

MEXICAN CUISINE

Mexican food is a style of food that originated in Mexico. Mexican cuisine is known for its intense and varied flavors, colorful decoration, and variety of spices.

Introduction

Covering the bottom third of North America and made up of thirty-one states and one very large capital, Mexico is probably the best neighbor a food-lover could have, when you consider the natural bounty of this rich and varied country. That's no doubt what the Spaniards thought when they landed on the shores of the Yucatan in 1521, much to the dismay of the Aztec, Maya, Zapotec and other natives populating this vast stretch of land. Hernan Cortes and his crew set the stage for three centuries of Spanish rule which finally started to unravel in 1810, when a village priest, Miguel Hidalgo, uttered his famous *grito*, or cry: "Mexicanos! Viva Mexico! Viva la Independencia!" The ensuing hundred years were filled with invasions (most notably from the U.S.) and fitful leadership, whereas the dawn of the twentieth century saw the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in earnest, with the likes of Pancho Villa duking it out with his countrymen. When the dust had settled, the Mexicans were in control, but hardly united. This was, after all, a country comprised of three distinct groups: native peoples, the descendants of the Spanish and *mestizos*, the result of intermarriage between the first two.

The melding of cultures contributed significantly to the melding of foods and food preparation in Mexico, often referred to as *mestizaje*, or "mixing." Corn, a staple for over 4,000 years, is the backbone of the diet. The kernels are softened in water and lime and then ground and fashioned (most commonly) into tortillas. Protein-rich beans and an infinite variety of chilies round out this holy trinity of Mexican cookery. The Spanish liked what they saw in Mexico and added a few things of their own, among them domestic animals, sugar and cheese. Mexican cuisine is further enhanced by an incredible array of fruits and vegetables which seem to taste better in Mexico than anywhere else: tomatoes, squash, sweet potatoes, avocado, coconut, pineapple, papaya and prickly pear cactus, to name several of the best. Herbs and spices also flavor the pot: cinnamon, clove, anise and cumin are all frequently-used spices, while cilantro, thyme, marjoram and the pungent *epazote* are popular herbs.

Good ingredients certainly count for a lot, but the Mexicans are also gifted cooks and seem to know how to give a dish that extra zing that makes it special. A simple salsa Mexicana is taken to new heights with a touch of cilantro and lime, while a complex mole sauce is always heavenly thanks to over thirty carefully-chosen herbs and spices which are added in and left to slowly simmer in the pot. Whether it's humble *tacos de pollo* or a regal *cochinilla Pibil*, the Mexican kitchen is filled with honest, flavorful food which is prepared in a host of interesting ways.

National Cuisine

Mexican cuisine has become increasingly recognized in recent years as being among the world's greatest cuisines, including French and Chinese cuisine. Corn is the grain synonymous with Mexican cuisine, but rice is today, an equal staple of the Mexican diet. According to food writer Karen Hursh Graber, the initial introduction of rice to Spain from North Africa in the 4th Century led to the Spanish introduction of rice into Mexico at the port of Veracruz in the 1520s. This, Graber says, created one of the earliest instances of the world's greatest fusion cuisines.

When Spanish *conquistadores*, in other words soldiers/conquerers, arrived in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (the ancient city on which Mexico City was built), they found that the people's diet consisted largely of corn-based dishes with chilies and herbs, usually complemented with beans and tomatoes. The *conquistadores* eventually combined their imported diet of rice, beef, pork, chicken, wine, garlic and onions with the native indigenous foods of pre-Columbian Mexico, including chocolate, maize, tomato, vanilla, avocado, guava, papaya, pineapple, jicama, chile pepper, beans, squash, sweet potato, peanut, fish and turkey.

Most of today's Mexican food is based on ancient traditions, such as the Aztecs and Maya, combined with culinary trends introduced by Spanish colonists. *Quesadillas*, for example, are a flour or corn tortilla with cheese (often a Mexican-style soft farmer's cheese such as Queso Fresco or Queso Oaxaca), beef, chicken, pork, and so on. The indigenous part of this and many other traditional foods is the chili pepper. Foods like these tend to be very colorful because of the rich variety of vegetables (among them are the chili peppers, green peppers, chilies, broccoli, cauliflower, and radishes) and meats in Mexican food. The French occupation of Mexico influenced Mexican cuisine with baked goods such as sweet breads and the bolillo (pronounced bo-lee-yo), a Mexican take on the French roll. There is also a minor Asian influence due to the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade, which lasted from 1565 to 1815.

There are also more exotic dishes, cooked in the Aztec or Mayan style, with ingredients ranging from iguana to rattlesnake, deer, spider monkey, crickets, ant eggs, and other kinds of insects. This is usually known as *comida prehispánica* (or prehispanic food).

Regional Cuisine

It stands to reason that a country as large as Mexico would have a variety of regional cuisines. Some of the best can be found in the states listed below.

Puebla: two hours south of Mexico City is where the first mole sauce was prepared. As the legend goes, an order of nuns was asked to prepare a special dish for a visiting dignitary. Unsure of what would constitute a worthy dish, the nuns literally emptied out their pantry and filled a pot with a combination of herbs, spices and chocolate, over thirty ingredients in all. Left to simmer for several days, the resulting thick, sweet *mole* sauce was served over turkey at the royal feast. Today, mole is most commonly served over chicken. "The nuns are the best cooks in Mexico," says Francisco Cisneros, chef at *Guaymas* restaurant in Tiburon, California. Anyone who has ever tasted a good mole sauce would have to agree. Coffee is grown in Puebla, a nice accompaniment to the area's many unique desserts, especially *camotes*, a sweet potato confection. Pastry shops are as common in Puebla as churches, no small feat since there are said to be over 300 churches in the city of Cholula alone. Your meal is likely to be more attractively presented in Puebla than anywhere else in Mexico, since this area is known for its *azulejos*, or glazed blue and white pottery and tiles.

Yucatan: the land of the Maya is a welcome relief for anyone tired of chilies. Many Yucateco sauces are fruit-based, chief among them a sauce made from brick-red annatto seeds (*achiote*) and flavored with Seville oranges, pepper, garlic and cumin. This sauce is spread over chicken (*pollo pibil*) or pork (*cochinita pibil*), the meats are then baked in a banana leaf, and the result is delightfully good. Pack a picnic and trek to the ruins at Chichen Itza for a meal in an unbeatable setting.

Veracruz: fish is the dish of choice in seaside Veracruz, a busy port filled with salty folks who love life and a good meal. Any fish dish *a la Veracruzana* means it'll be topped with a sauce of tomatoes, olives, capers and chilies. Exotic fruits (guanabana, mamey, chirimoya) and coffee are also grown in this fertile region. Care for a taco? tamale? enchilada? It's bound to be filled with fish while you're in Veracruz.

Oaxaca: you might want to drink your dinner while you're in Oaxaca. Coffee is grown in this state and is usually prepared *a la olla*, which means it's laced with sugar and cinnamon and left to simmer in a large pot for hours. The resulting brew will definitely perk you up. Heartier sorts will gravitate to the region's mescal, a very sober cousin of tequila. Hungry folks should try anything topped with *mole Oaxaqueno*, a sweeter version of the Puebla original thanks to the addition of bananas. The Oaxacans are rightfully proud of the bounty of their vast state, which also includes beautiful *artesanía* (hand-carved wooden animals and the black pottery of San Bartolomeo de Coatepec are especially nice) and lyrical Zapotec dances.

The Mexican Diet

The Mexican table is filled with an assortment of foodstuffs. Sauces, soups and stews are common and expected, while preparations range from a quick-fry to slow roasting. The following is a list of key elements in the Mexican diet.

Corn: most commonly used for tortillas, the warm, flat rounds which accompany or enhance many a dish. Also used for tacos (tortillas stuffed with chicken, beef, fish or cheese) and tamales (steamed and stuffed with meat or vegetables).

Chilies: used both fresh and dried, it's the white veins and seed pods that are the hottest part and pack a punch. Mexicans like to distinguish between heat and flavor, something that can be lost on the untrained palate. Popular varieties of chilies are jalapeno, poblano, serrano, guajillo, chipotle, pasilla, habanero, ancho, mulato and cascabel.

Beans: they run the gamut from lentils to kidney beans and fava beans and are found in many soups and stews. Small beans are often served *refrito* (refried in lard, tasty but heavy) or *de la olla* (boiled and served in a light broth).

Tomatoes: the essential ingredient for a tasty salsa Mexicana and also used in sauces for both fish and beef dishes. Tomatillos are small green tomatoes encased in a stiff husk -- they're more tart and often used for a kicky tomatillo salsa which is laced with spicy chilies.

Fruit: mango, papaya, coconut and pineapple are all eaten fresh as well as used in sauces and desserts. Nopales (prickly pear cactus paddles) are sauteed and eaten as a vegetable of sorts but can also be found sweetened in desserts.

Special ingredients: **flor de calabaza** (squash blossoms) are used in everything from soups to sauces. **Huitlacoche** is a small, dark fungus (!) which grows on a corn stalk and is surprisingly creamy and delicious. **Crepas de huitlacoche** (huitlacoche crepes bathed in a dreamy cheese sauce) are a singularly Mexican treat. **Romeritos** and **epazote** are two pungent herbs which add a special zest to fish, beef and chicken dishes. **Pepitas** (pumpkin seeds) are used in sauces, most commonly in pipian, which is used to top many chicken dishes.

The Market

El mercado (the market) is a key part of Mexican life, a big deal with the emphasis on BIG. Cities throughout the country are blessed with markets that are a combination of food hall, discount store, meeting place and social club. These markets are often found in the city center, and most cities of any size have one primary market and several lesser markets. Foodies traveling through Mexico should add the mercado to their list of requisite stops: some of the best can be found in Oaxaca, Guanajuato, Toluca and Mexico City.

On a recent trip to Mexico, I visited the market in Toluca with Gabriel O'Farrill, chef of *Los Danzantes*, a stylish Mexico City restaurant where the accent is on nueva cocina Mexicana. While the market is open every day of the week, Friday is the market day. An infinite number and variety of stalls are spread out over many square blocks next to the central bus station. A new Wal-Mart has opened up across the way, but don't even think about it: you're in the right place.

What will you find at the Toluca market? People for starters, and lots of them. A sea of humanity courses between rows and rows of food, clothes, trinkets, gadgets, games and more. Tables are piled high with the reddest tomatoes and the pinkest strawberries you've ever seen, while buckets are filled with beans of every color, size and shape. Young boys peer into tubs of hot oil as they fry gigantic pork rinds. Shiny fish and swirly sausage compete for your roving eye, while hawkers do their best to sell you a bowl of soup or a plate of stew. This experience is not for the faint of heart, nor is the food for the faint of stomach. Tripe and potatoes chopped on a super-smooth tree trunk and then deep-fried?

Strolling through a Mexican market lets you see first-hand the bounty of the land and its many uses. Among my favorite things: *charales*, tiny river fish which are fried crisp, making for a sorta-fishy chip; *piloncillo*, hunks of sugar cane candy which are used to sweeten cafe de olla ("piloncillo is especially common at wakes," says O'Farrill -- "all the calories in that sugar help give people strength"); mango *manila*, small, super-sweet mangoes; and some of the biggest, reddest and juiciest watermelons I've every seen. This last item gives O'Farrill the opportunity to share a tale with me: "Watermelons are indigenous to Mexico," he tells me, "and they're also how we got the colors of our flag. During a hot and bloody battle in Chilpancingo (the capital of Guerrero state) in the 1820s, the fighters took a break and cooled off with some watermelon. When they sliced into it and took note of the bright green, white and red tones, they decided those would be the colors of our new flag." Viva Mexico!

Some famous recipes are:

Chiles en Nogada (Stuffed Poblano Chilies)

Ingredients:-

12 poblano chilies

Stuffing:

1/4 Cup cooking oil

1 white onion, finely chopped

4 oz. brown sugar

1/2 bunch cilantro, chopped

1/4 tsp. black pepper

1 whole chicken boiled in salt water, onions, celery, carrots and garlic

3 garlic cloves, peeled and roughly chopped

4 bay leaves

4 oz. blanched walnuts, chopped

3 Tblsp. tomato paste

4 oz. Raisins

2 oz. vinegar

Sauce:

2 lbs. cream cheese

8 oz. blanched walnuts

1/2 lb. goat cheese

1/2 tsp. Nutmeg

1 C. sour cream

1/4 T. granulated sugar

Garnish:

pomegranate seeds

cilantro

Roast, clean, peel and devein chilies, making sure to slice them along one side only so they can be reconstructed after they are stuffed. Remove meat from boiled chicken and chop. Saute onion and garlic until they are soft. Add chicken, raisins, sugar, walnuts, pepper and bay leaves and saute for a few minutes. Add vinegar, cilantro and tomato paste and cook for 15 minutes. Cool mixture. Stuff chilies with cooled mixture, reheating them in the oven prior to serving.

To make the sauce, blend together sauce ingredients and heat oven to medium heat. Pour sauce over heated chilies and garnish with pomegranate seeds and cilantro.

1/2 white onion, chopped in half
3 Serrano chilies
1/4 Cup onion, finely chopped
1/2 Hass avocado

3 cloves garlic, peeled
1/2 Cup cilantro
1/8 Cup cilantro, finely chopped
Salt to taste

For the red sauce:

4 Cup water
1 medium onion, sliced into rounds
2 Chipotle chilies, fried but not charred

1.5 tomatoes
3 cloves garlic, peeled
Salt to taste

Topping:

1 Cup creme fraiche
3/4 Cup cream cheese, crumbled

1/4 Cup sweet whipping cream

For the potato flautas: heat corn tortillas. Place a small amount of the potatoes and cheese in the center of each tortilla and roll them tightly.

For the chicken flautas: combine the loose chicken with the onion and oil; season to taste. Place a small amount of the mixture in the center of each warm tortilla and roll them tightly.

For the green sauce: boil the water and add in the tomatillos, onion, garlic and chilies. Cook for 30 minutes; remove from heat, drain and reserve the liquid. Let the tomatillos cool. Blend the cooked ingredients in a food processor along with the onion, cilantro and avocado. Season to taste. If the sauce is too thick, add back some of the reserved liquid.

For the red sauce: boil the water and add the tomatoes, onion, garlic and fried chilies. Cook for 25 minutes; remove from heat, drain and reserve the liquid. Blend the ingredients in a food processor and season to taste. Add back some of the reserved liquid to thin the sauce.

Presentation: heat the oil in a large frying pan, but not too hot. Fry the flautas until they are golden, turning them carefully. Drain on an absorbent paper towel. Place the flautas on a large serving dish. Alternately top with green and red sauce. Combine the creme fraiche and sweet whipping cream and drizzle it over the flautas. Top with crumbled cream cheese.

Ceviche Acapulqueno (Ceviche Acapulco-Style)

For the fish:

2 lbs. red snapper fillets, chopped into small chunks
The juice of 8 large lemons
Salt to taste

For the vinaigrette:

1 medium white onion, finely chopped	2 Serrano chilies, finely chopped
1.5 large tomatoes, finely chopped	3/4 Cup green olives (stuffed with pimento), finely chopped
1/8 Cup parsley, finely chopped	1/4 Cup cilantro, finely chopped
2.5 Cup. Ketchup	1 can V-8 juice, approx. 12-oz. size
1 Cup olive oil	1/2 can jalapeno chilies, finely chopped (approx. 4-oz. size)
1/8 Cup Worcestershire sauce	1/2 tsp. chopped oregano
Salt to taste	

Preparation: In a large glass dish, place the fish and cover it with the lemon juice and salt. Marinate for 15 minutes; remove half of the liquid. Combine the ingredients for the vinaigrette, add to the fish and cover. Marinate for three hours in the refrigerator. Serve in individual goblets and top with chopped cilantro. Optional garnish: place a small skewer of olives, avocado and pickled carrots next to each goblet.