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OAXACA

Melting Pot of Food Cultures

Few names are as closely associated with traditional Mexican cuisine as Oaxaca. Even the original meaning of the state's name implies the importance of one of its endemic ingredients, making it one of the mother cuisines of our national culinary art. The toponym "Oaxaca" comes from the Náhuatl term *huāxyacac*, imposed by the fifteenth-century Aztec conquerors, who incorporated a large part of its territory into the Tenochca empire. The name is made up of *huāx*, which in Spanish became "huaje," a local plant, the white leadtree,

and *yaca*, which literally means "nose," complemented with the suffix "c," the abbreviated equivalent of *tepec*, or "place."

The term could be read Huax-yaca-[tepe]c, that is, "in the nose of the white leadtrees" or "place of the white leadtrees." However, after a linguistic adaptation by the Spanish conquistadors, this became the current term: Oaxaca.

This state's cuisine is so important that when Mexicans—or even foreigners—hear the word "Oaxaca," they immediately think of its greatest bastions: *moles*, grasshoppers, jerkies, *tejate* (a maize and cacao beverage), *atole* (a corn-flour beverage), chocolates, mescals, cheeses, *tlayudas* (toasted tortillas spread with unrefined pork lard, refried beans, lettuce,

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meat, cheese, and salsa), different kinds of corn, chili peppers, tamales, and innumerable varieties of *quelites*, or wild herbs, that give its recipes their unique character.

The variety is undoubtedly due to the state's huge biodiversity, with its more than 14 000 towns and almost 4 million inhabitants, according to the 2015 census, the most recent. Historically, its geographical location made it an obligatory stopping-off point for migrants from central and southeastern Mexico; this meant that the contact among the Nahuatl, Totonacs, Mixtecs, Olmecs, Zapotecs, and Maya vastly enriched the doings around kitchen fires from pre-Columbian times on.

Then, when the orders of Dominican friars arrived and established their first missions, the cuisine was fed by a number of techniques applied to the most famous ingredients, like cacao. Today, stone-ground chocolate is one of Oaxaca's most representative products, not to mention its baked goods, famous for their variety. This is followed by its dairy products such as *quesillo* (a string cheese, normally wound into a ball), popularly known throughout Mexico as "Oaxacan cheese," an unofficial but implicit designation of origin.

Understanding this cuisine requires special attention to the context in which it has developed: it requires knowing its locales, paying attention to its song lyrics, and following the rhythm of a joyous *calenda* parade as the brass instruments of one of the many local bands blare out their tunes.

The saying goes that in Oaxaca, "Oaxacans eat Oaxacan every day," and that's precisely the huge difference *vis-à-vis* other cuisines: the state's food sovereignty has staved off gastronomical industrialization and other evils of our time, among them the effect of fast food, which fortunately continues to be scarce throughout the state.

The greatness of Oaxacan culinary culture can also be seen in its textiles, hand embroidery, or strap-loom; it is reflected in the filigree worn by the proud, haughty women from the Tehuantepec Isthmus to go with their radiant spectacular traditional Tehuana dress, and even the simple but intricately designed *huipiles* of Triqui women,¹ who accompany their outfit with a basket for collecting maize and other products from the prodigious *milpa*.²

To comprehend the diversity of the ingredients and understand the importance of Oaxacan cuisine in Mexico's world view and gastronomy, you have to visit the Tlacolula Sunday market, even today the largest indigenous establishment of its kind in the Americas, where ancestral forms of commerce like barter continue to be practiced, in which producers exchange goods but not today's currency.



▲ Beef stew.

It is here that the purchase and diversity of ingredients converge with the artisans from all over the state, who have made burnished black clay into works of art for the table. In addition, there are glazed ceramics, blown glass, and wooden whisks for dissolving chocolate —this, by the way, is the only original kitchen utensil originally from Mexico—, used today all over the country and increasingly in different parts of the world.

Other places where visitors can see the most representative dishes and ingredients of this cuisine, above all from the Zapotec Central Valleys are Etna, Ocotlán, Zaachila, and Zimatlán, where, on different days of the week producers from the countryside gather to sell to wholesale suppliers from the municipal seats.

Oaxaca is tradition and stewardships; it is a patron saint's fiesta in which a traditional cook may prepare food for 2000 people, day and night, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, for up to a week. It is an unsolicited matriarchy, inherited by women who

one day found themselves alone, at home, caring for their children and older adults, since their husbands had to travel north to seek out the “American Dream”; it is the women and the men who long for their homeland and every day swell more and more the ranks of the work force in thousands of restaurants from one end of the United States to the other, since the Oaxacan, regardless of gender, usually knows how to cook; it is said that “it’s in their blood.”

First Peoples

To understand this gastronomical diversity, it is important to point out that the local living ethnic groups' cuisines are unified, even though their languages, cultural traits, and customs may differ.

Oaxaca is one of the states that best preserves the heritage of these first peoples, but also that of other centuries-old arrivals, like those from Africa, who make up a large group of Afro-Mexicans, also part of these lands. In 2013, in Pinotepa Nacional, the local Congress officially declared October 19 Black Afro-Mexican People's Day.

The main ethnic groups among the first peoples, classified by their agricultural production or by the most representative dishes from each region are as follows:

- Amuzgos (*in the West, bordering on Guerrero state*): maize, beans, coastal chili peppers, sesame seeds, peanuts, squash, sugar cane, banana, avocado, cantaloupe, watermelon, oranges, limes, *cuajinicuil* legumes, lemons, mangoes, nance fruit, papayas, tamarind, mandarin oranges, coconuts, plums, coffee, sapote fruit, and mammee apples.
- Chatinos (*Southeast*): red and black *mole* sauce, *pozole* soup, *cecina* (salted meat), grasshoppers, *tlayudas* (toasted tortilla spread with unrefined pork lard, refried beans, lettuce, meat, cheese and salsa), flying *chicatana* ant sauce, worm sauce, nopal-cactus broth and “cat” broth (made with chick peas, chayote squash, Oaxacan *pasilla* chili peppers, carrots, and beef).
- Chinantecs (*North*): “stone” broth, Popo beverage, yuca tortillas and tamales, ranch pacayo palm flowers, and a wheat *atole* drink; bananas, *quintonil* herb seeds, eggs, and tortillas.
- Chocholecs (*Mixtec highlands*): corn dough with blood sausage, barbeque wrapped in *pulque* agave leaves, *chile-*



▲ Chicken broth and pepperleaf tamale.

Carolina
Velázquez Paxtán



Celia Floirán



▲ Seven-layer tamale with *mole* sauce and toasted plantain.

ajo sauce, *atole* (corn-flour beverage) with chili peppers, chicken in yellow *mole* sauce, “tablecloth-staining” meat in sweet *mole* sauce, beans perfumed with avocado leaves.

- Chontals (Southern Sierra Madre and coastal plain): mescal maguey plant, maize, squash, beans, annona fruit trees, mamme, sapodilla, avocado, guavas, nance fruit, sugar cane, chili peppers, and coffee.
- Cuicatecs (Northeast, Western Sierra Madre): black *mole* sauce with bean tamales, beef broth with *chilhuacle* chili peppers, bean tamales in almond-tree leaves, chili peppers stuffed with ground chicken and rice.
- Huaves (Tehuantepec Isthmus): shrimp (this area is the state’s main shrimp producer) and salt (Oaxaca’s most important salt deposits are located here). Mexican sierra and mullet. Fish tamales, shrimp *mole* sauce, seafood soup.
- Ixcatecs (Mixtec Highlands): mescal, maize, nopal cactus, cacaya (the top of the stalk of the agave flower), bee’s or wasp’s honey, beans. Beverages like *tejate* (made of maize and cacao) and hot chocolate.
- Mazatecs (High Sierra of the North): *mole* made from grilled bones, beans with yucca, yucca tortillas, *chayote* or mirliton squash, pepperleaf dumplings, pig’s feet in beans, and chive tamales.
- Mixes (Northeast, bordering on Veracruz): sugar cane *tepache* (a fermented beverage); dried fish, potato, *chayote* squash, or green bean tamales; beans with fig-leaf gourd leaves; *mole* sauce made with beans and corn dough with *quelite* herbs; *mole* made from *chayote* squash root; and peas with green bananas.
- Mixtecs (border area with Puebla and Guerrero): *coloradito mole*, Mixtec *chileajo* sauce, Mixtec *milpa* soup, *enfrijoladas* (corn tortillas smothered in a chili pepper-infused bean puree), red enchiladas, *champurrado* (chocolate drink thickened with ground maize, flavored with cinnamon, cloves, and star anise); white maize *atole*, pulque bread, peanut brittle, goat *mole* (or *huaxmole*).
- Nahuas (North, bordering on Puebla): tamales in banana leaves made from iguana or chipilin; *tlayudas* (toasted tortilla spread with unrefined pork lard, refried beans, lettuce, meat, cheese and salsa), toasted tortillas (*totopos*) made from yellow or white corn, *nicuatole* gelatin dessert, cacao, and coffee.
- Tacuates (Mixtecs from the coast, Santa María Zacatepec [a district of Putla] and Santiago Ixtayutla [Jamiltepec district]): *masita* (a mixture of broken corn with

barbeque drippings, ground chili peppers, cooked over a slow fire), and flying *chicatana* ant sauce.

- Triquis (coastal lowlands and Oaxacan Mixtec area): coffee (this is one of the state’s most important coffee-growing areas), *chileatoles* (*atole* with chili peppers), deer barbeque, a *tepache* beverage made with fermented raw cane sugar and bird’s beak chili pepper; red worms, and a special kind of wasps known as “*changos*” (monkeys). The consumption of mushrooms in the rainy season is very famous.
- Zapotecs (united towns of Oaxaca [Central Valleys] Tehuantepec Isthmus, Northern Sierra, Southern Sierra Madre). This is the largest, most geographically extended ethnic group in the state, with almost 1 million inhabitants. Rice with beef, pork with maize, stuffed onions, eggs scrambled with shrimp heads, dried shrimp *mole*, bean *mole*, fatty beef tamales, dried tongue and iguana (different dishes depending on their local customs).

- Zapotec cuisine in the Central Valleys: *tejate* (a cacao and maize beverage), green or yellow *moles*, *macoles* with *guiñadu*, creamy *pipián* sauce made with pepper veins and seeds with chicken, black *mole*, bride’s *mole*, chocolate *atole*.
- In the community of Cuajimoloyas, named as Oaxaca’s wild mushroom capital, located about 60 kilometers north of the Oaxaca city, a route for gathering edible mushrooms in the July rainy season has developed that coincides with the celebration of the traditional Guelaguetza festival. Today, this route is included in the Joint People’s eco-tourism route.
- Zoques (a region of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, the Los Chimalapas Jungle): coffee, cacao, pepper, bananas, mamee, annona, and guava.

The Guelaguetza and the Art Of Sharing through Cuisine

The term “master traditional cook” was coined relatively recently in Mexico. After the UNESCO placed traditional Mexican cuisine and community, ancestral, living culture on the Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2010, the previously used denomination (utilized in the file about the cooks from Michoacán state presented by the Mexican government and the appropriate consulting bodies) underlined the importance of women’s customs in community cooking and how, thanks to their work, entire towns throughout Mexico have found a way of supporting themselves.

This has led to a complete study that shows that, down through the centuries, these women have perpetuated pre-Columbian techniques. Due to the mixture of cultures and the interaction with cuisines from elsewhere, many of their recipes have incorporated new ingredients.

In this framework, master traditional cooks have held conventions all over the country in the manner of the Michoacán cooks to ensure that this paradigm is fulfilled not only in that state, but also in others like Oaxaca, whose social organization is similar.

Preserving the legacy and oral heritage of one of humanity’s richest and most biodiverse cuisines has been the aim of the conventions held in Guanajuato, Morelos, Guerrero, Tlaxcala, and Veracruz, just to cite the pioneers.

In Oaxaca’s case, Traditional Cooks of Oaxaca, a civil society organization, founded and currently headed by cook and restaurateur Celia Florián, convened the First State Conven-



Ada Catalina

Fist-shaped tamale. ▶





▲ Mole sauce made with toasted maize.

tion of Traditional Cooks. Held in the Oaxacan capital's Dance Plaza in 2017, it was a huge success. One year later, the Second Convention was held with an added "Oaxacan table" where artisans from all over the state offered their wares. A street market or *tianguis* was also held for local producers to sell their products, accompanied by a convention of 80 traditional cooks that the organization honored with the title Traditional Master Cook of Oaxaca; the group is seeking the state university's seal of approval to issue an official certificate to that effect.

Before these conventions, the "Wisdom of Flavor" festival had already brought together a large number of cooks from around the state. At each inauguration, master cooks from Oaxaca's eight regions (Central Valleys, La Cañada, Papaloapan, Mixteca, Costa, Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Sierra Norte, and Sierra Sur) were invited to present their best dishes at a gala dinner. This soon became an even bigger event.

The most recent convention produced a book.³ All 570 of the state's municipalities were sent a letter inviting them to send the most representative cook from each region. This unprecedented, heroic, months-long activity was carried out by the organizing team of the second convention, which brought together the master cooks, 80 of whom traveled to the capital to share their ancestral wisdom and its flavors for three days.

The result was a beautiful compilation that brings together their life stories and favorite recipes, putting them at the forefront in the oral transmission of our heritage, which is cooking every day for family, friends, and strangers alike. In these wonderful stories, these women tell us about the mar-

ginalization, poverty, violence, and machismo many of them have unfortunately endured. They tell us how cooking is a joy but also a need.

They share the oral tradition of their mothers and grandmothers, who taught them with affection, but also most of the time, with a smack on the head with a spoon, since not everything is peaches and cream when dealing with Oaxacan cuisine. This is a state that has survived poverty thanks to many of these matriarchs, who go out looking for the best ear of corn in the field to feed their children and who don't let anyone look down on them for being cooks and not having had formal schooling. Each and every one of them is a true heroine in the world in which we Mexicans have a lot to learn about and admire in our first peoples.

The culinary art in Oaxaca, as can also be seen in this book, is the true-to-life proof that we need to return our gaze to our country's traditional cuisine. It is unique, a reason for infinite national pride that we must all preserve and defend as these women and so many others have. **NM**

Notes

- 1 A *huipil* is a continual length of cloth sewn at the sides and slipped over the head like a blouse. See the article in this issue about the enormous variety of *huipiles* in the Americas. [Editor's Note.]
- 2 See in this issue an article about the traditional *milpa* form of cultivation. [Editor's Note.]
- 3 This article is an abridged version of the prologue to that book: Claudio Pobleto, ed., *Oaxaca y sus cocineras. Tesoro gastronómico de México* (Mexico City: Culinaria Mexicana, 2019).