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Tabiche chili peppers in Ejutla de Crespo.

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Guiintabich: From Memory to Table¹

Introduction

One June afternoon in 2021, over coffee and Mexican sweet bread, Doña Ernestina Santiago shared with her two daughters, Maggy and Liz, and with members of the *Cocina Colaboratorio* collective memories of her childhood. She particularly delved into how she had gained her enormous culinary knowledge of her community, Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, in the state of Oaxaca's Central Valleys.

We all watched closely as she told us about the important role the women in her family had played, especially

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her mother and sister, in departing to her an infinite amount of knowledge, practices, and recipes that reflected the diversity of ingredients, crops, and plants from the lands where she grew up. Among her memories, Doña Ernestina recalled a kind of chili pepper called *guiintabich*, with a very special flavor that her mother used to cook with beans, but which stopped being consumed in the community forty or fifty years ago. What kind of chili pepper is *guiintabich*? Does it still exist? Why did people stop growing it, cooking it, and eating it?

Doña Ernestina spent hours preparing the maize and chili pepper beverage *chileatole*, chicken livers, enchiladas, little red (*coloradito*) mole sauce, all kinds of dishes typical of her community for us. Would we have the opportunity—just as she gave us the gift of so many new flavors—to find, or at least to know what happened to her beloved *guiintabich*?

Chili Peppers and Santo Domingo Tomaltepec's Biocultural Memory

Chili peppers are a millennia-old crop in Mexico and other parts of *Abya Yala*, or Latin America. Their sensory characteristics, and in particular the huge diversity of flavors that they add to many dishes, have positioned them as a standard bearer of many gastronomical traditions of the world. Mexico is considered the center of their diversification, while South America is their place of origin. It is in Mexico that about ninety cultivated varieties have been identified, which thrived based on an intimate relationship between them and different cultures.² However, it makes no sense to talk about chili peppers in isolation. Rarely are ingredients remembered, cooked, or tasted individually.

As part of such a broad biocultural mosaic, chili peppers in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec are mixed with, prepared, and eaten together with many other ingredients, among them maize, beans, squash, nopal cactus, wild herbs, and many others; several types of chili peppers are even used in a same dish. For example, in a *mole* sauce, at least *guajillo*, *ancho*, and *chilhuacle* chili peppers are used, and, of course, the ways they are prepared require several different pairs of hands, kinds of knowledge, affection, and memories shared and renovated for generations. Depending on the day, the season of the year, or the fiesta, the local dishes take on different overtones, flavors, styles of preparation, collective work, times, and rhythms. This is no simple thing. Not just anyone can get chocolate or *atole* to froth. Not just anyone knows how to clean and devein the chili peppers for a *mole* that will be served to hundreds of people.

In that sense, our interest as a collective when we explore chili peppers has as its starting point their significance in a broader biocultural matrix, where biological diversity is intrinsically connected to the variety of knowledge accumulated, recipes, celebrations, collective

work, and other cultural practices. Today, these networks of use—and disuse—evolve and erode rapidly due to the growth of industrial agriculture, capitalism's market volatility, the harmonization of our food systems, and the climate crisis.

What Happened to *Guiintabich*?

The traditional cooks of Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, among them Doña Ernestina Santiago and Doña Inés Ramírez Martínez, are the bearers of a vast body of local culinary knowledge transmitted orally and tacitly by their mothers and other women in their families and the community. At eighty-one and seventy-nine years respectively, they have witnessed the arrival of new ingredients, but also the disappearance of others that they grew up with.

Doña Ernestina tells us that *guiintabich* (its name in the Zapotec language, in which *guiin* means chili pepper) was used a great deal when she was a girl but can no longer be found either in the community or in the region. It tasted very good and was eaten both fresh and dried. It looked like “water chili peppers” or jalapeño, with green and red colors. She clearly remembered that her mother used to buy it in the local stores, but that when she grew up, she stopped finding it in the community's stores and food.

It was then that she told us that the young generations weren't familiar with *guiintabich*; only seniors remembered it. When she thought about its loss, she said, “Who knows why it disappeared; my mother used it a lot, mainly for beans in strips.” In her memories, *guiintabich* did not exist by itself; it was based on the longing for her loved ones, that is, on emotional ties, that the sensorial experiences emerged and, literally, they were put on the table.

Similarly, Doña Inés Ramírez, a well-known cook in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, shared her memories of *guiintabich*. According to her, it was a chili pepper that could be bought fresh in the community and dry in Oaxaca's Central Market. Like Doña Ernestina, she said that it looked like a *pasilla* chili pepper and was widely used in the community, but that “it wasn't like before, when you could find it anywhere... My granny on my mother's side grew that pepper.” Its very particular flavor went well with dishes like *tlayudas*, particularly as part of a garlic sauce she used to make. She said that when she was young, sometimes people would come and sell it from Yulalag, a

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Zapotec town in Oaxaca's Northern Mountains. But, with the passage of time, the prices went up a lot and people stopped buying it.

Both she and Doña Ernestina said that the rising prices were a determining factor in people stopping using many ingredients since the pocketbook “wasn't deep enough to buy them.” For this reason, Doñas Inés and Ernestina thought many young women prefer to buy less expensive chili peppers, mainly those produced in Northern Mexico or abroad, which have been replacing the Oaxacan ones. Both said that, in addition to increased prices, the fact that culinary expertise is not being handed down has fostered many ingredients and dishes in their community to fall into disuse.

However, we didn't only talk about the loss of the *guiintabich*: a clue about its origin and current status emerged thanks to the two cooks' memories. Doña Inés told us that despite its not being used in the region anymore, it was still possible to find it in the Central Market, but only dried and only at few stalls and at very high prices. She also said—and Doña Ernestina confirmed it—that she remembered hearing it was being grown in Oaxaca's Southern Mountains. So, Doña Inés suggested we investigate the whereabouts of this chili pepper in the Central Market.

***Guiintabich* Is the *Tabiche* Chili Pepper**

When we got to the market, Doña Inés took us to the aisles where the dry chili peppers are sold. All the merchants there told us the same thing: they weren't familiar with that name, but they did know of one called the *tabiche* chili pepper, which is only sold dried, except once a year in December, when a woman brings fresh peppers from the Tehuantepec Isthmus. Carlos, in the El Oaxaqueño stall, emphasized that, despite the fact that *tabiche* peppers were being sold less in Oaxaca's Central Valleys, they did continue to be produced, although less and less, in the Oaxacan Southern Mountains, in the Miahuatlán region. It all seemed to add up.

After our conversations with the two cooks and our visit to the Central Market, one of the members of *Cocina Colaboratorio* went to visit a relative in Ejutla de Crespo, near Miahuatlán in Oaxaca's Southern Mountains. The great *guiintabich* mystery was solved immediately: “M'ija, it must be *tabiche* peppers.” And yes, on Thursday market

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day in the Ejutla plaza, *guiintabich* peppers are to be found in several sizes, both dried and fresh. We took photos of them, sent them to Doña Ernestina's family, and they answered back right away that, in effect, the *tabiche* was *guiintabich*.

In Ejutla de Crespo and environs, *tabiche* peppers are in the salsas of many homes. And not only are they found in the markets and on kitchen tables, but people continue to grow them; in fact, in the town market, *tabiche* seeds are also on sale. Standing in the local plaza, it was hard to believe that this chili pepper was the famous *guiintabich*, lost in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, a town less than three hours away by car.

We interviewed *tabiche* chili pepper saleswomen in the market; they were aware that it wasn't very common in Oaxaca City anymore. They told us, though, that it is easier to find between Miahuatlán and Ocotlán. They buy it from local producers and know that a large part of the production is exported to the United States, and its sale is calculated by the almud, an old-world measurement made in a box with internal marks, indicating different volumes.

For this part of Oaxaca, *tabiche* peppers are the “everyday peppers,” used to make tomato or tomatillo salsa (see the image). When we said that we had come from a town near the city of Oaxaca where people said that it had been lost, these people said, “Well, it does exist here; we grow it here; and with this little seed you can plant it again.” When we told the women in Santo Domingo this, they planned a series of activities to reintroduce it and share it with both the women already familiar with it and with the younger generations.

The discovery of *tabiche* peppers not only brought joy at rediscovering a lost flavor, but also the opportunity to restore its place in the Santo Domingo Tomaltepec's culture and culinary imaginary. The collective organized a get-together to remember, plant, cook, and chat about *guiintabich*, with the seeds and peppers the Ejutla de Crespo sellers had shared with us.



Doña Inés making *tabiche* pepper salsa with garlic.

Emitio Hernández

We asked little girls, young people, and adults to come, and invited the cooks and an agroecologist to share the knowledge on *tabiche* and its flavors. We met at the Hernández Family vegetable garden, creating an intergenerational learning and experience space. First, with the children, we planted the *tabiche* seeds in the nursery, and then, we brought out the table, put a tablecloth on it, and fired up the griddle. We put the dry and fresh peppers in the middle, together with other ingredients and some kitchen tools like mortars and pestles, blenders, cutting boards, spoons, and knives. Guided by curiosity, memory, and intuition about how to do things, we began a process of creation and lots of flavor. The older women taught the younger ones how to make salsas with that kind of pepper. Around the fire, Doña Inés shared a simple, very flavorful recipe using garlic.

The participants reconnected with *tabiche* peppers in the traditional way that Doña Inés and Doña Ernestina's families prepared and ate them. But, also, encouraged by the conversations and memories, they ventured into innovation, incorporating fruit and other garden ingredients like herbs, coriander, radishes, and tomatillos to make new salsas. Josefina Hernández, a member of both the community and the collective, prepared a delicious *tabiche* salsa with mango, and Marcela Cortés, Doña Inés's daughter, made another with avocado. The new and the old salsas accompanied Doña Licha's delicious thick *memela* tortillas;

and then, the group conversation headed to the feelings sparked by cultivating, cooking, and tasting an ingredient that had been part of the community history and that was returning to readapt and reappropriate new forms.

Conclusions

Through dialogue and the collaboration of diverse voices, this research not only revived the memory and tradition of *tabiche* chili peppers, but also inspired a series of reflections about heritage, care, and emerging challenges such as climate change and the standardization of food systems. It also reminded us that creating networks of uses, conservation, and care is not done overnight. The first *tabiche* seeds that we planted struggled to sprout and had difficulties reaching full adulthood and bearing fruit. Even today, we continue working on acquiring the tacit knowledge that has been lost in order to make this variety of chili pepper grow. This requires time, willingness, resources, and several attempts.

Given these challenges, we believe that the history of the loss and recovery of *tabiche* chili peppers offers a valuable lesson: diversity is not necessarily completely lost but can be recovered in different ways. The flavors, practices, and memories can be reformulated and reappropriated to reclaim identities and keep our bio-culinary heritages

alive, which can function as a political tool for defending and caring for our territory.

The history of *guiintabich* shows that the conservation of agrobiodiversity is achieved through memory, markets, recipes, cooking, and cravings, not only through the conservation of germplasm. In other words, conservation of agrobiodiversity is not to be found in seed banks, but in everyday salsas, in Sunday-afternoon stories, in the networks of use and exchange where seeds are cultivated, when buying chili peppers in the local market, when cooking and celebrating in town fiestas. These practices and stories, however, can be broken or discontinued. This story shows us the importance of creating spaces for listening and sharing memories and practices that keep our great patrimony alive. At the end of the day these are the actions and links that historically have made it possible to domesticate many foods and, at the same time, the variety of flavors we have and enjoy in our dishes. **NM**

Notes

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- 2 See Araceli Aguilar-Meléndez and Andrés Lira Noriega, “¿Dónde crecen los chiles en México?” in Araceli Aguilar-Meléndez, M. A. Vásquez-Dávila, E. Katz, and M. R. Hernández Colorado, comps., *Los chiles que le dan sabor al mundo* (Xalapa, Veracruz/Marseille: Universidad Veracruzana/IRD Éditions, 2018), pp. 75-92, <https://libros.uv.mx/index.php/UV/catalog/view/FC278/1087/1179-1>.

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