

The arrival of wheat in Mexico



In terms of subjugation, settlement and the imposition of order, Spain began building its new empire when Christopher Columbus undertook his second voyage in 1493. This was a genuine expedition to the Antilles consisting of 17 ships, 1300 men and considerable quantities of cattle, seed and utensils.

Santo Domingo or La Española, Puerto Rico, Cuba and Jamaica marked the beginning of Spanish occupation—as well as wheat's first ports of entry to the Americas. Columbus noted in his diary that it was on these islands that he first tasted guavas, chiles or peppers (confused with Asian pepper), bread and cassava cakes—which, made from yucca root or manioc and very popular in the islands and coastal regions, were eaten by the Spaniards during their crossings to the continent since they did not have their own bread or biscuits (*biscoctum* or hard crackers).

Father Acosta, who was evidently disgusted by them, described cassava cakes as follows: "...a thin, long and narrow cake. Dry, this is the bread they eat; it is a thing without taste and insipid.... It must be moistened in order to be eaten, because it is harsh and rough.... It lasts a long time, and thus is taken by navigators in place of biscuits.... It

means eating not wheat or corn but something bad."¹

The Conquest of Mexico was prepared from Cuba at the initiative of the island's governor, who entrusted it to one of his best men, Hernán Cortés, a 30-year-old native of Extremadura. Following the wise saying "*con pan y vino se anda el camino*" (with wine and bread you make your way), Cortés assembled an impressive

expedition, with large consignments of grain and bread making up a key part of the provisions.

The results of the Conquest are common knowledge. It began in 1519 and was consummated two years later with the fall of the Aztec Empire in August of 1521. Regional conquests were carried out subsequently, up through the 18th century with the conquest of Nayarit, Tamaulipas, Texas and the Californias.

In the late 16th century the structures began to take shape which would characterize the Colonial epoch and consolidate the Conquest

¹ Joseph Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias, 1586-1588* (Natural and Moral History of the Indies, 1586-1588), quoted in José Luis Martínez, *Pasajeros de Indias* (Indies Wayfarers), p. 59.



A variety of European-type breads in Mexican baskets.

Excerpt from Cristina Barros and Mónica del Villar, *El santo olor de la panadería* (The Holy Smell of the Bakery). Procuraduría Federal del Consumidor and Fernández Cueto Editores, Mexico City, 1992.

politically and spiritually, on the basis of the economic and social conquest.

In rural areas the haciendas were developed as a form of land tenure and as the principal unit of production. Of particular significance were cereal-producing haciendas which modified the Mexican landscape so that corn, beans and maguey cactus now shared the land with wheat, sugar cane, rice, barley, oats and alfalfa, among other crops.

In the cities economic activity was slowly growing. Manufacturing centers were founded, above all in Mexico City, Puebla and the Bajío region, with cloth the foremost product. Commercial and handicraft activities were carried out in markets, warehouses, stores and workshops. At the beginning of the 17th century the following curious facts were recorded, illustrating the kind of activities going on at the time: there were 28 chocolate factories, 13 bakeries, 68 clothes stores, 2 tailors, 3 barbers, 4 shoemakers, 7 silver- and goldsmiths, one bookseller and one optician for a population of about 58,500.²

The 16th century can be characterized overall as a period of adjustment and surrender, of clashes and assimilation, conquest and subjugation, interchange and *mestizaje*.³ In this process, those aspects related to man's production for his own sustenance are among the most pleasing, valuable and enriching areas in both cultures.

The result was an amazing, newly fledged Mexican cuisine in which, as a

rule, it would be difficult to distinguish the indigenous from the foreign. The richness and regional variety of this culinary *mestizaje* arose in accord with the mixtures of local products and traditions in the colonized lands, as well as the tastes and contributions of the Spaniards according to their places of origin: Andalusia, Castile, Asturias, the Basque country and Galicia.

Salvador Novo contrasts the value of this conjunction to the greed that precious metals awakened in the conquistadors:

*The most valuable thing the conquistadors took away from Mexico is certainly not gold, teocútlatl, the excrement of the gods. Gold is death, inertia. It runs out, it hides itself, it remains in its own being or simply changes from one set of greedy hands to another. That which is good, cualli, is that which feeds man and that which, like man, is capable of reproducing and prospering, being fruitful, being eternal, new to each spring, to each reincarnation. That is the true and imperishable wealth.... That which does not run out: our seeds, plants, fruits....*⁴

Of all the products that were brought to Mexico, one in particular symbolized European culture and sustenance: wheat, a grain that—side by side with corn—would provide our fields with a symbol of cultural *mestizaje*. The original situation of “tortillas vs. bread” gradually changed to “tortillas and bread” in the Mexican diet, converting the Spanish saying “If you have no bread, eat cakes” (*tortas*) into the Mexican saying “If you have no bread, eat tortillas”—or as some

would have it, “If you have no tortillas, eat bread.”

Wheat had been introduced in the Antilles beforehand, with poor results due to climatic conditions; the humid tropical climate was unfavorable. As for Mexico, it is quite possible that the first crops of wheat came from the shipments of grain brought by Cortés, who, from early on, promoted new crops both on his own lands and on those of other conquistadors and settlers.

Some chroniclers, from López de Gómara to Humboldt, helped spread the legend attributing all of New Spain's wealth in wheat to Juan Garrido. Garrido, a black man who some maintain was Cortés' slave or servant, was born in Lisbon, traveled to Castile and from there embarked for the Antilles.

As a conquistador he participated in seizing Tenochtitlán and was rewarded with a plot of land which was part of a tract belonging to Cortés, located in the area currently known as the Ribera de San Cosme. He is said to have found three grains of wheat while cleaning the rice eaten by the Spanish army. When he planted them on his plot of land, only one grain germinated, producing one hundred and eighty grains, from which the cereal was propagated throughout Mexican territory.⁵

While it would be difficult to locate the exact date that wheat was first sown in Mexico, we do know that by 1524 significant quantities were being harvested. That was the year that, in a message to Spanish emperor Carlos V, Cortés requested

² Francisco de la Maza, *La ciudad de México en el siglo XVII* (Mexico City in the 17th Century), quoted in Georges Baudot, *La vida cotidiana en la América española en tiempos de Felipe II, siglo XVI* (Daily Life in Spanish America Under Philip II, 16th Century), p. 272.

³ *Mestizaje*: the process of racial and cultural mixture. (Editor's note.)

⁴ Salvador Novo, *Cocina mexicana o historia gastronómica de la ciudad de México* (Mexican Cuisine or Gastronomic History of Mexico City), p. 30.

⁵ See information on Joan or Juan Garrido in *Diccionario autobiográfico de conquistadores y pobladores de la Nueva España* (Autobiographical Dictionary of the Conquistadors and Settlers of New Spain), p. 99.

the grant of various conquered towns such as "...Cyuacan, where I have cultivations of wheat"; the request was answered in an edict dated May 2, 1531.⁶

Unlike the Antilles, the Mexican highlands turned out —luckily for the Spanish— to be favorable ground for wheat cultivation. It is understandable that they felt the need to have bread like their own and not just our tortillas and tamales. Bread was the basis of their diet and their religion. Once settled here, they were anxious to

⁶ Archives of the Hospital de Jesús, file 17, exp. 3, quoted in José B. Mancebo, *Las Lomas de Chapultepec. El rancho de Coascoanaco* (The Chapultepec Hills. The Coascoanaco Ranch), p. 27.

recover their own customs and the propagation of their own sustenance, of their sacred food.

Religious orders —such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Jesuits— played a key role in spreading the cultivation and processing of wheat, in all the areas of Mexico where they traveled, all the way up to Sonora and the Californias.

They not only propagated cultivation of wheat, but in various convents and haciendas, in addition to sowing, they milled it and made bread for their own consumption, according to European custom. Testimony of this was left in the architectural remains of ovens located in numerous convents,

such as those of Actopan, Alfajayucan and Itzmiquilpan in the state of Hidalgo, or one of the first Franciscan convents, built in Huejotzingo, Puebla, which includes an area for breadmaking.

Famous monastic wheat mills were located in Santiago Tlatelolco, property of the Dominicans, and the Jesuits' Belén mill. Orders of nuns also carried out important work in the popularization and spread of various kinds of bread, especially pastries.

At the beginning of the Colonial period, the main obstacle to wheat cultivation was not the land but the Indian population. Their opposition was understandable when the attempt was made to force them to change or share their traditional crops, such as corn, in favor of a completely unknown one which, moreover, called for new techniques and tools.

It was obviously hard to convince them to give up their traditional, simple *coa* or sowing stick for planting corn and to adopt the complicated plough and hitherto unknown cart needed for growing wheat. In addition, they obtained two or three harvests of corn per year, as opposed to the single yearly wheat harvest obtained from unirrigated land.

In light of this situation, in 1559 the viceroy of Mexico decreed that farmers had to pay a tribute in wheat, in order to force them to cultivate this crop. Two years later he rescinded the order when he found out that the Indians were buying the wheat they needed to turn over as tribute. It would seem that the natives' message was "let him eat it with his bread."⁷

The solution the authorities came up with was to cultivate wheat on

⁷ A popular expression in response to being forced to do something, equivalent to "let him put that in his pipe and smoke it." (Editor's note.)



Wood stoves lend an incomparable flavor to bread.

Spaniards' land and force Indians to work these lands in accordance with the *encomienda* or *repartimiento* system.⁸ Acceptance of this was gradual and unequal.

Señor Suárez de Peralta relates an anecdote showing Indians' original rejection not of wheat cultivation but of bread itself:

Poor Indians who went begging... would not accept bread at all, and I don't mean crusts but loaves of more than a pound and a half... In my own house I saw a poor man return the bread and say that he was asking for money, not bread.

After the initial clash, by the end of the century, the region of Puebla in the center of Mexico—birthplace of Mesoamerican corn—embraced wheat and became the country's main area of wheat production. The Atlixco valley, with numerous Spanish farmers, eventually produced around 100,000 *fanegas* a year (between five and six thousand tons), while in the nearby San Pablo valley, with seventy Spanish farmers, annual production reached about 72,000 *fanegas* (around four thousand tons). In areas surrounding Mexico City, irrigation made it possible to obtain two harvests a year.⁹

As the 16th century drew to an end, the foundations were laid for the development of New Spain [as Mexico was called when it was a Spanish colony]. The process of culinary *mestizaje* proceeded at different rhythms at family hearths, in the countryside, in convents and

monasteries, in the streets and in the incipient commercial establishments.

The Indian population had learned not only to grow wheat but to make bread. As basic breads, Mexico saw the emergence of the yellow-brown "low bread" made of wheat germ and the elegant refined white bread decorated with flower designs (a custom handed down from the Romans).

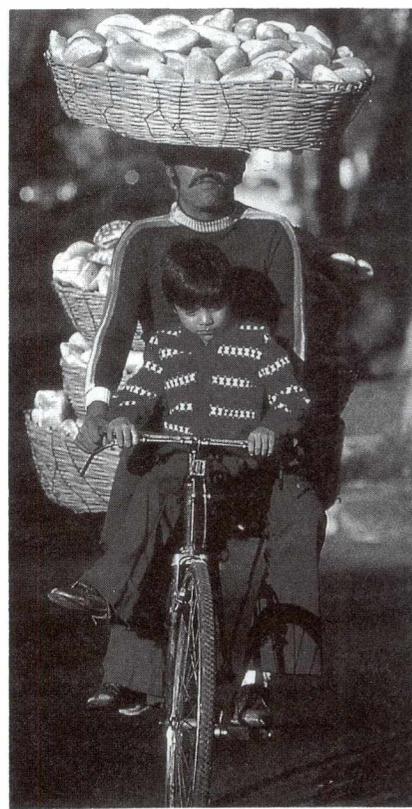
Wheat gave rise to mills and ovens, completing the process required for the emergence of bakeries and, later on, specialized biscuit- and pastry-making shops. A popular saying reflected a growing taste and appetite: Why do you give me tamales when biscuits can be had?

With pride, Bernal Díaz describes the achievements obtained among the Indians with regard to crops and the products made from them:

...now they raise cattle and tame oxen, they plough the land and sow wheat, and they refine and gather and sell it, and make bread and biscuits, and they have planted their lands and properties with all the trees and fruits that we brought from Spain....¹⁰

The arrival of other products needed for making bread laid the groundwork for the gradual and varied development of Mexico's infinity of pastries and sweet breads. Of particular importance was the arrival of sugar cane, which greatly enriched our cuisine's sweets and desserts. Sugar was also dissolved in traditional drinks such as *atole* (a flavored drink based on corn meal) and the famous chocolate; and its use as an ingredient led biscuits to be designated as a form of "sweet bread."

Sugar cultivation underwent a development similar to that of wheat. Cortés himself was one of the first to establish sugar plantations and mills,



Newly baked bread, in perfect balance.

which he set up on his lands in Cuernavaca. From there cultivation spread to warmer lands: Veracruz, Guerrero and Michoacán.

Animal products such as pork lard, cow's milk, butter and duck and chicken eggs rounded out the list of ingredients necessary for making bread and reproducing the sweet recipes of Arab, Jewish or Christian origin brought over from the Iberian peninsula.

Among other delicacies, *torrejas*, *muéganos*, *alfajores*, *roscones*, *mamonos*, *buñuelos*, *mantecadas*, *empanadas*, *puchas* and *ázimo* breads made their appearance. All would be welcomed, mixed and enriched through the contributions of indigenous cuisine, which took shape in the skill, taste and ingenuity used in handling the forms, names and colors of bread ❧

⁸ Georges Baudot, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁹ Felipe Teixidor, *El fin de nada y el principio de todo* (The End of Nothing and the Beginning of Everything), quoted in Sonia Corcuera de Mancera, *Entre gula y templanza. Un aspecto de la historia mexicana* (Between Greed and Frugality. One Aspect of Mexican History), p. 51.

¹⁰ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *op. cit.*, chapter CCIX (209), p. 879.