

# The Mystery of *Mole* from Puebla

## A Baroque Convent Delicacy

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**A**ny attempt at discovering the origins of what is undisputedly Mexico's national dish will flounder in legend and invention, amidst characters from convents, imported viceroys and gilded, painted figures of saints.

The only thing that seems clear, even crystal clear, is that *mole* was born in a city given to miracles and surprises.

Puebla was created by a flock of angels who, gliding over a deserted valley, decided to land and take up the difficult trade of laying out streets and plazas. Having accepted this winged, white spectacle, the inhabitants decided to call the place Puebla de los Angeles (Puebla of the Angels).

It is not strange that in that period—sad for the indigenous people and elegant for the new inhabitants—a way of life based on the destruction of the old gods and the enthronement of the new God was established.

One day, in a convent—as yet unidentified despite historians' imaginings—a nun mixed the new products from across the sea with products native to Mexico and a delicacy as baroque as main altars or children's toys was born: *mole*.

Not even I, who have dedicated a whole book to the *mole* from Puebla,

dare to use my own theories as my starting point; I think that for an article for a university [publication], the best recourse is legend, setting aside the remnants of such uncertain history.

The viceroy stained his dress whites with the black sauce, the nuns wondered at their own discovery, and the whole city applauded the turkey in *mole* sauce.

Time would change settings, characters, names and dates; but no one could change what was really important.



Photo by Jorge Pablo de Aguinaco

*Mole* is one of the dishes that have made Mexican cuisine world-famous.

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*Mole* is the most refined expression of the Mexican Baroque, born just when Europe was announcing the advent of neoclassicism and professing its boredom with pilasters and the glories of Solomon. But the Baroque in Puebla triumphs upon entering the kitchen by bringing turkey in *mole* sauce to the forefront.

I think that thick, chocolaty sauce, slightly spicy and aromatic with seasonings, is a wondrous example of the culminating achievement of an art. It is also one of the world's three or four unprecedented dishes, born of their own time and of themselves. *Mole* is an expression which in and of itself defines both a cuisine and a spirit. It is a meeting of two hearths that produces a third so distant from both father and mother that it has neither paternity nor family.

*Mole* comes to the far reaches of the earth as though fallen from the skies and it is not at all strange that angels, nuns, viceroys and golden columns should be present at its birth. I have proposed abandoning all attempts at surrounding turkey in *mole* sauce with historical references. One of those impossible angels planning the city must have descended from the sky with a platter of *mole* in its hands. This is the *mole* that those angels ate when, tired of mapping out streets and plazas, they sat on the ground and stained their wings that they then had to carefully lick.

Therefore, it is best not to try to make news of the lack of news, but rather to go back to the beginning of the story. That is, back to the recipes for *mole* from Puebla, unique, but with as many variations as there are cooks. ❧

## The Birth of Mole Poblano

If one place in Mexico could be considered the birthplace of Mexican cooking, it would be Puebla, a city founded by the Spanish in the sixteenth century as an important crossroads for travelers and armies coming and going between Veracruz and Mexico City. In the convent kitchens of Puebla, nuns created many of the dishes that still serve as the nucleus of Mexico's cuisine, *mole poblano* and *chiles en nogada* being the most famous.

Several popular legends tell of the birth of *mole poblano*, a festive dish that epitomizes the culinary marriage between the Spanish and Mexican worlds. While not as fanciful as the one that would have it created when a gust of wind blew just the right amount of spices and condiments into *cazuelas* of simmering turkeys, a more likely story is that it originated—in the seventeenth century—when the sister superior of the convent of Santa Rosa was faced with preparing a special meal for a visit from the archbishop and Spanish viceroy. Known for her culinary inventiveness, she probably took note of her helpers' stories about the Indian royal use of chocolate and with their help devised this superb dish, an adaptation of an earlier Mayan one. It is said that the original recipe included more than 100 ingredients. Today *mole* remains the classic dish for festive occasions such as weddings and baptisms.

**Take from:** Susana Palazuelos, *Mexico. The Beautiful Cookbook*, Collins Publishers, San Francisco, 1991.

## Turkey with Mole Poblano Sauce

- 1 young turkey, about 8 lb (4 kg), cut into serving pieces
- 16 cups (128 fl oz/4 L) water
- 4 cloves garlic
- 1/2 onion
- 1 tablespoon salt

### Sauce

- 1/2 cup (4 fl oz/125 mL) plus 2 tablespoons oil
- 7 oz (220 g) *chiles anchos*, seeds and membranes removed
- 3 oz (90 g) *chiles pasillas*, seeds and membranes removed
- 10 oz (315 g) *chiles mulatos*, seeds and membranes removed

- 4 *chiles chipotles*
- 1 1/2 lb (750 g) tomatoes
- 1 onion, coarsely chopped
- 10 cloves garlic
- 5 oz (155 g) blanched almonds
- 3 1/2 oz (105 g) shelled peanuts
- 8 whole cloves
- 4 black peppercorns
- 1-1 1/2-in (4 cm) sticks cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon aniseed
- 3 oz (90 g) raisins
- 3 oz (90 g) unsweetened (cooking) chocolate
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 tablespoon salt, or to taste
- 1/2 cup (2 oz/60 g) sesame seeds

- \* Place the turkey, water, garlic, onion and salt in a large pot or Dutch oven, bring to a boil, cover and simmer over medium heat for one hour or until the turkey is tender. Drain, reserving the stock, and set aside.
- \* To make the sauce, heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a skillet, add the *chiles anchos*, *pasillas* and *mulatos* and sauté for 1-2 minutes. Transfer to a bowl, cover with hot water and soak for 30 minutes. Drain, transfer to a blender and purée. Set aside.
- \* Toast the *chiles chipotles* and roast the tomatoes. Peel the tomatoes, transfer to a blender, add *chiles chipotles* and purée. Set aside.
- \* In the same oil in which you sautéed the *chiles*, sauté the onion and garlic for 2-3 minutes. Transfer to a blender. In the same oil, sauté the almonds for 5 minutes. Add the peanuts, cloves, peppercorns, cinnamon and aniseed and sauté for 3 more minutes. Transfer to the blender, add the raisins and purée.
- \* Heat the cup of oil in a large pot or Dutch oven. Stir all the purées together, add to the pot and boil for 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Add the chocolate and sugar, stirring constantly. When the mixture comes to a boil, add 4 cups (32 fl oz/1 L) of the turkey stock. Cover and cook over low heat for 20 minutes. Add the salt and correct the seasonings. If the sauce is too thick, add more stock.
- \* Add the pieces of turkey, cover and cook over medium heat for 10 minutes. Meanwhile, toast the sesame seeds in a small skillet over medium heat until they are golden. Serve the turkey *mole* hot, sprinkled with the sesame seeds.

**Note:** It is better to prepare the sauce in advance, adding the turkey when it is reheated—not only because of the work involved in preparing the *mole* but because it tastes better when the various flavors have time to mingle and mellow. However, if you find this recipe too laborious you can always buy *mole* paste in supermarkets and street markets all over Mexico.

**Taken from:** Susana Palazuelos, Mexico. *The Beautiful Cookbook*, Collins Publishers, San Francisco, 1991.