



Alegrías made of amaranth seeds, a sweet and nutritious tradition inherited from the Aztecs.

MEXICAN CANDIES

A Bit of Edible History

Lynn Wehnes*

Visitors to Mexico are often struck by the brilliant colors, rich variety and delicious flavors of Mexico’s candies. But few realize that these sweet delights are portable pieces of Mexico’s past.

Many of today’s most popular treats date back to pre-Columbian times. Amaranth candies, for example, are made from the grain of a plant that was prized as a gourmet food by the Aztecs, and was cultivated extensively by them in the valleys of central Mexico.

* Historian.

Photos taken at Celaya and Candy Stores, both on Juárez Avenue, in Mexico City’s Historic Center.

Today, amaranth appears most frequently in *alegrías*, sweets made by popping amaranth seeds on a *comal* (griddle) and holding them together with molasses.

Daniel K. Early explains in his essay “The Renaissance of Amaranth” (in *Chilies to Chocolate: Food the Americas Gave the World*) that, according to the *Mendocino Codex*, a sixteenth-century record of Aztec society and culture, amaranth (or *huautla*, its Nahuatl name) was one of four major crops collected as tribute throughout the empire. The Aztecs’ total take, after collecting it from each of the 17 provinces in their empire, was as much as hundreds of thousands of bushels. And amaranth’s history dates back even fur-

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ther: it has been found in excavations in Tehuacán, Puebla that are 5,500 years old.

The Aztec's most important use of amaranth was probably in their religious rituals. During an event called "Huautamalcualiztli," or "Amaranth tamale feast," worshippers offered popped-amaranth tamales to the god of fire. They also ate them and put them on graves to serve as funeral offerings.

"An even more highly charged use was in rituals involving the sacred *tzoali*, a mixture of popped amaranth seeds held together with syrup from the maguey cactus and, at times, human blood," writes Early. "The faithful considered this preparation the flesh of the gods. Images of at least six deities (Chicomecóatl, the goddess of crops; Xiuhtecuhtli, god of fire; Tláloc, the rain god; Macuilxóchtli, the flower god; Omócatl, god of feasts; and Huitzilopochtli, god of war) were fabricated from *tzoali* for consumption in a communion ritual."

Naturally, when the Spaniards arrived, they were horrified by what they saw as a perversion of the Catholic communion ritual.

"No historical evidence has been found that the Spaniards prohibited the cultivation of amaranth itself, but they certainly waged a repressive campaign against this 'idolatry', in which amaranth played a central role," Early notes.

Other examples of contemporary sweets common to Mexico's indigenous cuisine include the *cajetas* of Celaya (caramelized goat milk, often served as a dessert on crepes); *chongos zamoranos* (a milk and syrup sweet shaped like mushrooms); the fruit sweets of Puebla; pumpkin seeds; sweets made from sweet potatoes and gourds; and the *ates* of Morelia, as Heriberto García Rivas points out in *Cocina prehispánica mexicana: la comida de los anti-guos mexicanos* (Mexican Pre-Hispanic Cuisine: The Food of the Ancient Mexicans).



Celaya, a traditional candy shop.

Among the candy ingredients used by indigenous people is vanilla. Its incorporation into native cuisine is remarkable, explains Patricia Rain in her essay "Vanilla: Nectar of the Gods" (in *Chilies to Chocolate*), given that the vanilla flower and its fruit have no noticeable scent or flavor unless fermented.

"This biochemical fact makes it remarkable that, in antiquity, vanilla's virtues were discovered, let alone that an efficient means of curing the beans was developed and the plant itself brought under extensive cultivation," she writes.

Rain credits the Totonacs of Veracruz with these accomplishments. "At least a thousand years ago the Totonacs worked out a means of processing the beans very much like the methods used today in commercial vanilla extractions, and they began to make vanilla an integral part of their culture. In addition to using it as a perfume and as a flavoring for food and drink, the Totonacs found that vanilla was effective as a medicine, an aphrodisiac and an insect repellent." About 500 years before the Spaniards arrived, the Aztecs forced the Totonacs to give them part of their annual vanilla harvest.

"Chocolate is another indigenous ingredient with a long history," writes John A. West in "A Brief History and Botany of Cacao" (in *Chilies to Chocolate*). The *Mendocino Codex* shows large sacks of cacao beans being paid in tribute by other Indian groups to the Aztecs, along with other fine goods such as honey, feathers and gold. Spanish colonial governments established a monopoly on cacao production, and during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, cacao became the Spaniards' most important export crop. The Spanish

controlled its trade and consumption in Europe and its colonies.

Members of the Spanish royal family began the practice of adding other flavorings, such as aniseed, vanilla, cinnamon and sugar to their liquid chocolate beverage.



A great variety of shapes, flavors and colors in marzipan.

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“Presumably, the Spanish court took such great liberties in doctoring chocolate drinks because long, damp voyages from the New World left many of the beans moldy and poor tasting; the additional flavors became necessary to mask the undesirable ones,” West writes.

Despite the drink’s popularity in Mexico, hot chocolate as we know it—hot milk mixed with chocolate—did not exist until it was invented in 1727 by an Englishman named Nicholas Saunders, according to West.

The arrival of the Spaniards also meant the arrival of sugar, which they transported from the Canary

Islands to Santo Domingo, and from there to Cuba and Mexico. Before sugar was brought to Mexico, Mesoamerican peoples sweetened their foods with honey from forest bees and the cane from the corn plant, the *tuna* (Prickly pear) and the maguey plant, says Sonia Corcuera de Mancera in her book *Entre gula y templanza* (Between Gluttony and Moderation). When Cortés first introduced sugar to Mexico, at the end of the first quarter of the sixteenth century, sugar consumption did not grow quickly, especially among those with meager resources. Cortés himself began cultivation of sugar on his *fincas* in Tlaltenango and los Tuxtlas, Veracruz, and cultivation extended to Morelos, Guerrero and other parts of New Spain.

But it was not until the first half of the seventeenth century that sugar began to gain an important place in the Mexican diet, according to Carlos Zolla in *Elogio del Dulce: Ensayo sobre la dulcería mexicana* (Eulogy to Sweets: Essay on Mexican Sweet Making).

The art of Mexican sweet making may have reached its climax in the convents, during the colonial period. “In the eighteenth century they [sweets] became true works of art, baroque in the mixture of colors and shapes, in the *recherchés* names and in the original com-



Pirulies, a children’s favorite.

bination of ingredients,” writes Corcuera de Mancera. She adds, “There came about in the convents what we would call haute Mexican cuisine: dishes more elaborate and more decorated than ‘the typical dishes of that time’. The nuns of Jesús María imitated all types of foods, using sweets as their base: When the sweet-toothed caters thought they were taking a slice of meat, they found themselves with a slice of almond paste!”

The nuns’ agility with sweets was to be mutually advantageous to both them and the eating public. The convents needed money as a supplement to their gifts and endowments to pay for the goods and products they had to buy from outside their walls. The public needed to satisfy its desire for sweets.

“Those of average condition, placed socially somewhere between the viceroy and the leper, also bought and savored all types of sweets,” Corcuera writes. “To give an idea of the affection that the Mexican had for sugar, it is enough to think about the poetic names of the candies: *suspiros* (sighs), *besos* (kisses), *bocado real* (royal mouthful), *regalo de ángeles* (gift of the angels); one as improbable as *leche de obispo* (bishop’s milk) or the *borrachos* (drunkards) with a discreet alcoholic content.”

As a result, nuns began to set themselves up in business, offering services which produced sweet dishes on demand for all types of celebrations. The nuns added their contributions to the development of Mexican sweets, Zolla explains, introducing the use of Old World technology (the oven), as well as

The nineteenth-century fad in Mexico for all things French found exquisite expression in sweets as well.



A sweet rainbow.

European preparations such as marzipan. Among the nuns best known for their creations were those in the Convent of San Jerónimo and the Regina Coeli and Catalina de Sena Monasteries.

The nineteenth-century fad in Mexico for all things French found exquisite expression in sweets as well. As Salvador Novò explained in *Cocina mexicana o historia gastronómica de la ciudad de México* (Mexican Cuisine or a Gastronomical History of Mexico City), “With all the pretty sweets inherited from the convents; and the cakes multiplied during the viceroyalty, the attraction of French candies and pastries was in itself above all reflection, all prudence.”

It is probably the twentieth-century, post-revolutionary re-evaluation of Mexican culture and the restoration of its prestige within the country that has resulted in traditional candies’ current popularity. How convenient that such colorful reminders of the nation’s past can be so readily consumed and enjoyed. 