

MEXICAN CUISINE

C o n t i n u i t y a n d C h a n g e

*Alfonso de María y Campos**

At a time when the world rejects aggressive, exclusionist nationalism, few spheres of human endeavor are allowed to develop in the shelter of a healthy national identity. We must set aside the spheres of politics and religion, because they tend to authoritarianism, and economics, because it leads to isolationism in a world of growing commercial interdependence. The only area left to us in which we can recover the emphasis on national characteristics is the arts, even though they are also deformed by globalization and the homogenization fostered by the mass media.

Although a country's gastronomy also faces the tendencies of our time (globalization, interdependence, the revolution in communications, etc.), it is one of the few things that at the end of the millennium refuses to be wiped out. In fact, it even grows and evolves to consolidate certain characteristics of tolerance, of identity of an ethnic group and of a nation.

The great sages of gastronomical thought, from Brillat Savarin in the



Photos by Jorge Pablo de Aguinaco

Mexican cuisine is famous not only for its taste but also for its artistic presentation.

* Mexican historian.



Enchiladas. A traditional dish is also *haute cuisine*.

eighteenth century to my recently deceased Catalonian friend Xavier Domingo (whom I pay homage to here), have established some of the essential criteria for defining the food of a given country as “national.” In the first place, for there to be “national cuisine,” it must have originated in authentic “regional cuisines” based on local ingredients and techniques. Also, a national cuisine must develop sufficient identity and character of its own to be able to assimilate culinary products and techniques

from other national or regional cuisines without losing its character. It must also be “exportable,” in the sense that it be able to transform, enrich or conquer other cultures, tastes and cuisines.

Let us look at the case of Mexican food which, as I will show, together with Chinese and French, is one of the world’s three great cuisines. Here we take home at least a bronze medal.

Today’s Mexican food is rooted in the broad and rich base of the pre-Hispanic period, thanks to the original-

ity of the products used. Without listing them all, suffice it to mention corn, tomatoes, chili peppers and chocolate. The gastronomy of the Old World was rapidly enriched by the arrival of Europeans to America. For example, tomatoes became the “traditional” ingredient of the ancient but somewhat doddering cuisines of the Mediterranean (Spain, the South of France, Italy). Without tomatoes, several of these cuisines would not be what they are today, particularly Italian cooking, which also incorpo-

rated corn (or the Turkish grain) as its basis, turning it into the peasant staple, polenta.

At the same time, Mexico's indigenous cooking assimilated the new products and techniques from Europe and even from Asia, Africa and other regions already explored by the Spaniards and other Europeans. Here, the techniques should be emphasized since, while the products themselves were very important (particularly meat and dairy products —animal proteins— and wheat), it was the cooking techniques which adapted the most to the mixture which would become

Mexican cuisine: first and foremost, the use of pork lard for frying of all kinds. Distilling techniques gave rise to mescal, tequila, rum, etc., while local drinks had previously only been fermented, like pulque.¹

Later, in the seventeenth century (often underestimated in Mexican history), human and cultural *mestizaje* (mixes) advanced rapidly with the efficiency only comparable to the dimensions of a population catastrophe.

¹ A fermented milkish drink made from the juice of certain species of agave. [Editor's Note.]

As the population of Mesoamerica dropped dramatically because of the combined effects of disease, war and famine, some population groups disappeared, others began to emerge and still others regrouped, mixing different cultures: North with South, East with West. In this way, important culinary transformations took place spurring the appearance of more or less specific regional cuisines and foods: North, Gulf, Central, Southeast, Pacific cuisines, etc. In many cases the local food products determined the cuisine; in others the incorporation of products from other re-



Chiles en nogada. A colorful mixture of unexpected tastes.

gions and even from other countries enriched and gave a local or regional cuisine its specificity. Outstanding examples of this process were the states of Tabasco, Campeche and Yucatán, veritable gems of our local, regional and even national cuisine: they incorporate the local *tepeiscuincle*², *pejelagarto*,³ crab, shrimp and shark, the imports capers, olive oil and olives, together with some of the finest techniques of the Orient, like pickling by mixing vinegar, olive oil and spices to conserve food longer and give the dishes more flavor.

The cuisine of the high central plateau developed in a more baroque and elaborate style. The great houses and wealthy convents made good use of products native to Mexico and had unlimited access to imports and techniques from Europe and the Orient, furnishing them with a panache worthy of the most elegant tables in the world. After that, the concept of refined, holiday food—particularly



Tamales. A wide variety of flavors and ingredients.

linked to religion—became an essential part of the roots of the new national cuisine.

Mexican cooking is a truly national cuisine, palpable not only in the origins and colors of *chiles en nogada*⁴ or red, green or sweet tamales, but because it is the result of a long, delicate process of amalgamation in which the native opens up to the new without losing strength or identity. Unity and diversity are as important for a regional cuisine as native and foreign are for truly national cuisines.

The twentieth century did not bear out mid-nineteenth century French predictions that Mexico would be conquered gastronomically by the weight of U.S. culture. Aside from the size of U.S. investment in Mexico's food industry, particularly in "fast food," which is much higher than Mexican investment in the U.S., even with NAFTA, the fact is that Mexican food makes its presence felt north of the border. This is due both to the sheer numbers of Mexican immigrants in the

United States and their family and social ties and to the value placed on Mexican food by immigrants. Naturally, it is also explained by the "exportability" of Mexico's products and culinary techniques despite the fact that they may change significantly when adapted locally. The same thing happens to Chinese, Japanese and even French cooking when exported to the United States or other countries, testifying more to their good qualities than to their weaknesses. This is why, today, restaurant guides in the world's largest and wealthiest cities emphasize "ethnic" cooking—a rather doubtful, sociological way of describing outstanding regional and national cuisines. ❧

² Rodant from Mexico and Costa Rica. [Editor's Note.]

³ A particularly tasty fresh-water fish native to the Grijalva River in the state of Tabasco. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ Chili peppers stuffed with ground meat and candied fruit, covered with walnut cream sauce and garnished with pomegranate seeds. [Translator's Note.]