



*Achiote, used in Mexican food.*

After many years of being enjoyed almost exclusively inside our borders, Mexican cuisine is today increasingly prominent on the international gastronomical stage. It has even been recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In a series of articles in this issue, penned by experts, and an interview with a well-known master of Mexican cuisine, we pay tribute to Mexican gastronomy as a reflection of a culture rich in flavors and specific ingredients, born of the country's immense biodiversity, as well as ancestral traditions and techniques, which, although passed down from generation to generation, are no barrier to exploration and innovation.



Mexican Cuisine

# WORLD HERITAGE TREASURE

Gina Bechelany Fajer\*



*Guasmole, a dish made using the legume called guaje.*

Mexican cuisine has been influenced by the land where it has developed. Mexico is a region of huge biodiversity, a place where various elements combined to encourage original ways of preparing food.

Food has long transcended its purely nutritional function and has become an essentially social activity. Ingredients, preparation techniques, utensils, and choices of diet all form part of people's cultural make-up and identity, both on a community and an individual level. In Mexican culture, large and small social events take place around the table: wedding banquets, communions, baptisms, birthdays, farewells and reunions, and official receptions; get-togethers are always spiced up with food-related codes.

Mexican cuisine has been influenced by the land where it has developed. Mexico is a region of huge biodiversity, a place where various elements combined to encourage original ways of preparing food. We can trace back the diet and culinary traditions to pre-Hispanic times, and three items in particular: corn, chili peppers, and beans, which constitute the axis of the cultural identity and unify Mexico's various regions. However, with the arrival of the Spanish came a rich new gastronomic exchange, a blending of both cultures during the colonial period's 300 years. This melded the indigenous with the Spanish, especially in the regions such as the Maya, Zapotec and Aztec, where highly complex cultures flourished. This is the root of what we now call Mexican cuisine, based on the ancient Mesoamerican culinary tradition, fused with the flavors and rich knowledge brought by the Moors to the Iberian Peninsula, with Asian condiments courtesy of the Nao galleons' voyages from China, all stirred together with ingredients of Spain's own cuisine.

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Photos by Adalberto Ríos Szalay and Adalberto Ríos Lanz.





Ingredients for making mole sauce.

## A TWO-WAY CULINARY CHAT

A well-laid table is not only about food. It also creates the right atmosphere for a nourishing conversation between two people: Gloria López Morales, president of the Conservatory of Mexican Gastronomic Culture (CCGM) and writer Nicolás Alvarado, who talked about traditional dietary practices within the framework of a globalized gastronomic model and obviously referring to traditional Mexican cuisine's place on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Gloria López Morales is an internationalist and diplomat who has held positions in Paris, for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and in Havana, where she began to take an interest in developing cultural tourism,

with an emphasis on gastronomy. Writer and communicator Nicolás Alvarado has worked for various print and electronic media, including style and travel magazines, and he states that tasting food is a type of cultural experience. "When we talk about a trip, apart from the actual places we visited, we almost always refer to where we eat," begins Nicolás. Then Gloria adds, "It's precisely a country's food, its cuisine, that says so much about who we are as a society."

## ORIGINALITY AND TECHNIQUE

**GLORIA LÓPEZ MORALES (GLM):** A cuisine is born and supported especially by what is grown in the place in question. Mexico's gastronomy has been determined by the domestication of corn. We have three ancestral products that are the core ingredients all across the country: corn, beans, and chili peppers. These are the backbone of our cuisine."

**NICOLÁS ALVARADO (NA):** But technique is also crucial.

**GLM:** For sure, but that takes us into the realm of culture, since the domestication of corn is a cultural phenomenon . . .

**NA:** I agree. In terms of agriculture, for example, you would expect the British Isles to have much more to offer, but the techniques simply hadn't developed for the creation of a more complex gastronomy.

We have to consider the technique a core element of gastronomic development. It is precisely technique that enables a shift from subsistence to pleasure or to art —by which I mean artifice— and from nature to culture.

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with a great cultural tradition has been the recipe for  
a high level of gastronomic development.

**GLM:** That's probably true, although the British Isles do not have the same biodiversity as Mexico . . .

**NA:** There's sea, there are flat fields, there are varied climates, and . . .

**GLM:** And they still eat raw herrings!

**NA:** They still eat raw herrings because of a lack of technique, because they didn't develop methods . . .

**GLM:** Probably. Some historians and scholars maintain that culinary tradition comes from a combination of two major factors: biodiversity and agriculture's ability to transform products.

**NA:** But I insist. We have to consider the technique as a core element of gastronomic development. It is precisely technique that enables a shift from subsistence to pleasure or to art—by which I mean artifice—and from nature to culture. Biodiversity does not make for a cuisine; though under the right conditions it might lead to agriculture. Cuisine is about culture: human inventiveness, capacity for abstraction and dexterity to develop tools and techniques. . .

**GLM:** Yes, of course creativity is fundamental, but we can see that the great culinary traditions of the world are clustered around the tropics: China, India, Mediterranean peoples, and, in the case of the Americas, part of Mesoamerica and the northern reaches of the Andes. The generosity of nature and of peoples with a great cultural tradition has been the recipe for a high level of gastronomic development.

#### HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

In the 1990s a meeting took place with a multidisciplinary group of specialists, whose goal was to safeguard the knowledge and practices of Mexico's traditional culinary system, to preserve the roots, identity, continuity, and promotion of our gastronomy. And so the CCGM was born. This non-governmental organization set out, among other things, to inscribe traditional Mexican cuisine on the UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list, a goal they achieved in 2010.

**NA:** Did the Conservatory set out principally to get Mexican cuisine listed as cultural heritage treasure of humanity?

**GLM:** To a large extent, yes. As we all know and recognize, gastronomy is one of the



Grinding on a *metate* mealing stone, an ancestral utensil.





Two-colored tortilla, made from both blue and white corn.

By obtaining this distinction, we are making a commitment to the UNESCO to preserve and promote our gastronomy, not just in Michoacán but throughout Mexico.

pillars for any culture. It's something that defines and identifies it. Nowadays we are at the mercy of globalization. Every country around the world is being swept along by this phenomenon, driven by rapid technological development that demands a constantly evolving society. It is a reality that in some countries traditional cuisine has already begun to be eroded. We have seen this with the proliferation of fast-food outlets, not just in the big cities but also in small cities and towns.

**NA:** However, although I consider that our cuisine has a lot going for it and is better than many, a lot of other countries also have delicious cuisines and deeply rooted culinary traditions. So why was Mexican cuisine singled out specifically for this distinction?

**GLM:** There's no doubt about it, plenty of cuisines could be on the list. The French cuisine, for example. In fact, they tried but did not meet the protocols. In my view, they missed a great chance to compile a comprehensive file on their cuisine, which has so much merit. But the Mexican cuisine, by which I mean its traditional cuisine, is the only one to receive the distinction. The file we prepared together with the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the United Mexican States National Committee for the UNESCO (Conalmex), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE), was entitled *Traditional Mexican Cuisine — Ancestral, Ongoing Community Culture, the Michoacán Paradigm*.

**NA:** It only refers to one state, yet Mexican cuisine is hugely diverse. What happened to the gastronomical traditions of the Yucatan, Puebla, Monterrey and all the others?

**GLM:** The UNESCO explicitly asked us to present a specific case, where concrete actions had been taken to preserve an area's cultural heritage. We chose Michoacán's cuisine because we had been running a program between 2004 and 2010 called "Cooks from Michoacan." A group of women from that state made a film that showed their direct involvement with their



experiences and as bearers of the traditions that they wanted to safeguard. That was how traditional Mexican cuisine was listed by the UNESCO in November 2010.

**NA:** What has been the importance of this declaration of Mexican cuisine as an Intangible Heritage Treasure of Humanity?

**GLM:** First of all, it recognizes the fact that the traditional cuisine is authentic and still very much alive. By obtaining this distinction we are making a commitment to the UNESCO to preserve and promote our gastronomy, not just in Michoacán but throughout Mexico. And especially the continued use of its main elements, chili peppers, corn, and beans, since these are found in Mexican homes both in rural areas and in cities. Culinary traditions remain at the core of Mexican culture and have crossed borders with the migrant population now living in the United States and Canada; and most importantly, its development continues to be linked to the original customs.

**NA:** That's a good point. The fact that our gastronomy is recognized as an intangible heritage of humanity gives us a great opportunity to raise international awareness of our entire culture through our cuisines. It will shine a spotlight on Mexico, and as a result it won't be so easy to avoid the commitment of developing public policies to preserve, support, and promote it.

#### CULINARY TRADITION NOW

**NA:** Even with the Cultural Heritage declaration, it's impossible to make a cuisine stand still, because it's constantly evolving, changing, and fusing with different elements, products, and techniques used in other regions of the world. You just need to look at the creations and developments made by leading international chefs from Mexico like Enrique Olvera and Ricardo Muñoz Zurita, who have made groundbreaking new dishes by adding an ingredient or two to the *milpa* crops: corn, chili, and beans.

**GLM:** I completely agree; cultural manifestations are never static and cannot be carved in stone. That's why it's a living culture in constant evolution. Placing traditional Mexican cuisine on the UNESCO's intangible heritage list does not at all mean inhibiting its natural and unavoidable



Roasting over an open wood fire is a lasting tradition.



"It's vitally important that a living culture is preserved, but what concerns me most is that we might think that our cuisine is better than others. Mexican cuisine is extraordinary, but it doesn't need to struggle against others to stay alive."

NICOLÁS ALVARADO

evolution. As you say, the world's various gastronomies have been in contact with each other and products and techniques have been exchanged. Evolution takes place on its own, so what we must safeguard are the roots, fundamentally traditional Mexican cuisine's collective nature. I explained this in detail to three French chefs who did not understand how Mexican cuisine had been chosen.

**NA:** I don't think that one way of cooking, whether individual or collective, can be superior to another. . . . Individual creativity throughout history has been the source of all artistic creation and of course collectivity is the source of artisanal and traditional creation. It's vitally important that a living culture is preserved, but what concerns me most is that we might think that our cuisine is better than others. Mexican cuisine is extraordinary, but it doesn't need to struggle against others to stay alive.

**GLM:** No, that isn't the idea at all. Cuisines from all around the world must be in a dialogue, but protecting what is yours *vis-à-vis* others must be done to the same degree.

#### A DIALOGUE BETWEEN CUISINES

**NA:** Obviously no one cuisine is superior to another, but you can argue that some traditions have richer traditions, such as Mexico, France, and China, and many others, too. I don't think that cultures need to compete with one another. I'm worried that today there seems to be this absurd rivalry, and that everything is given an ideological slant, and you can begin to detect a whiff of politics. I find this troubling because it's very hard to think of one culture being better than the others.

**GLM:** A question people always ask me, one which really irritates me, is whether Mexican cuisine is really in third place after the French and the Chinese. What we're trying to do is value what we have, for our own sake. But what I do emphasize is that few cuisines can be compared to what we have in Mexico given its originality, character, diversity of products, and preparation methods. But we are letting it all slip through our fingers. The trend of globalization and free trade has eroded our healthy, varied diet; today in Mexico we face a big problem of obesity brought about by changing dietary habits.

**NA:** Perhaps we have adopted new diets but the problem is not about having free-trade agreements or being open to outside influences; it's a question of education. If we ate fried tortilla *garnachas* every day instead of hamburgers we'd still have health problems and obesity. The problem is that we must learn how to eat. I'm not so worried if the ingredients or





preparation methods are Mexican or not; in that sense, the Conservatory's work strikes me as highly valuable. But the alarm bells of chauvinism are going off in my head, and that's something that makes me panic culturally speaking. I wouldn't like to live in a country that makes eating a Mexican diet a matter of public policy. For me what's essential is for a culinary and cultural dialogue to exist with every possible country.

**GLM:** Supporting one culture does not necessarily mean denigrating another, but that does not preclude mounting a defense against impositions. Our project has been warmly welcomed by cooks, chefs, students, restaurateurs, and small- and large-scale producers alike. Perhaps we have not made a big enough impact on public policies. It would be wonderful if we had a policy that not only protected Mexico's culinary traditions but also our farmers.

#### RENEWED TRADITION

People are truly concerned, including members of the Conservatory, that the culinary system is in danger and in need of protection. Traditional recipes and techniques run the risk of being lost if they are not recorded, and this could entail the loss of delicious dishes. However, that does not mean closing the door on exploration and innovation to enrich Mexican cuisine. Prestigious Mexican chefs such as Ricardo Muñoz Zurita, Enrique Olvera, and Daniel Ovadía have explored new trends and promoted gastronomic development in Mexico based on the use of international culinary techniques to produce creative and innovative new recipes using traditional Mexican ingredients. These masters have not only brought new value to the tradition but have also rescued many forgotten products from oblivion. Their traditional cuisines have been updated and our gastronomy now has a multicultural flavor while retaining its authenticity and splendor. **VM**



Making *pulque* bread in a wood-burning oven.

