

Food

Baroque Mexican Cuisine

Despite the many inroads modern life has made into Mexico, you can still sort out the scent of chili, mole and tortillas mentioned by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier when he compares Mexican cooking to the French and the Chinese. He believes the three correspond to a certain philosophy, a system, a discourse on method. Thus, if baroque architecture can be understood as a point of view on life where heaven is thought of as an eternal feast, no wonder that our daily life and wordly celebrations are also full of the baroque. This is especially true of the essential ingredients for any Mexican fiesta: mole and mariachis.

Manufacturing mole is a process so baroque it seems to result from a rapture, from ecstasy or some kind of culinary delirium. Mole was born in the city of Puebla, rich in convents, industrious nuns and baroque facades and altars. Mother María de la Asunción, in charge of the kitchen at the Convent of Santa Rosa, was given the task of preparing a special dish for the Illustrious Don Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, Archbishop of Puebla and the convent's main benefactor. Mother María reviewed her best recipes in search of something original, but nothing pleased her. She finally decided to commend herself to Saint Pascual Bailón, the patron saint of cooks. That night she dreamt of the formula for *guajolote* in mole, and early next morning she prepared the bird—a turkey whose name in Nahuatl means "bird with a double chin."

She used a *metate* (grinding-stone) to crush together broad chili, wrinkled raisin chili and so-called mulato chili because of its dark color. She added cinnamon, pepper and cloves from China. Then she mixed in ground peanuts and almonds together with plantain and chocolate, and produced a

magnificent paste that was further seasoned with butter and olive oil before being poured over the *guajolote*. Enraptured by their new dish, the nuns got carried away and began adding more ingredients. They sprinkled sesame seeds over it to combine the sweet and the salty and aid the archbishop's digestion. Another nun added onion rings and a third arranged fresh lettuce-leaves around the dish. María de la Asunción added the final touch by decorating the mole with beautiful cut-open radishes.

The Illustrious Don Manuel feasted his eyes before trying the new dish and was so impressed he decided then and there to baptize it "mole poblano."

This mole and those from other regions have survived over time and are an essential dish in any important Mexican fiesta. Sometimes cooks give in to temptation and use modern artifacts, such as an electric blender, to grind the ingredients. They may even buy a previously prepared paste, since mole now comes in cans and jars. Yet many families still prepare their mole "the old way" and proudly share stories about how Isabel, Margarita or Señora Sánchez grind on the *metate*, fry the spices and seasoning in butter and olive oil and cook it all in a clay pot over a wood fire. It is still served on the best plate in the house and sprinkled with sesame seed, which is what originated the popular saying "ser ajonjolí de todos los moles" (to be the seed of all moles), meaning a person who likes to be present at all important events.

CHILIS IN NOGADA

These chilis also originated in Puebla, perhaps in the very same Convent of Santa Rosa. This time it was a matter of showering attention on Agustín de Iturbide, the first ruler of the so-called Mexican Empire instituted shortly after the country's independence from Spain in 1810. It was August, the emperor celebrated his saint's day on the 28th, and the creative industrious nuns wished to make a very special offering to the commander of the victorious trilateral army, guarantor of independence, freedom and the faith.

One of the nuns was obsessed with the colors of the victor's flag and their meaning: green for independence, white for religion and red for unity. She went to market with this in mind and found the usual seasonal offerings: walnuts, chilis, apples, citron, raisins, cheese, almonds and pomegranate.

Back at the convent she prepared a stuffing for the chilis with minced meat and raisins, apples, almonds and acitrón, and covered them with a sauce made of freshly ground and peeled walnuts with cheese, almonds and milk. She added red pomegranate and green parsley leaves so that the dish offered to the emperor would show the colors of his flag. As he savoured the dish, little did Iturbide know that it would last much longer than his empire.

Now as then, the dish is served as a delicacy in restaurants during the month of August, which is when walnuts are in season.

odds and ends

There are still brave women who on Saint Agustin's Day, or to feast somebody whose birthday is in August, will take on the task of preparing the chilis and laboriously shelling and peeling the nuts. Carmen and Dolores do so over a century after Iturbide's empire was lost in history.

THE TORTA

Since both consist of ingredients immured between slices of bread and can be eaten anywhere and at any time without need of a table or silverware, the torta can be compared to a sandwich. But the Mexican torta is prepared with handmade bread from bakeries that are outstanding examples of our fantasy and extravagance in food. There are all kinds, forms and shades of bread, and love songs tell stories that combine passion with the names of different kinds of bread.

The bread used for tortas is sober, salted, and once it has been sliced open it will take any ingredient. It can be spread with butter, or even better, olive oil, although mayonnaise is the usual modern garnish, and it can contain anything from a scrambled egg on to ham, pork or cheese. Children take them to school and workers eat them on the job (though we must admit they prefer a taco if possible.) Tortas are ever-present items at the desks of bureaucrats, and secretaries eat them seeking out a patch of sunshine at lunchtime.

The torta may seem simple enough, yet it originated in a very complex form. In the old times it was customary to get up at three



Chocolate-rich mole

Photo by Pedro Rotger Salmer

odds and ends

o'clock in the morning to go to the best bakery in Mexico City, La Providencia, where one asked for Guadalupe "the Mole" who chose the best-baked bread for you. Then you went on to buy vegetables and herbs, choosing the smallest carrots, round and cambrai onions with tails and all, and three kinds of chilis: serranos, chipotles and guajillos. You also picked up green tomatoes, wide-eared lettuce, radishes, celery, thyme, laurel and sweet marjoram. At the Izazaga market you

was cut up taking special care of its heart, which was put in to cook with the chicken before being seasoned with guacamole (avocado sauce), pickled chilis and onion, oregano, sliced cheese and tomato.

Now you were finally ready to place the bread on a damp white-wood cutting board, to take up a very special, very sharp knife (there was once a famous tortamaker who wore down her excellent knife from spreading so much

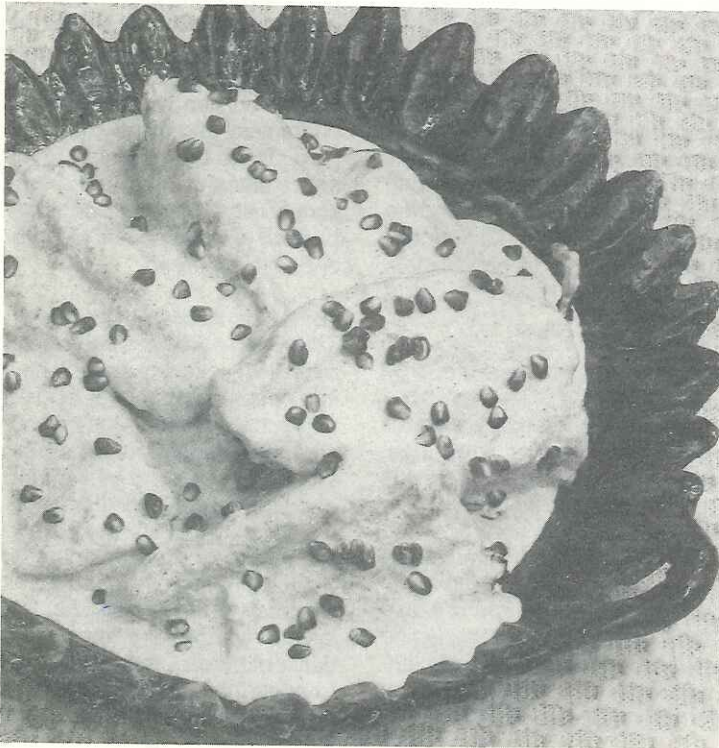


Photo by Bob Schalkwijk

Chilis in nogada

went to the herb-sellers for a deers-eye, a traditional amulet used for blessing, and purchased a piece of tequesquite, a kind of carbonate. At La Merced market you purchased smiling ranch-chicken, grateful filet, brains that did not smell of sea-breeze, drained turkey, eggs that had not been injected and Chihuahua cheese.

Back at home you put blessed water on to boil for a broth, and you threw in a piece of tequesquite, vegetables and an unwashed chicken lavishly handled to improve its taste. You let this simmer for four hours along with the deers-eye, and checked it constantly. The leg of pork was prepared by smearing it with lard and garlic and then spicing it up with broad chili. The filet was stuffed with almonds, then fried and plunged in pulque (a kind of liquor made from maguey) bought especially for the occasion at "La gloria de la Conesa." The turkey

butter), to slice the bread open with the care and precision of a surgeon, and to wash your hands because of possible microbes. Then you hollowed the bread and proceeded to fill and garnish it with the same frenzy you applied to getting your ingredients together.

The torta is not as old as mole or chilis in nogada, yet its origins are just as baroque. Even in its modern version, today's good torta-makers are constantly inventing minute works of culinary art to please customers at Meche's, Luis', the Thousand Tortas, the Turtles and Fat Abraham's.

De Gaulle spoke of the difficulty of governing a country whose people ate hundreds of different kinds of cheese. How do Mexican rulers feel about the culinary baroque of their people? ★

Teresa de Jesus Yanes and Emma Rizo

Theater

Mirror, Mirror On the Wall

How can a play reflect that part of the human condition that no one wants to talk about, or that when they do, they are very careful to keep its secrets from touching their own lives? Contemporary theater that retains traditional discourse and dramatic structures cannot respond to or represent this situation. Nor can the problem be resolved all at once; rather it requires years of experimentation with innovative dramatic forms and speech. *Mirrors (Espejos)*, a new play that recently opened in Mexico, takes important steps along this long path.

Mirrors is the creation of a rather odd couple: Juan José Gurrola and Raúl Falcó. Gurrola is an internationally recognized playwright and actor with 30 years of experience. Falcó is young, knowledgeable in all aspects of theater and guided by an indomitable energy to reach the peaks of his profession.

Mirrors reveals the authors' difficult lives in the hallucinations of an aviator who unfolds as classic characters: as Narcissus, the handsome man who scorns Eco the nymph and becomes the dandy (the Marquis), who lurks by the pool to feed his spirit on the passionate storms that rage within him.

"That's why not much can be said... Yet again the wax will melt. And once more you will fall into the water that will be your grave where you shall live forever more."

Into the cabin of his plane, crashed into the desert on the way to New Delhi, Marquis Narcissus hallucinates a variety of situations that take him from Paris to a sleazy nightclub in the Caribbean. He enters into a philosophical dialogue with Tiresias, confidant of the gods of Olympus, and is condemned to live the rest of his life without Eco's love, whom he once

scorned, trapped in the fleeting love of prostitutes. He will live in the Hell of the fleeting love of prostitutes, love that is bought. Life is constructed in the play through the constant repetition of the daily routine, using the speeches of classic authors such as Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, Saint John, Villaurrutia and others as the main vehicle for expression. The work is part of an effort to create a new kind of theater, in a world whose logic of development seems to have gone astray; theater that obliterates dramatic conventionalisms: lineal time development, ordered sequences, the narrative climax and all the categories that stifle meaning. It is theater that seeks to fuse art and life into a single, simultaneous experience, that erupts in front of the audience and invites reflection.

The artifice created in *Mirrors* is developed by borrowing the pictorial techniques of a collage, introducing fragments of other separate works into a new and inter-related whole. The technique generally consists of four elements, although they may not always be applied precisely. They are: the section, the previously formulated materials or message, the assembly and discontinuity or heterogeneity. "That way the audience witnessed scenes in which they could see Desdemona, Lady Macbeth and others together for the first time," according to noted Mexican theater critic Bruce Swansey.

Something similar happens in *Mirrors*. Fragments of literary classics move from one context to another. Each quote mutilates the linearity of discourse and time, conveying a double meaning: the original fragment in its context and a new meaning emerging from the new whole. The play blasts out in all directions, yet retains a classic concern: man's fate, love submerged in base passion and all of the contradictions that shape contemporary life.

The absence of a narrative core, an indication of the play's modernism, explains Raúl Falcó, "allows us to use psychic manipulation in profoundly realist theater where we enter the subconscious realm. *Mirrors* unfolds strictly within this rigor and this necessity, while at the same time there is strong dose of reiteration that adds a new element with each repetition as part of fiction's privileged domain." A verbal surface is structured that reflects and represents the characters and situations that enunciate it.