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José Agustín Arrieta, *San Pascual Bailón* (patron saint of cooks), 68 x 53.5 cm, 1852 (oil on canvas).

THE CUISINE OF PUEBLA

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Puebla is a crossroads and its cuisine mirrors it more faithfully than a tapestry or a good film. Gastronomical enjoyment satisfies our entire being: it is a joy to the eyes and a stimulant to the imagination through smell, taste and good moods. These are all the privileges of a good cuisine and its accoutrements, wines and spirits, particularly those made of fruit.

The gastronomy of Puebla on the eve of the twenty-first century still includes the cuisines of both the indigenous communities and the mestizos and Mexico-born Spaniards of the colonial era. One example makes this very clear: tamales. There is an enormous variety: ash tamales; bean, maize and *cacahuacintle* corn tamales; chili pepper, mushroom, fruit and curd tamales; and tamales made from squash flowers. *Atole* is the same: sometimes thick, sometimes thin, it is made of fruit, cinnamon, vanilla or chocolate (*champurrado*).

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Rice and spices from the Orient both grace Puebla's cuisine. It is also characterized by a combination of sweet, savory and spicy flavors. Recipes that use a small amount of many ingredients, a very Asian custom, are also common. And in Puebla, as in Asia, beauty is always prized in a dish.

Puebla cuisine has created its own utensils: *metates* and *molcajetes*, *cedazos* and sifters, *mole* pots of special colors with dripping black glaze on the sides, big enough for an entire turkey or *guajolote*. And the kitchens are graced with stoves covered in beautiful Puebla Talavera tiles.

Puebla's cookery produces its own ingredients and then puts them to use, from corn down to everything grown and raised in the kitchen garden: every imaginable kind of vegetable, barnyard fowl, and the crowning touch, both fresh and the ineffable dried *poblano* chili peppers. We cannot neglect fermented and distilled beverages: *tepaches*, *chías* and *nevados*. To the long list of centuries-old recipes from Puebla, we have to add three culinary masterpieces of Mexican food: *mole poblano*, or "mole from Puebla," *chiles en nogada*, or chili peppers in walnut sauce, and Puebla sweets.

It has been written that *mole poblano* not only provokes sighs and satisfied praises, but elicits virtual paeans in the pages of outstanding authors: Don Artemio de Valle Arizpe; Don Alfonso Reyes, "the Unparalleled One;" and Don Salvador Novo, himself an accomplished cook. *Mole* sauce is ductile, creamy and

velvety: sumptuously bathing the flesh of the turkey, the king of the Mexican barnyard, enveloping it in its aroma, it clothes it with spices, trapping the pleasure of a mouthful in the soft texture of the makeshift tortilla spoon.

Mole mixes the inciting flavor of chili peppers: the strong *mulato* chili, the caress of *pasilla*; the sweet aftertaste of the *ancho* chili, with bread; tortillas, almonds and peanuts, interlaced with the ancestral wisdom of cinnamon, pepper, cloves and the consummate fantasy of chocolate. *Mole*, baroque, synthesizes all the flavors of Mexico.

About *chiles en nogada*—exceptional if prepared with walnuts from Calpan and pomegranates from Tehuacán—Alfonso Reyes wrote, "Topped with ruby-red droplets, translucent and bright, a white, almost ermine, nutty cloak barely covers the chilies' intense green. Bitten into, all the baroque splendor of the *picadillo* filling bursts forth wrapped in the fleshy chili pulp and mixes greedily with the soft perfume of the walnut sauce and the sweet and sour flavor that each pomegranate seed envelopes like a closed capsule." [Quoted in Guadalupe Pérez San Vicente, *Comida familiar en el estado de Puebla* (Mexico City: Banrural, 1988), p. 15.]

Sweets from Puebla deserve all praise and poetry, but above all, they deserve to be tasted, one by one: the "nuns' sighs", the *muérganos*, the Santa Clara tortillas, the coconut and brown sugar candies, the "duchesses", the *mostachón*, and the *gaznates*. They are the proof that there really is a celestial presence in Puebla. ■■

GLOSSARY

Atole: a thick, hot drink made of corn flour dissolved and boiled in water.

Cedazo: a sieve-like utensil used for separating light ingredients from the heavier ones.

Chía: a seed used to make a refreshing drink.

Gaznates: crunchy deep-fried tubes of egg and shortening batter.

Metate: a rectangular, flat stone surface used for grinding corn, cacao and other grains.

Molcajete: a three-legged stone mortar used for preparing spices and sauces.

Mole sauce: typical of Puebla, is made from different chili peppers and sesame seeds.

Mostachón: almond-cinnamon sugar cookies.

Muérganos: honey-nut cookies.

Nevado: a fermented fruit drink.

Picadillo: a Mexican dish made of ground meat mixed with other ingredients; for *chiles en nogada*, the *picadillo* filling contains generous portions of candied fruit.

Santa Clara tortillas: glazed cookies.

Suspiros de monja ("nuns' sighs"): deep fried dough covered in maple syrup.

Tepache: a fermented beverage made from sugar cane or pineapple juice and brown sugar.