

THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO

*Mole* Sauce  
Flavor and Livelihood  
Of Atocpan

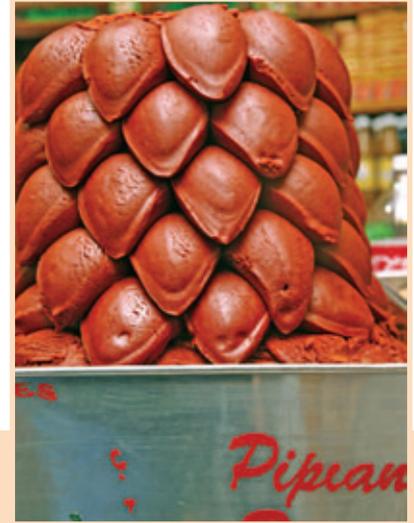
Isabel Morales Quezada\*



Chocolate tablets.



Ancho chili peppers.



Pipián paste.

After visiting Atocpan, it is easy to imagine how a little town can be the main supplier of one of Mexico's most emblematic traditional dishes. The town name comes from the Nahuatl word *atocli*, meaning “on fertile earth,” referring to the bountiful land that allowed the indigenous peoples to grow basic food crops like corn, lima beans and beans. Today, though, the main local occupation is not working the land, but making and selling the *mole* powder and paste used to make *mole* sauce.

San Pedro Atocpan belongs to Mexico City's Milpa Alta borough, and its full name reminds us of both its pre-Hispanic and colonial past. Its first inhabitants called it Atocpan, but when the Spaniards arrived, one of their most effective methods for colonizing was spreading the Christian Gospel. So, it was the Franciscan friars who added a Christian name to the town, turning it into San Pedro Atocpan.

When you arrive, the first thing you see is the large number of businesses selling different kinds of *mole* in both powder and paste form and the ingredients for making it. The pervasive smells come mainly from the chili peppers for sale, kept in large baskets. Going into any of the stores, you are immediately struck by the aroma, colors and textures of all the ingredients. Mixed together, they become one of Mexican cuisines oldest dishes. The best way to describe *mole* sauce is as a fusion of flavors.

But, we cannot leave out the historic events that made this dish possible: the mixture of its ingredients could well be a metaphor for the mixture of the Spanish and indigenous cultures. *Mulli* was the Nahuatl name the indigenous people used in pre-Hispanic times for the sauce they made with different kinds of chili peppers and ingredients like peanuts, chocolate and tortillas, and served over rabbit, hen, turkey or fish.

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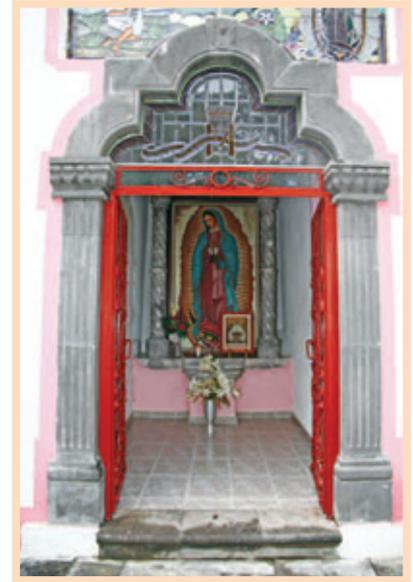
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Photos by Daniel Munguía.

Legends tell of the way the *mole* changed over the years. Many attribute its origin to the colonial city of Puebla's convent kitchens, famous for the appetizing dishes they prepared to tempt the palates of the viceroys. The nuns were not alone in the kitchens; they learned from the indigenous women to make this sauce of pre-Hispanic origin, and it is thought that they added different ingredients to the dish to make it less spicy.

Besides being the stuff of legend, what these stories reveal is the experimental nature of *mole* sauce. Each region of the country created a different kind, with certain common ingredients, but each place has added others that change the flavor. The sauce was further transformed by the arrival of products from Europe and Asia like anise, cloves, cinnamon, coriander and sesame seeds.

Today, *mole* can be found almost anywhere nationwide, though the states of Puebla and Oaxaca, and, of course, San Pedro Atocpan, are particularly outstanding producers. The interesting thing about San Pedro Atocpan is that it is precisely a tiny town that has grown and progressed economically because of its *mole* production.



San Pedro Atocpan is a tiny town that has grown and progressed economically because of its *mole* production. *Mole* Sauce with almonds has become its specialty.

#### THE HISTORY OF *MOLE* IN ATOCPAN

The tradition began in the mid-twentieth century when some of the families who specialized in making *mole* sauce decided to sell it in Mexico City markets. The quality of their product made it a success and, like elsewhere, more families decided to start making it. Little by little, production increased and diversified until it became the town's





Sanctuary of Our Lord of Mercies Church.



main economic activity. In May 1977, Rodolfo Borja took the initiative to organize a *Mole* Fair to promote what had become the town specialty: *mole* sauce with almonds.

Since then, the fair has been held every year in October. Atocpan producers and local restaurants all participate; exhibits of different varieties of the dish are mounted; and stands are set up where visitors can taste all the different kinds.

The fair shows that the main source of jobs in Atocpan is *mole*, which means that many town activities are organized around it. The stores that sell all kinds of chili peppers also offer the different kinds of *mole* that exist nationwide: red, black, green and yellow. In most of the shops, you can practically touch the dried *mole* powder in the air because it is all open to the public. But in Juan Caballero's shop, each kind is kept in a glass case to keep it from scattering throughout the store, as the owner proudly explains.

Asked about *mole* with almonds, Caballero just says that it is made with three kinds of chili peppers: *mulato*, *pasilla* and *ancho*, also all on display in his store, each with its own sign to avoid confusion. *Mole* has been generous to him, he says: despite the fact that in his youth he was a boxer and never thought he would specialize in it, today, now that he is retired, he owns a tidy store that offers him a living.

Besides the shops, around the plaza and its kiosk, Actopan has places to eat *mole* dishes, including, of course, *mole* with almonds. One noteworthy restaurant is Las cazuelas de Actopan, whose name refers to the clay pots the dish is traditionally made in, which, of course, can also be bought in the town at a street stand across from the plaza. They come in all sizes.

Las cazuelas de Atocpan restaurant is the best example of progress: it is one of the oldest in the town and has evolved to the point of having what looks like a mini-supermarket downstairs where a great variety of Don Pancho-brand *mole* sauces are sold in buckets of up to 10 and



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20 kilograms. And not just that: in the back of the restaurant and store are the mills where the powder to make *mole* sauce is ground in large amounts Monday through Saturday. The company is a cooperative started 25 years ago by only 20 partners, who have now grown to 100, making it one of the most productive firms in San Pedro Atocpan.

Different kinds of *mole* are prepared here, but the most typical is *mole* sauce with almonds served over turkey, as pointed out by restaurant supervisor Agustín Retana, knowledgeable about *mole* and his town's customs. He talks about the ingredients that make the "special almond" *moles* distinct, like banana; or the green *mole*, made with squash seeds; or the chocolate, characteristic of the red *mole*; or the "sweet *mole*" which includes even more chocolate. Agustín even mentions the effort being made today to produce a special *mole* for diabetics, and says that there is already a special mixture for foreign visitors who are not used to highly seasoned, spicy foods.

The *mole* at Las cazuelas de Atocpan is not only served over meat and rice, but can also be garnished with bean tamales, served around a little pot of sauce. Although this way of arranging the dish seems a little unusual, it was not created by the restaurant, but is a popular tradition in every home in town.

Finally, visiting this restaurant shows how *mole* production has evolved over time. In the past, all the ingredients had to be ground by hand on a stone mortar or mealing stone, making a recipe already complicated by the number of its ingredients even more laborious. Today, producers have modern grinders to facilitate production and make it possible for Atocpan *mole* to be sent all over the country and even abroad, where it is not known as *mole*, but as a generic "salsa," which detracts from its sophistication.

The *Mole* Fair, which takes place around October every year, is a good opportunity to learn more about this dish and Atocpan itself, which though it is near the city, retains its country air thanks to its beautiful surroundings. A lovely panoramic view can be seen from the Sanctuary of Our Lord of Mercies Church, at the highest point in the town, a modern building finished in 1977, accessed by a long stairway. Lower down, in contrast with the modern church, next to a little garden is the Yencuitlalpan Chapel, one of the first Franciscan buildings dating from approximately 1560.

There is no doubt that San Pedro Atocpan is a traditional town, dedicated to preserving the most Mexican of the country's mestizo culinary traditions even though it is also part of one of the world's most chaotic urban sprawls. But its determination to take the tradition even further is also surprising, showing that its evolution as a dish has no limits. Atocpan is well worth a visit to discover why *mole* became the main livelihood of an entire town. **MM**



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