



HISTORY MADE OF BREAD

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“Cloud,” “shell,” “gendarme,” “mustache,” “baldie,” “short-bread,” “nun,” “kiss,” “ear,” “ox eye”. . . In Mexico, all these words have their own flavor and each can be purchased for a few pesos at the bakeries that have endured heroically down through the centuries. Each name is a kind of sweet baked good, and everyone has his or her favorite. At home, breakfast or dinnertime is the best for enjoying a piece, and good luck to anyone who eats somebody else’s favorite!

The history of bread in Mexico begins in the colonial period, although it is said that the diversity of forms we can see today may have its roots in pre-Hispanic times since the in-

digenuous of that period were very imaginative in making tamales with corn dough, and molding them as offerings to the gods. “They made them in the shape of arrowheads and flowers; they rolled colored corn and bean dough, for example, and when these were cut into, they looked like shells.”¹ When the Spaniards arrived, they brought wheat with them and set up bakeries, where the indigenous were 90 percent of their workers, while mulattos or mestizos made up the rest. In addition, the convents also made bread for their own consumption. This meant that the indigenous women who worked in them may have taken their knowledge home and later done the same, selling out of the house, in stores, or in markets.²

That was how the old inhabitants of these lands appropriated wheat dough and invented a diversity of forms that

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remain in existence today. On the one hand, there are the sweet rolls or pan dulce made with Spanish recipes, and on the other, French baking that introduced the bread we consume today, also had a great influence. But long before French pastry and bread-making techniques arrived, in the colonial period there was a difference between the bread served at the table of bishops and viceroys and that eaten by common people:

The bread sold to the people, that is, ordinary bread, could be found in *pulperías* (stores that sold all kinds of supplies, eatables, wines, raw alcohol, or spirits, and pharmaceutical products or notions, etc.). All over Latin America, *pulperías* were the precedent for what we now know as our local mom-and-pop general corner stores. Apart from sales in bakeries and *pulperías*, indigenous women sold bread in plazas and markets.³

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Consumption of this food was controlled and restricted, and bread made from fine, white flour was reserved for the viceroys. Later, sales moved from *pulperías* to bread shops, which also sent itinerant salespersons out onto the street offering their wares. The influence of late-eighteenth-century Italian cafés and French bread-making and patisseries in the nineteenth century ensured the popularization of the combination that has lasted until today among Mexicans: sweet



bread, or pan dulce, and coffee. Later, the Mexican Revolution contributed to French specialties spreading to bakeries, and that is how the bread and pastry boom began in Mexico. Ordinary people took to eating this kind of baked good, and buying and eating it became a ritual that, although time has changed it somewhat, has lasted until today.

In the early and mid-twentieth century, the way people purchased baked goods was different from now: at that time, it was all set out in windows or drawers and anyone who wanted to purchase a piece had to ask the employee behind the counter for it. That's why the names of each kind of bread became so popular at that time: the variety of forms gave rise to the diversity of names. In most cases, you can relatively easily recognize each name, particularly if your family is an avid consumer: the puff pastry ear; the shell, with vanilla or chocolate ridged crusts that make it look like a seashell; the rocks, covered in chocolate and made with a thick dough that uses the hardened leftovers of other pieces of bread; or the brick, made the same way but in a rectangle and also covered with chocolate; the sweet kiss, made out of two rolls stuck together with jam; the rolls made with lard, like the bone (a long roll); or fences, a rectangular piece made of braided strips.

When you enter a bakery, you travel amidst clouds decorated with little pieces of sugar; little round nuns, sprinkled with white flour; rings of cinnamon; sweet, glazed mirrors; spongy

ox eyes that force us to look at them when deciding which piece to pick: the list seems interminable. But young people today may not know how many varieties and names of baked goods can be found in traditional bakeries. One of the reasons for this may be that, beginning in the 1950s, the bakeries introduced self-service, changing the ritual: customers could pick up a tray and some tongs and serve themselves. This means that it was less and less necessary to learn the names; plus, most bakeries did not post their names on the shelves.

Despite the fact that some traditions have been lost, and today it is rare for a young person to be familiar with most of the names of the kinds of bread and pastry, the tradition of going to pick it up, picking carefully, continues to be deeply rooted among a large part of the population. In Mexico City it is a big adventure to go into the oldest, most highly frequented bakeries. So, if you want to find out what place bread and sweet bread play in Mexican food and taste, suffice it to go to downtown Mexico City and walk around until, almost like magic, you come upon the first bakery in sight.

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The Ideal Bakery and Patisserie on 16 de Septiembre Street is one of those places where it seems like time has come to a halt. It has an air of bygone eras that you feel from the moment you walk in, perhaps because the building was once part of the old San Francisco el Grande Monastery. Huge candelabra hang from the ceiling to light your way, dazzling anyone who visits. “La Ideal,” as it is known colloquially, was founded in 1927 and began as “a modest bread store” founded “in the middle of the Cristera War.”⁴ In addition to its beautiful architecture, what is surprising is the sheer amount of bread

and pan dulce on offer and the teeming crowd of people surrounding them. Its large area is taken up by big tables covered with different varieties, plus the shelves and glass windows that also display little cakes, gelatin, and cookies.

After arming yourself with a tray and tongs, you make your selection and then you get in line at the counter, where a regiment of women is ready to wrap up your choices and give you a slip of paper with the amount of your purchase; you take that to the cash register to pay before you pick up your bag tied with a string. Finally, you leave feeling triumphant for having been able to extricate yourself from the crowd with a bag of baked goods ready to devoured.

The downtown area boasts other bakeries, which, though smaller, are also reference points for bread fans. Two such are La Vasconia and the Madrid Patisserie. These bakeries were founded by Spanish immigrants when in the mid-nineteenth century a group of them from Baztán Valley in the Basque Country and Navarra spearheaded the expansion of the bread



DULCE PAN DE DULCE \$7.00

industry.⁵ La Vasconia, on the corner of Tacuba and Palmas Streets, was founded more than 130 years ago, while La Madrid, on 5 de Febrero Street is already 75 years old. The walls of these establishments display black-and-white photographs, making it easy to imagine the customers from those early days, very different from today's, but with a shared taste that has transcended time.

Lastly, we cannot forget the neighborhood bakeries, less glamorous and visible than the ones downtown, but with an equally important place in the history of Mexico's bread and pan dulce. It should be mentioned that this kind of bakery is disappearing due to industrial production. The packaged baked goods sold in stores and supermarkets have hit the bakeries hard, and sometimes their wares have been replaced by the ones sold in supermarkets, but that are not similar in flavor or variety to those that predominated above all in the first half of the twentieth century. Then, it was common to go into one of these establishments, usually near your home, to buy bread for breakfast or supper. When the Day of the Dead in November, or Christmas, or the Three Kings approached, these shops would decorate their windows accordingly, reminding customers that the delicious Day of the Dead bread

or the Three Kings rings were available; plus, their aroma made it impossible for passersby not to go in.

The Day of the Dead bread and the Three Kings rings are two traditions that have been preserved despite the whole industry that has grown up around baked products and the influences on food from abroad. In the days running up to November 2, the Day of the Dead, and January 6, the Day of the Three Kings, all over the city you can see people carrying the boxes of these delicious treats.

Day of the Dead bread can be traced to the pre-Hispanic era, when people made dough out of amaranth seeds to offer to the gods. Some historians say that this dough was mixed with the blood of sacrificial victims. When the Spaniards arrived, they forbade this ritual and created a sugary loaf col-

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ored red to simulate blood. What is known today as Day of the Dead bread varies from one region of the country to another, but the Mexico City version is round and fluffy, made with orange flower extract, and decorated with little pieces of harder dough representing the dead person's bones.

The Three Kings ring, decorated with dried fruit and gel, represents the passage of the Three Magi who traveled a long distance before finding the Baby Jesus, who was hidden by his parents to prevent Herod from finding him. This is why each ring hides little figurines representing the Baby Jesus. The ring is a tradition Mexicans, whether believers or not, just cannot miss, simply because of the pleasure of enjoying each other's company around a piece of ring and a steaming cup of chocolate.

Finally, after a review of the history of Mexico's traditional bread and pan dulce and bakeries, we can guess that the tradition of consuming this food is far from disappearing. Teens, children, and adults all enjoy together in the same place and at the same time the simple pleasure of picking out a sweet

roll at breakfast or dinnertime. The colorfulness of Mexico and the imagination of a people are represented in every shape and every name created for a food that is part of history, conquests, and revolutions. And so, this sweet bread has also made its own history. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Cristina Barros and Marco Buenrostro, http://www.revistaciencia.amc.edu.mx/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=104, April 6, 2015.

² Ibid.

³ Cámara Nacional de la Industria Panificadora y Similares de México, <http://www.canainpa.com.mx/varios/historia.asp>, April 6, 2015.

⁴ Pastelería Ideal, <http://pasteleriaideal.com.mx/nosotros/>, April 6, 2015.

⁵ Robert Weis, "Las panaderías en la Ciudad de México de Porfirio Díaz: los empresarios vasco-navarros y la movilización obrera," *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 29, file:///C:/Users/Downloads/-data-Revista_No_29-04_Dossier_4.pdf, April 7, 2015.

