

MEXICAN CUISINE

Mexico is a country located in North America with a North Pacific Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Sea coastline. Neighboring countries include Belize, United States, and Guatemala. Mexico is crossed by two mountain ranges known as Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental, which are the extension of the Rocky Mountains from northern North America.

Historical Background

The Mexican history can be divided into:

- Pre-Hispanic period
- Aztec cuisine
- Post-conquest

The indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America hunted game and gathered plants, including wild chile peppers. Corn was not yet cultivated, so one main source of calories was roasted agave hearts. By 1200 BCE, corn was domesticated and a process called nixtamalization, or treatment with lye, was developed to soften corn for grinding and improve its nutritional value. This allowed the creation of tortillas and other kinds of flat breads. The indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica had numerous stories about the origin of corn, usually related to being a gift of one or more gods, such as Quetzalcoatl.

The other staple was beans, eaten with corn as a complimentary protein. Despite this, studies of bones have shown problems with the lack of protein in the indigenous diet, as meat was difficult to obtain. Other protein sources included amaranth, domesticated turkey, insects such as grasshoppers and ant larvae, iguanas, and turtle eggs on the coastlines. Vegetables included squash and their seeds; chilacayote; jicama, a kind of sweet potato; and edible flowers, especially those of squash. The chile pepper was used as food, ritual and as medicine.

When the Spanish arrived, the Aztecs had sophisticated agricultural techniques and an abundance of food, which was the base of their economy. It allowed them to expand an empire, bringing in tribute which consisted mostly of foods the Aztecs could not grow themselves. According to Bernardino de Sahagún, the Nahuatl peoples of central Mexico ate corn, beans, turkey, fish, small game, insects and a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, pulses, seeds, tubers, wild mushrooms, plants and herbs that they collected or cultivated.

Post-conquest

A reconstructed kitchen at the former monastery of San Miguel, Huejotzingo, Puebla. Mexican educator Justo Sierra said that "the grocer, not the conquistador, is the real Spanish father of Mexican society." After the Conquest, the Spanish introduced a variety of foodstuffs and cooking techniques from Europe. Spanish cooking at that time was already a mixture of ingredients because of eight centuries of Arab influence. The original aim of the introduction was to reproduce their home cuisine, but over time it was incorporated with native ingredients and cooking techniques. Introduced foods included olive oil, rice, onions, garlic, oregano, coriander, cinnamon, cloves, and many other herbs and spices. More importantly, they introduced domesticated animals, such as pigs, cows, chickens, goats and sheep for meat and milk, raising the consumption of protein. Cheese became the most important dairy product. The most important cooking technique introduced by the Spanish was frying.

Despite the domination of Spanish culture, Mexican cuisine has maintained its base of corn, beans and chile peppers. One reason for this was the overwhelming population of indigenous people in the earlier colonial period, and the fact that many ingredients for Spanish cooking were not available or very expensive in Mexico. One of the main avenues for the mixing of the two cuisines was in convents. For example, the Spanish brought rice to Mexico and it has since grown well in Veracruz. New World tomatoes eventually replaced the use of expensive Spanish saffron, as well as other local ingredients. Sugar cane was brought to the country and grew as well, leading to the creation of many kinds of sweets, especially local fruits in syrup.

During the 19th century, Mexico experienced an influx of various immigrants, including French, Lebanese, German, Chinese and Italian, which have had some effect on the food. During the French intervention in Mexico, French food became popular with the upper classes. An influence on these new trends came from chef Tudor, who was brought to Mexico by the Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg. One lasting evidence of this is the variety of breads and sweet breads, such as bolillos, conchas and much more, which can be found in Mexican bakeries. The Germans brought

beer brewing techniques and the Chinese added their cuisine to certain areas of the country. This led to Mexico characterizing its cuisine more by its relation to popular traditions rather than on particular cooking techniques.

Mexican wine and Beer

Corn in Mexico is not only eaten, but also drunk as a beverage. Corn is the base of a hot drink called atole, which is then flavored with fruit, chocolate, rice or other flavors. Fermented corn is the base of a cold drink, which goes by different names and varieties, such as tejuino, pozol and others. Aguas frescas are flavored drinks usually made from fruit, water and sugar. Beverages also include hibiscus iced tea, one made from tamarind and one from rice called "horchata". One variant of coffee is café de olla, which is coffee brewed with cinnamon and raw sugar. Many of the most popular beverages can be found sold by street vendors and juice bars in Mexico.

Chocolate played an important part in the history of Mexican cuisine. The word "chocolate" originated from Mexico's Aztec cuisine, derived from the Nahuatl word xocolatl. Chocolate was first drunk rather than eaten. It was also used for religious rituals. The Maya civilization grew cacao trees and used the cacao seeds it produced to make a frothy, bitter drink. The drink, called xocoatl, was often flavored with vanilla, chile pepper, and achiote.

Alcoholic beverages from Mexico include tequila, pulque, aguardiente, mezcal, and charanda with brandy, wine, rum and beer also produced. The most common alcoholic beverage consumed with food in Mexico is beer, followed by tequila.

Geography:

The Republic of Mexico is vast, comprising nearly two million square miles of coastline, desert, rain forest, mountains, and fertile plains. From the American borderlands of the wide, agriculturally rich north, the country narrows gently as it sweeps south and east. The two main mountain ranges, the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental, hug the west and east, finally merging into the volcanically active central highlands and the capital, Mexico City - the most populous city in the world. Further south, the country narrows to only 100 miles, then broadens again before reaching the Guatemalan border. There are two major peninsulas in Mexico that are almost countries themselves. In the west is the poetically barren Baja Peninsula, which seals in the biological riches of the Sea of Cortes; to the east, protruding into the Caribbean like the end of a fish hook, is the Yucatan peninsula, bursting with rain forests, Mayan ruins, and white powder beaches.

The population is about 106 million, and the generosity of the Mexican people is unsurpassed. Knowing a few simple sentences in Spanish will win hearts.

Climatic conditions:

Mexico has been graced with an unusually temperate climate year-round. The Mexican summer is also the rainy season, although the rain rarely lasts more than a few hours, and typically arrives in the late afternoon. Extremes are present only in the North and in Baja, both of which have deserts where the temperature leaps above 100F. Mexico City has a year-round temperature in the high 80s, while the coasts usually stay in the mid-90s. Night time temperatures fall somewhat, but rarely break down below a comfortable 60F.

Food and society

In most of Mexico, especially in rural areas, much of the food is consumed in the home with the most traditional Mexican cooking done domestically based on local ingredients. Cooking for family is considered to be women's work, and this includes cooking for celebrations as well. Traditionally girls have been considered ready to marry when they can cook, and cooking is considered a main talent for housewives.

The main meal of the day in Mexico is the "comida", meaning 'meal' in Spanish. This refers to dinner or supper. It begins with soup, often chicken broth with pasta or a "dry soup", which is pasta or rice flavored with onions, garlic or vegetables. The main course is meat served in a cooked sauce with salsa on the side, accompanied with beans and tortillas and often with a fruit drink.

In the evening, it is common to eat leftovers from the comida or sweet bread accompanied by coffee or chocolate. Breakfast is generally heartier than in other countries and can consist of leftovers, meat in broth (such as pancita), tacos, enchiladas or meat with eggs. This is usually served with beans, white bread or tortillas, and coffee or juice.

Festivals

Mexican cuisine is elaborate and often tied to symbolism and festivals, one reason it was named as an example of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. Many of the foods of Mexico are complicated because of their relation to the social structure of the country. Food preparation, especially for family and social events, is considered to be an investment in order to maintain social relationships. Even the idea of flavor is considered to be social, with meals prepared for certain dinners and certain occasions when they are considered the most tasty. The ability to cook well, called "sazón" (lit. seasoning) is considered to be a gift generally gained from experience and a sense of commitment to the diners. For the Day of the Dead festival, foods such as tamales and mole are set out on altars and it is believed that the visiting dead relatives eat the essence of the food. If eaten afterwards by the living it is considered to be tasteless. In central Mexico, the main festival foods are mole, barbacoa, carnitas and mixiotes. They are often prepared to feed around five hundred guests, requiring groups of cooks. The cooking is part of the social custom meant to bind families and communities.

The most important food for festivals and other special occasions is mole, especially mole poblano in the center of the country. Mole is served at Christmas, Easter, Day of the Dead and at birthdays, baptisms, weddings and funerals, and tends to be eaten only for special occasions because it is such a complex and time-consuming dish. While still dominant in this way, other foods have become acceptable for these occasions, such as barbacoa, carnitas and mixiotes, especially since the 1980s. This may have been because of economic crises at that time, allowing for the substitution of these cheaper foods, or the fact that they can be bought ready-made or may already be made as part of the family business.

Another important festive food is the tamale, also known as tamal in Spanish. This is a filled cornmeal dumpling, steamed in a wrapping (usually a corn husk or banana leaf) and one of the basic staples in most regions of Mexico. It has its origins in the pre-Hispanic era and today is found in many varieties in all of Mexico. Like mole, it is complicated to prepare and best done in large amounts. Tamales are associated with certain celebrations such as Candlemas. They are wrapped in corn husks in the highlands and desert areas of Mexico and in banana leaves in the tropics.

Staple Diet:

Mexican cuisine is created mostly with ingredients native to Mexico, as well as those brought over by the Spanish conquistadors, with some new influences. In addition to staples, such as corn and chile peppers, native ingredients include tomatoes, squashes, avocados, cocoa and vanilla, edible flowers, vegetables like huauzontle and papaloquelite, or small criollo avocados, whose skin is edible. European contributions include pork, chicken, beef, cheese, herbs and spices, as well as some fruits. Tropical fruits such as guava, prickly pear, sapote, mangoes, bananas, pineapple and cherimoya (custard apple) are popular, especially in the center and south of the country. It has been debated how much Mexican food is still indigenous and how much is European. However, the basis of the diet is still corn and beans, with chile pepper as a seasoning, as they are complementary foods.

Corn

Despite the introduction of wheat and rice to Mexico, the basic starch remains corn in almost all areas of the country. While it is eaten fresh, most corn is dried, treated with lime and ground into a dough called masa. This dough is used both fresh and fermented to make a wide variety of dishes from drinks (atole, pozol, etc.) to tamales, sopes, and much more. However, the most common way to eat corn in Mexico is in the form of a tortilla, which accompanies almost every dish. Tortillas are made of corn in most of the country, but other versions exist, such as wheat in the north or plantain, yuca and wild greens in Oaxaca.

Chili peppers

The other basic ingredient in all parts of Mexico is the chile pepper. Mexican food has a reputation for being very spicy, but its seasoning can be better described as strong. Many dishes also have subtle flavors. Chiles are used for

their flavors and not just their heat, with Mexico using the widest variety. If a savory dish or snack does not contain chile pepper, hot sauce is usually added, and chile pepper is often added to fresh fruit and sweets.

The importance of the chile goes back to the Mesoamerican period, where it was considered to be as much of a staple as corn and beans. In the 16th century, Bartolomé de las Casas wrote that without chiles, the indigenous people did not think they were eating. Even today, most Mexicans believe that their national identity would be at a loss without chiles.

Many dishes in Mexico are defined by their sauces and the chiles those sauces contain, rather than the meat or vegetable that the sauce covers. These dishes include entomatada (in tomato sauce), adobo or adobados, pipians and moles. A hominy soup called pozole is defined as white, green or red depending on the chile sauce used or omitted. Tamales are differentiated by the filling which is again defined by the sauce (red or green chile pepper strips or mole). Dishes without a sauce are rarely eaten without a salsa or without fresh or pickled chiles. This includes street foods, such as tacos, tortas, soups, sopes, tlacoyos, tlayudas, gorditas and sincronizadas. For most dishes, it is the type of chile used that gives it its main flavor.

The most common varieties of chillies used in the Mexican cuisine are:

JALAPEÑO

The most commonly known chile outside of Mexico, spicy jalapeños are typically about two or three inches in length and have a bright green, grassy flavor. They are named after Xalapa, Veracruz, the region of Mexico where they were originally cultivated. When jalapeños are smoke-dried, they are known as chipotles, but they are also delicious raw, roasted, or pickled.

HABANERO

These plump, roundish little chiles are some of the hottest in the world, but they also offer notes of tropical fruit and herbs. Most habaneros start out light green and later ripen to yellow and then to deep orange. There are some rarer varieties that ripen to dark purple or even chocolate brown, but the flavor is not markedly different. Habaneros are very common in the Yucatán, where they frequently season table salsas.

GUAJILLO

Like anchos, dried, bright-red guajillos are one of the most common chilies in Mexican cooking. The guajillos have a berry-like flavor with very faint sweetness. Because of their mild heat and large size (four to six inches), guajillos are often used to bulk up the base of a salsa and carry the flavor of other, more assertive chiles. Guajillo-based salsas are great for things like enchiladas and chilaquiles.

CHIPOTLE

There are two types of chipotle chilies. The large ones are known as chipotles mecos, and they develop a cork-colored patina when fully ripe and turn sandy-brown when dried. The more common chipotle mora or morita is smaller (one-and-a-half to three inches) and takes on a deep red, almost black hue when dried. Both are quite spicy.

ÁRBOL

Small—about two or three inches long—smooth-skinned and slender, chilies de árbol are often used in thin “hot sauce”-style salsas, or are toasted until crisp and ground into powder. They have the bright, vegetal flavor of a bell pepper with none of the sweetness, and they’re hot as hell. Árbols are always sold dried.

ANCHO

Dark brown and triangular in shape, ancho chilies are actually just dried, fully ripe poblano chilies. They taste tangy, like dried fruit with a slight green note. Anchos are one of the workhorse chilies of the Mexican kitchen: abundant, inexpensive, and ubiquitous in many traditional recipes.

SERRANO

These small green chilies are used both raw and roasted for a wide range of Mexican salsas, especially salsa verde. They look like miniature jalapeños, but are significantly spicier, and the seeds and veins are not typically removed.

POBLANO

These fresh, triangular chiles are large (four to six inches in length) with a deep green hue and varying heat level. Poblanos are ideal for chiles rellenos because of their size and thick flesh. When roasted, peeled, and cut into strips, they are called rajas. If poblanos are allowed to ripen and then dry in the sun, they are known as anchos.

PIQUÍN

At about a quarter-inch, piquíns are too small to seed—the name means “small chile,” and is used in Mexico to refer to many varieties of tiny dried chiles.

PASILLA OAXAQUEÑO

Pasillas Oaxaqueños taste like spicy smoked raspberries, are dark in color with deep red tones, and their size varies anywhere from one to four inches.

PASILLA

The word pasilla is used to indicate a dried chilaca chile. They are typically five or six inches long with a chocolaty color and moderate heat. Their rich and meaty profile makes them pair well with red meat, game, and mushrooms.

Meat and Cheese

The main contributions of the Spanish were meat and cheese, as the Mesoamerican diet contained very little meat besides domesticated turkey, and dairy products were absent. The Spanish also introduced the technique of frying in pork fat. Today, the main meats found in Mexico are pork, chicken, beef, goat, and sheep. Native seafood and fish remains popular, especially along the coasts.

Cheesemaking in Mexico has evolved its own specialties. It is an important economic activity, especially in the north, and is frequently done at home. The main cheese making areas are Chihuahua, Oaxaca, Querétaro, and Chiapas. Goat cheese is still made, but it is not as popular and is harder to find in stores.

Mexican cooking Equipments

Cazuelas (Mexican Pottery Dishes)

These large clay dishes are ideal for simmering mole and other sauces because the clay heats the contents evenly, eliminating burnt spots. Cazuelas are shallow, usually 5-7 inches deep and rounded like a bowl. They often have handles for easier handling over open fire. The outsides are sometimes painted with bright beautiful colors. The inside is glazed and the clay imparts a wonderful flavor to the dish.

Barro or Olla (Mexican Pottery Pots)

Barro literally means "mud" but generally means "clay," and olla means "pot." Ollas are large, deep clay pots perfect for simmering beans, stews and soups. The clay heats evenly and is perfect for all-day cooking over a direct flame. The clay can be fragile and sensitive to quick temperature changes. Cooking in the clay pots imparts an earthy flavor to the dish.

Comal Griddle

A large round griddle usually made of clay, aluminum or cast iron but the more modern ones usually have a non-stick finish.

They are used to warm tortillas, and roast chiles and vegetables. They can range in size from a large dinner plate to 2 feet in diameter.

Metatey Mano Hand Grinder

A large tool usually made of stone or lava rock. It consists of a large stone surface, slightly concave, sitting on 3 short legs. It is usually about the size of a large, rectangular platter. There is a large cylinder of stone that is rolled on the surface to grind or mix the items placed on it. Sometimes the legs are longer, allowing the user to sit in front of it.

Molcajetey Tejolote Mortar and Pestle

A small wood, stone or clay bowl with an elongated cylinder of the same material that is rounded on each end. A small amount of spices or food is placed in the bowl and the end of the cylinder is used to smash the item against the sides of the bowl in a circular motion to pulverize it.

Molinillo Wooden Whisk or Stirrer

A cylinder of wood that is spun between the hands in a cup of hot chocolate to produce a foam on the top. They can be simple or highly decorated. To view or purchase a molinillo go [here](#).

Tortillero Tortilla Press

Originally made from wood, they are also made of cast iron. It consists of two large round plates or blocks of wood that you place a ball of masa and press together to form a tortilla. You may run across aluminum versions but they tend to break.

Popular Mexican Dishes:

Antojitos

Street food in Mexico, called antojitos (literally "little cravings"), is prepared by street vendors and at small traditional markets in Mexico. Most of them include corn as an ingredient.

Aguachile, Bolillos (salty bread), Burrito, Camote (Mexican sweet potato), Caviar de Carpa, Gorditas, Gringas, Cemitas sandwiches, Chalupa, Chapulines and escamoles, Charales, small fish, basically a type of smelt, Chicharrón, Chilaquiles, Chiltomate, Chimichangas (Tex-Mex mostly), Choriquesom, Chorizo, Churipo, Coachala, Ceviche, Cochinita pibil, Cocido, Cóctel de camarón and other seafood cocktails

Codzito, Cola de res con frijoles (beef tail with beans), Corunda, Curtido, Elote, Enchilada (red or green), Ensalada de fruta (fruit salad), Enfrijoladas, Entomatadas, Filete de pescado al mojo de ajo, Filete de pescado empanizado, Flautas with guacamole, Flautas, Frijoles charros, Fritadas de camarón, Gorditas de carne, Huauzontles, Huaraches, Jicama, Jocoque, Lengua, Lentil soup (lentil beans), Longaniza, Machaca, Mancha mantelesm, Memela, Menudo, Molotes, Menudo, Mixiotes, Mole de Olla, Mole Poblano, Molletes, Molotes, Moronga, Mulitas, Nachos, Pambazos, Panucho, Papadzules, Parilladas, Pastel Azteca, Pejelagarto, Picadillo, Pozole, Quesadillas, Quesos artesanales, Cheeses of Mexico, Rajas con crema, Romeritos, Salbutes, Sincronizadas, Sopesm, Sopes, Sopa de albondiga (meatball soup), Tacos al pastor, Tacos, Taco al pastor, Taco Sinaloa, Tamales, Taquitos, Tlacoyos, Tlayudas, Totopo, Tortas (sandwiches), Tortas de.... – small omelettes similar to egg foo yung patties.

Tortillas, Tostadas, Tripas, Venado (venison), particularly in the Yucatan. Yuca (cassava)

Cheese dishes

Caldo de queso, Queso de cuajo, Queso flameado,

Egg dishes

Huevos rancheros, Huevos divorciados, Huevos motuleños, Huevos rancheros,

Beef dishes

Bistec, Albóndigas(Mexican meatballs) , Bistec, Carne asada, grilled beef , Carne guisada, stewed beef in spiced gravy

Carne a la tampiqueña, carne asada that is usually accompanied by a small portion of enchiladas (or chilaquiles), refried beans, fresh cheese, guacamole, and a vegetable (often rajas; grilled slices of Poblano peppers).

Cecina – In Mexico, most cecina is of two kinds: sheets of marinated beef, and a pork cut that is pounded thin and coated with chili pepper (this type is called cecina enchilada or carne enchilada)

Milanesas – Chicken, beef, and a pork breaded fried bisteces.

Goat dishes

Cabrero

Pork dishes

Carnitas, Chilorio, Chorizo, Poc Chuc,

Poultry dishes

Pollo asado, Pollo Encacahuatado, Pollo motuleños, Pollo picado, Pollo rostizado