

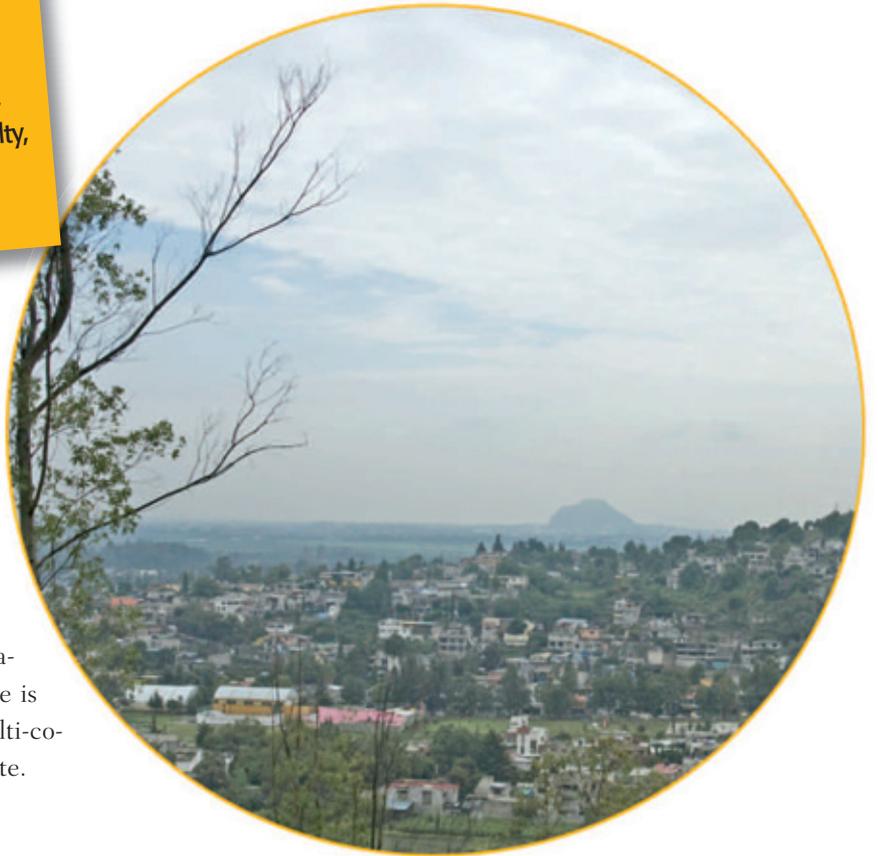


Santa Cruz Acalpixca's  
*Sweet Tradition*

Raquel del Castillo\*

Santa Cruz Acalpíxca is known for a very special craft: making candied fruit. A large number of residents, organized by family and specialty, make their livings this way.

Xochimilco is a town with character and pride in itself. This lake region was populated in pre-Hispanic times by warriors from mythical Aztlán, amidst plentiful water, good fishing and generous harvests. Here, towns were founded that exist to this day, complete with their indigenous traditions and customs. One of these is Acalpíxca, known today for its multi-colored sweets, a delight to the palate.



#### ORIGINS

Seven tribes of Nahuatlacas (“people who speak clearly” in Náhuatl) left Aztlán on a pilgrimage to the Anáhuac Valley. The ones known as Xochimilcas were the first to leave, in the “year of the Lord 820” (the tenth century A.D.), and settled on the Cuahilama Hill in the old Xochimilco Lake area. They built their ceremonial center atop the hill, from where they could survey the movement of canoes, fend off attacks and care for their crops. Figures carved in stone representing their gods in the form of animals and other symbols remain there, tracing the path to the top called the Great Boulevard. The ceremonial esplanade still shows vestiges of the Nahuatl conception of the universe: stones carved with the glyph of Nahui Ollin, who represented the so-called fifth sun,<sup>1</sup> and an *ocelotl* (jaguar) playing with flowers and butterflies.

By A.D.902, the Xochimilcas were settled around the lake. Their *chinampas*, or floating fields, were protected by the goddesses Amitl and Atlhua. Considered leaders, they continued to expand until the thirteenth century, when they were taken over by the people of Culhuacán and later by the Mexicas in 1378 during the reign of Acamapichtli, the lord of Tenochtitlan.



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Photos by Raquel del Castillo.



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By 1428, Acapulxica was one more town paying tribute to the great Tenochtitlan, and its territory was considerably reduced. These were the times of Tlacaelel, the prince who served as a powerful counselor to several Mexica rulers. This was when it was ordered that a boulevard be built to unite Xochimilco and Tenochtitlan, as well as an aqueduct. The subjects also had to provide construction materials (stone) for the Mexica temples and warriors for the military incursions into other regions. When the conquistadors arrived, they defeated the Xochimilcas, who, despite their resistance, suffered the same fate as the great Tenochtitlan.



That was when the town took the name of Santa Cruz Acapulxica, and in 1535, the townspeople began construction of the first Catholic church under the direction of Franciscan missionaries. Completed in 1559, it has a single nave with a tower and four bells. The floor is noteworthy, covered in tiles from Puebla, as is a monastery annex dating from 1770. A market is still held on the esplanade where local producers sell what they grow on their plots, plus plants and prepared



food, a tradition that has not been lost since indigenous times. Despite pillage down through the centuries, the Santa Cruz Acapulxica Church still preserves beautiful, unique examples of eighteenth-century sacred art. Among the pieces are wooden carvings depicting the *Sacred Burial*, an *Ecce Homo*, *Christ as the King of Mockery* (a bloodied Christ with natural teeth and hair) and a *Sacred Heart of Jesus*. There is also art from later centuries, like the nineteenth-century neo-Gothic bronze candelabras and an oil of Our Lady of Guadalupe dated 1919 and signed by Cipriano Flores Benavidez.

In the late nineteenth century, during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, Acapulxica was Mexico City's source of water. To get it there, an aqueduct was built from Xochimilco to the Condesa Station, and from there to the Dolores tanks to supply the city's downtown with clean water. Some of the pillars that were part of this structure are still standing.

Besides general destruction, the Mexican Revolution brought with it the pillage of churches and private homes, in this area carried out by the Zapatista troops. From these raids, a series of myths arose about treasures buried in the adobe walls

and in the *chinampas*. There are still those today who say that if something glimmers in the mud it is because there is a jewel, gold coins or some other precious object hidden by its owners for safekeeping.



#### SWEET FORMS OF EXPRESSION

Today, the town is known for a very special craft: making candied fruit. A large number of residents, organized by family and craft, make their livings this way. It is said that the practice dates to the viceregal period when the Spanish introduced French pastry-making techniques. Using sugar cane, they began to experiment in pasty shops, candy shops and cloisters to make fruit into a dessert and find ways of preserving it longer.

The craft has been handed down from generation to generation in Santa Cruz Acapulxica, creating a communal activity that has forged unity among local inhabitants and given them a seal of identity. The candy workshops are usually in their homes because it is a family business, even when some of the family members have to hold down other jobs to supplement their income.

Candyng food is a process more than 100 years old. First, you have to immerse the fruit or vegetable in slaked or pickling lime (calcium hydroxide) to harden it so it retains its shape. Then, it is cooked in large copper pots at different temperatures in syrup made of water and sugar. The whole process takes from three to seven days. What the imagination is capable of seems incredible. The artisans have the freedom to create different products depending on the season and their fancy. Fruit like sliced cantaloupe, *guanábana* and guava and vegetables like nopal cactus leaves, tomatoes and carrots are just a few of the products that take on new shapes and flavors in this process.

The town also produces coconut candy (grated coconut mixed with sugar), caramel candies, wafers festooned with squash seeds and honey and tamarind paste. Many people come from Mexico City and the State of Mexico with big hand-woven baskets to buy these sweets and re-sell them in the markets and streets of their hometowns. One of Santa Cruz Acapulxica's most impor-

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tant workshops is La Hija de la Morena (“the brunette’s daughter”). Owners Juana Alarcón and Luis Cortés even have apprentices from other families because their aim is to preserve the town’s tradition. The candy is sold right there and in popular markets like La Merced in downtown Mexico City. In September and December, during the Independence Day and Christmas holidays, they take over Mexico City sidewalks, flooding them with their colors.

In addition to the candies, Acapulco has its own local cuisine. One dish is called *cuatatapa*, and includes broken beans, pungent *epazote* herbs, nopal cactus leaves and *xoconostle* prickly pears; another is *tlapique*, a fish tamale; *auatle*, known as Mexican caviar; and *michimole*, a fish stew. One of the most popular beverages is *chileatole*, made

with grains of corn and squash flowers.

Your visit to the town is not over after tasting its famous gastronomical fare. Another must is the visit to the Lázaro Cárdenas Plaza, with its large market where locals come to sell what they have grown themselves. Another curiosity for the visitor —although for residents, it is commonplace— is the community laundry, where you can see the women of the town scrubbing their clothes, which they then load on a burro to carry home. A museum housed in the old pumping station from the Porfirian age and restored in 1985 holds 11,405 local archaeological finds, though not all are on display. The curious collection includes petroglyphs representing flowers and butterflies together with alligators and jaguars, jewelry, musical instruments, grinding stones, vestiges of vanilla beans, bones, ceramics and a ball game ring.

Acapulco’s rustic atmosphere is one of those treasures still preserved in the enormous metropolis of Mexico City, to the benefit of capital residents, who do not have to go far to discover it. **NMM**

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Legend of the Fifth Sun is a Mesoamerican myth about the creation of the world, the universe and humanity. It says that the Earth has gone through five different stages since its creation, each stage ruled by a sun. Nahui Ollin is the fifth sun; the first four correspond to the four points of the compass and the fifth sun is in the middle, a fifth point, and is attributed to Huehuetéotl, the old god of fire, because the fire on the hearth is at the center of the house. The fifth sun ruled during the time of the Mexicas.

