

Food

Gastronomy as a Cultural Tradition

Do hot peppers and tortillas, both native staples, constitute the basis of Mexican's food-intake?

"No, definitely not," says Guillermo Tovar y de Teresa, the Official Historian of Mexico City. "These are merely complements." And he adds, "What's more, I believe that in terms of variety and tastiness, Mexican food is comparable to the most important cuisines in the world, such as the Chinese and Japanese, the Italian and the French."

Tovar explains that each of the pre-hispanic peoples had their own culture, among them the Quichés, Tzetzals, Mixes, Zapotecas, Tarahumaras,

Huichos, Aztecs, Mayas, Zapotecs, Toltecs and Totonacas. Consequently, each had their own culture of nourishment.

"It was the same type of situation as when you travel from one country to another, where you find a great variety of foods," says Tovar y de Teresa.

The wealth and variety of the nation's culinary art led another Mexico City Historian, Salvador Novo, to write a 350-page book, *Mexican Cookery, or Gastronomic History of Mexico*. In his introduction, Novo—who was also a member of the Mexican Language Academy, and received the National Award for Journalism in 1976— provides valuable insights on the topic:

"The verb *cua*, used by one of the main pre-hispanic cultural groups, the Nahuas, means to eat. The adjective *cualli* means both the beautiful and the good, which is to say, that which is edible, that which is digestible, that which is pleasing to our sight and to our hearts, to the spirit and to the flesh."

A verb or an adjective-noun, —*cua* or *cualli*—, define or qualify the subject that receives them, and allow for the composition of words and phrases with which this admirable, many-hued tongue expresses its people:

Cla-cua-ni, he who eats things;



Mexican kitchen in the 19th century as painted by A. Serrano (Nat. Museum of History).

Te-cua-ni, he who eats people; *Cual-tlacatl*, the good man; *Cual-tlaxcal-chihua-ni*, she who makes good tortillas, the food-stuff made from corn.

On the subject of hot peppers, —*chile* or *aji* in Spanish— used by most Mexican's as seasoning, Novo says:

"Europeans desperately sought spices with which to season their food. When Columbus—Cristopher, who discovered America on October 12; 1492—, tasted a vegetable pepper and found it was hot, he thought—Eureka!—, he had found a pepper spice. Such was the description of his discovery that he conveyed to his sponsors."

"Transplanted to other countries, our peppers lost their aggressiveness and some, but not all, of their taste. After being dried and ground, they became the Spanish *pimentón*, the Austro-Hungarian *paprika*, the *morrón* peppers used to prepare cod-fish or to decorate the *paella*."

"Peppers soon spread throughout the world. They were taken to Asia, where they were well-received by both Indonesians and Hindus, who incorporated them into their own curry."

"But this was the real homeland of the fierce pepper: the one that seasons the broth and has the ability of *Tezcatlipoca* to take on a thousand different forms, colors, aromas, sizes and uses. There are long peppers, broad peppers, raisin and rattler peppers, and *cuaresmeños*, *poblanos*, *comapeños*, *chipotles*, *piquines* and *habaneros*. They can be used fresh and whole, or roasted, peeled and un-veined (which makes them a little less hot.) They can be dried-out or toasted, just a little or to the point of charring, as is the custom in south-eastern Mexico. They can be pickled with onion rings, garlic, aromatic herbs and carrot slices."

Peppers are vital, together with tomatoes, onions and coriander leaves, to arrive at the delightful *guacamole*, a sauce made with avocados.

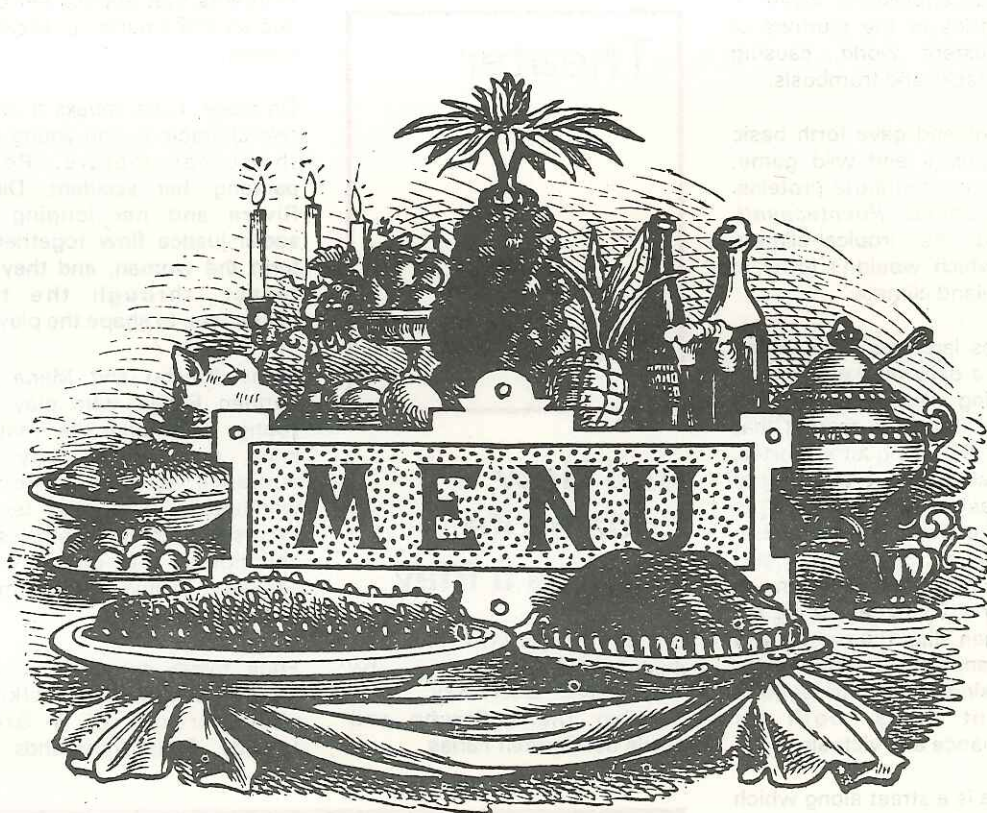
And Novo adds: "Even Spanish dishes improved considerably with the introduction of Mexican peppers. Such is the case of cod-fish a la *Vizcaína*."

On the corn tortilla, Novo explains: "The Nahuas were a frugal people". The Mendocino Code reveals what their children were fed: for children over the age of three, half a tortilla a day; between four and five years of age, one whole tortilla; from six to twelve, a tortilla and a half. From thirteen on, two tortillas.

The fact that this was the custom for reasons of discipline up until the time the Spaniards came, should amaze us less

nutrition of Mexicans with the protein supplements they consider vital: capsule vitamins, which are the nutritional complement that over-fed city dwellers turn to." Yet the healthy, vigorous Nahuas, who have lasted throughout the centuries, have not needed such compromises.

Novo then talks of the Mexicas. "Once they settled in Tenochtitlan, currently Mexico City, the lagoon offered a rich provision of protein: the caviar-



than the sad fact that these many centuries later, and no longer for disciplinary or educational purposes but rather because of sheer misery, many Indian's nutrition is neither more abundant nor more varied.

And Novo asks the question: "Should we feel sorry for this hereditary nutritional austerity of our Indians?"

His response is that "modern dieticians advise enriching the

like *ahuauhtli*, the *acociles*, the minute fish called *charales*. There were also frogs and ducks, *gallaretas* and *apizcas*."

"The floating gardens, called *chinampas*, began to yield vegetables, *quitil*, and the tomato proclaimed its rosy ruddiness, the plumpness from whence its name comes: *tomatl*, a certain fruit that gives a sharp edge to cooked dishes and sauces."

odds and ends

The combination of tomatoes, quelites and peppers produced the *mole*, vitamin-rich juices pressed out on the stone-grinder called *molcáxítl*. Today this Mexican dish is characteristic of the states of Oaxaca and Puebla.

70 According to Novo, both ignorance and an absence of fats and cooking oils, excluded fried foods from Mexican cooking. Their techniques were limited to boiling and roasting food, as well as pickling raw fruits and vegetables. Absent in the frugal diet of these Indians were the fried foods that make digestion a difficult and heroic process; the fats that accumulate into adipose tissue and raise cholesterol levels in the arteries of the gluttons of the Western world, causing heart attacks and trombosis.

"The highland gave forth basic seeds, plants and wild game; the lagoon contribute proteins. Trade, called *Pochtecaoyotl*, provided the tropical-climate foods which wouldn't grow in the highland climate."

A city as large as Tenochtitlan needed a daily market in which everything was available. This was the Tlatelolco market that dazzled the conqueror Cortés, who described it to the King of Spain as being "as large as twice the size of the square in the city of Salamanca, surrounded by archways on all sides, and where *daily* there are more than sixty thousand souls buying and selling; where there all the kinds of goods found in different lands, both for maintenance and victuals."

"...There is a street along which all sorts of fowl are sold, such as hens, partridge, quail, wild ducks, flycatchers, turtledoves, pigeons and many other small birds. They sell rabbits, hares, deer and small castrated dogs raised especially for eating... There are all sorts of vegetables, especially onions, scallion, common cress, borrego, thistle and cardillo."

"There are many fruits resembling those found in Spain, such as plums and cherries. They sell bee honey and wax, and a syrup from sugar cane which is as honeyed and sweet as that made from sugar."

"They sell corn..., fish cakes and pies filled with birds' meat... a lot of fish is sold salted and fresh, raw or cooked... there are

eggs from hens and geese..."

Finally, Cortés adds: "that in these markets they sell everything found on earth, which besides what I have already mentioned, are so many and of so many qualities, that because they are so prolific and will not come to my memory, and even because I have no name for them, I cannot express them all."

"Ours is a fun country because of its diversity, especially concerning food," says Guillermo Tovar y de Teresa.★

Jesús Yáñez Orozco

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