

Food

Tortilla and Crunchy Grasshoppers with Pulque

LA TORTILLA: BASIC DIET FOR RICH AND POOR

Tortillas were the bread of the ancient inhabitants of our lands, a corn bread similar to the Middle Eastern breads made from wheat. Tortillas were not eliminated with the Spanish conquest; rather they were and continue to be the principal staple in the Mexican diet. The indigenous population continued to eat them, and they gradually became a custom for the Spanish-born, as well. For some time, however, the *mestizo*, or mixed-race population, didn't want to acknowledge that they liked tortillas, fearing that such an admission would betray the fact of their Indian blood. And so the tortilla extended its culinary empire, stretching from the most humble of houses to the most luxurious palace, made by Indian women in their huts or by servants in feudal mansions.

Expert Indian hands prepared the dough, first making *nixtamal* from corn, water and quicklime, boiling it for hours. After rinsing and draining it several times, they would grind the mixture on a *metate*, a simple device made up of a larger, gently curved stone and a smaller, rolling pin-shaped stone, both fashioned from the same resistant material. The image of an Indian woman kneeling in front of her *metate* has been used in many, many paintings. And it was from those brown hands that the dough was born, ground again and again until just the right consistency to make thin, soft *tortillas*, ready to be eaten together with beans or taken to the table in wealthy households and

served along side sophisticated *moles* and *pipians*.*

As a new "Spanish-American" culture emerged, the creole imagination soon made the tortilla into an essential partner in a great variety of new dishes, all visually appealing and with a tremendous diversity of tastes and flavors. *Enchiladas* are one such dish, made from tortillas filled with shredded chicken or pork, drenched in red or green sauces prepared from all kinds

better meals, distracting hunger when eaten just with salt. Prepared with an imaginative bravado of colors and tastes, it can be served in the most elegant restaurants or wealthy homes. And in the most humble places and homes, the tortilla is skillfully used by expert hands instead of silverware. Simple and proud of its pre-columbian roots, the tortilla knows that it will never be supplanted in people's tastes, that it is invulnerable to McDonalds.

extracting the honey-water that turns white as it ferments. *Pulque* may be combined with other fruits such as guayaba, pineapple, almonds or peanuts.

The Apam valley was famous for its *pulque*, and there were large *pulque* plantations everywhere in the state of Hidalgo. *Pulquerías* (bars serving *pulque*) multiplied in cities throughout the land, and they became meeting places for all kinds of popular figures, pictur-



Grinding the corn

Diego Rivera. National Museum of Art

of chilli peppers —*ancho*, *pasilla* and *chipotle*, for example—and artistically garnished with radish florettes and lettuce. Shredded beef, cheese and sauce piled on top of tortillas fried in lard became a specialty of Puebla; known as *chalupas*, they've become a regional tradition.

The original tortilla, handmade and laborious, was replaced in Mexico's modern cities by new tortillas, made with other methods, with machines to grind, flatten and shape the dough. The handmade tortilla has taken refuge in more remote regions and is little more than a memory for millions of city-dwellers. And while neither the dough, nor its preparation are as pure as they used to be, the tortilla lives on. It continues to be a substitute for

* Two rich sauces made from a varied blend of ingredients.

EL PULQUE: AN EXCELLENT TONIC THAT GETS YOU DRUNK

Pulque is a frothy drink made from the maguey plant (the American agave), the native wine of the region. While it spoils very quickly and no way has been found yet to preserve it, *pulque* has other properties to recommend it. It is supposed to be less intoxicating than grape wines, good for the digestion and was even used at one time to cure hysteria. People say that it is really the only drink that should accompany dishes prepared with lard and seasoned with chillis because of its digestive properties.

Making *pulque* depends on watching how the maguey plants mature. *The tender leaves at the heart of the plant* must be cut open and scraped out,

esque sites for dancing and brawling, with equally picturesque names, "Good Friendships," "My Office," "Memories of the Future" and "Heaven," to mention just a few that immediately come to mind.

But little by little, *pulquerías* were attacked and marginalized: proper folk complained about the smells emanating from inside and about the scandals caused by the clients. They were considered places for the riffraff, even though cured *pulque* could still be found on tables in wealthy homes, especially on plantations. *Pulquerías* were looked down on, considered unworthy of a country on the road to progress, relegated as symbols of backwardness to the poorest of neighborhoods and to the towns farthest away from the reaches of "stabilizing" development. Only a few, like "Good Friendships" in the heart of Coyoacán,

have been able to survive in Mexico City. Their picturesque presence, their distinctive names and characteristic odor, together with their customary signs —“Minors, dogs, women and people in uniform not allowed” are slowly becoming part of our picturesque past.

**LOS CHAPULINES:
GRASSHOPPERS ARE
TASTY WITH LEMON AND
GARLIC**

One of people's natural drives has always been to take advantage of the things around them. Perhaps that's the origin of the custom in the state of Puebla, Oaxaca and Hidalgo of eating insects now known to have high protein values. There are some 247 edible insect species in Mexico, and some of them form part of the dietary tradition in many communities in the three states mentioned.

We've heard people say that the maguey worm served in hot sauce is a great delicacy. But very few people know that the merry, green grasshopper is good for something other than jumping around and enthusiastically devouring plants. During grass-

hopper season, mostly from June to November, insect hunters come out in many places, armed with nets to snare their prey. It's quite easy to capture and preserve grasshoppers, making them a traditional, regional favorite. And they're good for people, too. The *esphenario*, one of 58 grasshopper species in the country, is 60-65 percent protein on a dry weight basis.

Previously boiled grasshoppers are grilled with lime juice and garlic; eaten in this simple way, they can solve dietary problems in even the poorest communities. But they are also used in more sophisticated dishes, prepared in garlic butter, for example, and served in specialized restaurants. Since grasshoppers are seasonal, other ways have been found to prepare them so that they can be eaten year-round. One is to boil and grill them, then grind them into a flour used to make "meatballs," croquettes or crackers (the latter served with a *nopal* cactus sauce). Thus, necessity and imagination are joined not only to solve a vital problem, but also to enrich culture and bring new pleasures to the palate.★

Emma Rizo and Teresa de Jesús Yanes



ay unos anima lejos "del agua que se llaman acociles, son casi como camarones, tienen la cabeza como langostas, son pardillos y quando los cocen paranse colorados como camarones: son de comer cocidos y tambien tasta



"Ajolotes" and "Acociles", aztec names of typical mexican animals.



Photo by the Laboratory of the Independent Peasant theater of Tabasco

Florentine Codex