



PUEBLA

SEEN FROM ITS HEARTHS

*Mónica Pérez-Salazar de Soler**

Like in an enormous pot of *mole* —in which the layman sees only the flavor of the dish and how it looks—for the careful observer, the cuisine of Puebla holds a rich gamut of ingredients; when identified, they make tasting it more enjoyable and the taster a wiser person.

With your first mouthful you will savor the pre-Hispanic indigenous culture in

* Nutritional consultant.

the spiciness of its seasoning, in its condiments, fruits and grains and in the way they are roasted, blistered and ground. You will notice the flavor of the culture of Spain, not only in the ingredients, but in the use of frying in oil or pork lard, the generous servings and the way meals heavily seasoned with cloves and basil, rosemary, pepper, oregano and cinnamon are served several times a day.

Paying closer attention to the taste, you will find among its ingredients the architecture of its kitchens and its dining rooms (non-existent in indigenous homes), the art in their tiles and in their fine Talavera china. You will get the merest hint of the social structure in what the lords, churchmen and scholars ate, in what the servants and merchants ate, and in what the poor and the peasants ate —or did not eat.



The Santa Rosa Convent Museum's kitchen retains some of the original utensils.

You will recognize in the consistency of Puebla cuisine its cloistered, monastic life, its religious holidays and the custom of making gifts of exotic and delicious dishes: from convents to private homes, from private homes to convents and from either to any figure considered sufficiently illustrious to deserve it.

History as an ingredient is unique in Mexican regional cooking. So, with just a pinch of legend, we can pinpoint when *mole poblano* and *chiles en nogada* were born, which diligent hands invented them and who was meant to be pleased by them.

THE CUISINE OF PUEBLA, NEW SPAIN'S DAUGHTER OF MIXED ANCESTRY

Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the diet of the highland indigenous peoples—inspired by Coatlicue, mistress of the Earth—was thoughtful, frugal and varied. The basic corn and beans were augmented with all kinds of chili peppers

Puebla in colonial times was the peaceful haven that art needs to cook over a slow fire.

and edible vegetables (*quilitl* in Náhuatl) like purslane, *huauzontles*, *quintoniles*, *romeritos* and *epazote*; a great variety of fowl; insects like worms, larvae, grasshoppers and ants; fish and fresh water shrimp; eggs; different legumes and fruits like avocados, tomatoes, zucchini, mamee, *zapote*, the cherry-like *capulines*, as well as flowers, vanilla, honey and cacao.

The Spaniards' "discovery" of the Americas led to the conquest, and the conquest led to discovery.

Xocoatl (chocolate) discovered milk, and cheese discovered the *ahuacatl* (avocados) and tortillas; corn discovered pork lard and pork sausage; sugar conquered the sweet potato, the *viznaga* (hundred-year-old cactus) and the gourd squash; chili pep-

pers challenged rice and pork. The lamb brought from across the sea succumbed, wrapped in maguey leaves and was buried in a tomb of hot stones to be reborn from that steam bath as *barbacoa*, a tender, steaming mestiza that, slathered with a sauce of pulque and dried chili peppers, was offered under a warm blanket of tortillas to indigenous people and Mexican-born Spaniards alike.

All these love affairs resulted in numerous and succulent offspring. Specialties were born region by region, according to the products native to each place, the customs of each indigenous people, the tastes brought by the Spaniards from their provinces of origin, and mainly, according to the dedicated, loving imagination of the cooks who brought the sun up every day in their braziers before it poked its head over the horizon.

The sun, the conquistadors, the viceroys and Spanish goods all arrived to Mexico City via Veracruz, the gulf port. Halfway on that painful journey, amid crags and precipices, a large valley opens up in a place that had been the important ancient land of the lord of Cholula, with its 400 indigenous sanctuaries. The Spaniards immediately understood the expedience of founding a village in such a strategic and friendly location. With unusual forbearance, they decided to respect Cholula and found their city a little further on (a decision which did not impede their later building with architectural fervor a church on top of each pagan sanctuary). This important city was Puebla. Spanish, like the taverns in its center, indigenous, like its *pulquerías*¹ in surrounding neighborhoods.

With the years, mansions with many patios and a profusion of convents sprang up like enormous stone ovens, whose gen-

tle, calming warmth was the leavening for Puebla's sublime cuisine. How could it not be so? The angels themselves, under whose entitlement the city was built, were keeping watch to make sure nothing was missing: it was surrounded by orchards, springs, mills and haciendas.

Well situated, with a temperate climate, Puebla in colonial times was the peaceful haven that art needs to cook over a slow fire.

And art it was, in its magnificent, generously proportioned kitchens, where humble *ayacahuite* pine tables stood side by side with the water jar, the *metate* and the stove, and in a modest home, the walls decorated with toys and little pots made of clay; if the house were wealthy, smooth, decorated tiles, ladles of burnished copper and a ceramic counter representing San Pascual Bailón (the patron saint of cooks) among angels, cabbages and earthenware pots. Today we can see what these kitchens were like in the detailed paintings of everyday life by Pingret and Arrieta: the grinder on its *metate*, foodstuffs on the table, the water carrier deep in conversation with the cook. We also know what they were like thanks to the restoration of a few convent kitchens, the most outstanding of which is the one in the Santa Rosa Convent, a gift from a wealthy lady to her daughter, a nun in that community. It is entirely covered in tiles, including the three domes of the roof, an exception in Puebla architecture.

But it was art above all in its dishes: a delicate balance of sweet, spicy and savory; a balance of suggestive condiments, an unexpected combination of ingredients. Here, the artists were the indigenous cooks and their mistresses. The mistresses, in their homes or their convents, were the ones who



Unique vaulted tile ceilings in the Santa Rosa Convent Museum's kitchen.

History as an ingredient is unique in Mexican regional cooking.

made the decisions, the ones who read and wrote recipe books, the ones who savored and made the last adjustments in the taste, the last, delicate detail: they were the ones who came up with the idea of a dribble of sherry in the walnut sauce, the almonds in the tomato sauce and the egg yolks in the frothy chocolate. They were also the ones who distributed what was needed to make the meals; they dispensed the pots to the servants and counted the tortillas. They saw that once a week, from a side door, food was distributed to the poor.

The cooks had their own domain. They knew about smoking, roasting and blistering chili peppers; they knew secrets of old of many *mollis* ("sauce" or "stew" in Náhuatl); they knew how to wring the

hens' necks, separate the good mushrooms from the bad and make tortillas, *molotes*, *peneques* and *chalupas* out of corn meal; they peeled the walnuts one by one for the walnut sauce and wore down the pestle of the *molcajete* grinding cloves, cinnamon, cumin and coriander seeds.

In the convents, as of 1774, the nuns rolled up their sleeves and participated humbly, and very successfully, in the details of kitchen work, when by order of the viceroy, they reluctantly resigned themselves to eating together in the refectory and preparing a common meal. This ended the previous practice dating from the first centuries of the colonial period, when each nun had one or more servants, her own apartment and her own kitchen.

SIMMERING FOR YEARS

In Puebla people ate five times a day and went to prayer at least as many times; prayers and food must often have cooked



Jorge Pablo de Aguinaco

Mole poblano is considered one of Mexico's culinary masterpieces.

in the same juices, bringing to mind images of delicious dishes in the middle of their devotions and of heaven in the steaming of the pots. This is the origin of many Puebla specialties like “bones of the Holy Spirit,” “angels’ gift,” “holy water,” “bishop’s milk” or “angel hair.”

Puebla cuisine boasts many dishes like *chilatole* soup, stews like pork in tomato sauce or pork and *chipotle* chili *tinga*, stuffed *poblano* chili peppers and appetizers like little sandwiches in white *cemita* bread and the cornmeal-based *chalupas*, *chanclas* and *peniques*. The most famous dishes are *mole* and *chiles en nogada*, to each of which we will give its proper place.

Chiles en nogada were born in August because that is when *poblano* chili peppers, walnuts and pomegranates are all in season.

Tradition has it that the nuns in Puebla invented this dish to please Agustín de Iturbide in 1821 because he was the emperor, because it was his saint’s day and

because the independence of Mexico had been signed that year. Every family has its own recipe: the chili peppers can be coated with egg batter and deep fried or not; pears can be added to the chopped meat stuffing; or a little goat cheese can be added to the sauce. But what is unacceptable is that the meat be ground instead of chopped, that the walnuts be dry or that cheese made from vegetable cream be used, because then the *chiles en nogada* just would not be what they must be: sublime. A fierce delicacy asleep below a sweet, white sheet of sauce, adorned in patriotic fashion with parsley and a few pomegranate tears.

Mole poblano. When we talk about *mole*, all adjectives must be superlatives. It is a national monument that breached the borders of Puebla to take its place in family and religious festivities in every Mexican home. Making the *mole* is the beginning of the party. In the mills near markets, women can usually be found who have

brought mountains of toasted, deveined *mulato*, *pasilla*, *chipotle* and *ancho* chili peppers to be ground together with rolls, fried tortillas, a few peanuts and almonds, sesame seeds and sometimes chili pepper seeds. Back in their kitchens they add roasted garlic and onion, tomatoes, cloves, cinnamon, anise and pepper, a piece of chocolate and each cook’s secret touch. This dark, thick, velvety sauce is poured over pieces of turkey and dusted with toasted sesame seeds, thus perpetuating the inspired creation that Sister Andrea de la Asunción, a Dominican nun from Santa Rosa Convent, made to please a viceroy.

Guillermo Prieto compared Puebla to an enormous sacristy. From its hearths, Puebla looks like a splendid kitchen. **MM**

NOTES

¹ A *pulquería* is a place where *pulque*, a drink made from fermented agave juice, is served. [Translator’s Note.]