

The Delights of Guanajuato



Guanajuato State Tourism Office

Mexico is famous for the variety and extent of its cuisine. Each region delights the palate with dishes from the finest and simplest to the most exotic and sophisticated, depending on their ingredients, preparation and presentation. Fish and seafood, different meats and fowl, vegetables and all kinds of dishes made from corn, the indispensable ingredient in our cooking, prepared in a thousand and one ways, give Mexican cuisine unrivaled and unforgettable flavors and aromas. Desserts and sweets could do no less.

Traditional Mexican candy-making is the sum of the history and customs that go back to pre-Hispanic times, with its taste of fruit, honey and seeds like amaranth, passing through the colonial period and the exquisite *mestizaje* that

adds milk and sugar. Then, with the centuries, other ingredients and recipes from each locality join in to develop a regional identity. Modernity adds alien and often artificial flavors to which Mexican confectionery adapts to and must coexist with.

Many kinds of candy have become the symbol of certain festivities or are associated with certain times of the year and are only made then: the best known of these are the little sugar (and now chocolate) skulls made for the Day of the Dead in many parts of the country. Others become veritable works of art and compete in contests like Guanajuato's famous *alfeñiques*. In these cases, sight replaces taste as the main sense satisfied. Most have gone beyond the realm of the family kitchen and are



Confectioners make many different figures out of *alfeñique* paste.



The La Catrina shop carries more than 200 products from all over Mexico.



Jamoncillo covered with walnuts, a delight to the palate.

mass produced and sold in specialty shops, markets and streets where passersby can buy them to take home or as gifts.

Today's traditional Mexican candies have acquired local or regional passports and are known as confections from Puebla, Morelia, Guadalajara or Guanajuato —just to mention the most famous.

Guanajuato's candy is extremely varied, but is basically made of three ingredients: milk, sugar and every imaginable fruit. Custards; *cajeta* or milk-based caramel cream; *jamoncillo*, a milk and sugar paste, filled with nuts, dates, dried plums, pine nuts, almonds or figs; coconut bars made with milk, with or without wine, with nuts and raisins; coconut bars made without milk and with fruit like pineapple or figs; *palanqueta*, or nut brittle, made of peanuts, pine

nuts, almonds or walnuts; dried, candied fruit (candied strawberries are typical of Irapuato, dubbed the world's strawberry capital); preserves; jam; *ate*, or fruit paste. The list is unending.

Don Ignacio Agreda, who has been making candy in Guanajuato since 1953, says that the most important thing is to maintain the tradition of good candy, made without adding any preservatives or chemical ingredients, and which stays fresh for several months thanks to the knowledge and experience used in its manufacture. The procedures are simple, most based on boiling the ingredients. The art is in the rendering, in knowing when the mixture is cooked just right. Don Ignacio says that it is easiest to see when *jamoncillo* paste is done, but that fruit takes longer and need more care because it absorbs the syrup more slowly. Today, with the advent of thermometers, it is no longer necessary for confectioners to put their fingers in the pot to see if the mixture is ready—but the good ones still know how to if the need arises.

Candy also changes with the times and confectioners have to know how to adapt to modernity. In Guanajuato, classic candy-making exists side-by-side with modern methods and one or two derivatives of the two. For example, the *charamuscas*, a candy that dates back to the early twentieth century, was a favorite of

Taken from *Atrasmás de Guanajuato*, Guanajuato State Gov., 1995

Daniel Munguia

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Charamuscas and *trompadas*, the most typical local candies.

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El cubilete, manufacturers of local candies for almost 50 years.

Guanajuato families, originally made with *pi-loncillo* (unrefined, brown sugar blocks) and citric acid, made in the shape of a bar or representing the town's famous tourist attractions, the mummies. This is also the case with the *trompadas*, made with the same ingredients, but filled with coconut, walnuts or almonds. Around the 1960s, these were still the best known candies, but they lost the battle with the advent of the *jamoncillos* and other milk-based candies. Today they are only a few among hundreds of varieties that one can buy in Guanajuato's candy stores, and some day soon they may well be forgotten. Celaya's famous *cajetas* or Irapuato's candied fruits seem to have more staying power.

Don Ignacio also explains that candy-making is also a seasonal affair. During summer vacations, when thousands of Mexican and foreign tourists visit the city, shop shelves fill with *jamoncillos* and coconut candies, just like during the International Cervantes Festival held yearly in October. For the celebration of All Saints' Day, sweet-potato candy and candied fruit come on the scene. And they lead to experiments: Don Ignacio introduced a sweet-potato and guava paste that was used to decorate the intricate offerings made to the dead on the Day of the Dead. It was so successful that



Daniel Munguia

Dried, sugared strawberries and milk- and sugar-based *cajetas*.

it is now becoming a tradition. At the end of the year, dried fruit is a much appreciated dessert at Christmas tables. It is also used to make fruit cake (not a Mexican tradition). Caramel figures are another custom, as is *colación*, a mix of sugar-coated almonds and peanuts and multi-colored sugar candies, until a few years ago absolutely indispensable for the traditional pre-Christmas fiestas or *posadas*.

Visitors can find sweets from faraway parts of Mexico, or that have originated there but are now produced in Guanajuato, as well as traditional local varieties. But in any case, they are all delights worth taking home so as to bring a little taste of Guanajuato.

Elsie Montiel
Editor