



Amaranth

From the Sacred to The Everyday

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Mexican Salad with Amaranth Seeds

Ingredients

1 pear
1 lettuce, washed and disinfected
150 grams amaranth seeds
30 grams hibiscus flowers
1 jícama
goat cheese to taste
balsamic vinegar
olive oil
honey

To prepare:

Cut the pear and the jícama into wedges.
Boil the hibiscus flowers for 10 minutes and then sauté.
Cut the goat cheese into very thin slices using a string.

In the salad bowl, mix the lettuce with a little olive oil, the balsamic vinegar and the honey; add the goat cheese, the hibiscus flowers and the amaranth seeds.

This is a contemporary recipe that is part of what is currently known as “Mexican haute cuisine” because of its mixture of pre-Hispanic ingredients like amaranth seeds, and those from other places: hibiscus flowers from Asia, goat cheese from France and olive oil and honey from old Spain.

Amaranth seeds can be very versatile in cooking because their neutral taste allows them to be used in both sweet and savory dishes. Ground, toasted or baked, they are always nutritious and a good reason to follow tradition from breakfast to supper.

Tulyehualco, located in the borough of Xochimilco, is part of Mexico City's great urban sprawl. But there is still a whiff of the pre-Hispanic in its traditions, particularly the one involving a plant that has breathed life into this little town for more than 600 years: amaranth. The most surprising thing is to discover that, for Tulyehualco residents, amaranth is just as important a food as corn is for Mexicans as a whole, and, like corn, it is used to make a wide variety of dishes.

Street stalls selling an infinite variety of sweets made with amaranth abound here. To those of us who grew up in Mexico City, they are very familiar, because they have always been sold on the street, in subway stations, and even in department stores. But here, we can also discover the history and origins of amaranth dating back to pre-Hispanic times.

The people of this little southern town are descendants of the Xochimilca tribes who lived around the lakes, surrounded by flowers and vast reaches of vegetation in pre-classical times. Their deities Amitl and Atlahusa went with them on their journeys through the *chinampa* floating fields, while the goddess Chantico helped them make their lands more fertile, guided jewelers in the art of goldsmithery and artisans in making "the Lord's" volcanic stone slabs.

Like with all the pre-Hispanic cultures, their cosmic vision was linked to agricultural cycles. In this view, the cultivation of amaranth was fundamental: its seed was associated with the sacred. The *huauhili* (amaranth seed in Náhuatl), an important part of their religious



Amaranth fields.

celebrations, was used in offerings and was one of the main ingredients, together with red prickly-pear juice, for making the large figures that represented some of their gods and were consumed as part of the ritual.

The sacred character of the *huauhili* was precisely the reason it almost disappeared. When the Spanish came to spread the Catholic Gospel, indigenous rites were banned, condemned as pagan acts. Since amaranth was a central part of them, the Spaniards lost no time in banning its use also, and its consumption decreased

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Photos by Raquel del Castillo.

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notably among the population. However, the non-religious uses of the amaranth seeds and their nutritional value allowed it to survive until today.

As part of the daily diet of pre-Hispanic times, amaranth was used in making *atole* drinks, tortillas and tamales. Later, indigenous peoples experimented with it and created other dishes. This culinary mix also had a happy result: the *alegría*, or “joy,” one of Mexico’s most popular sweets even today. It is said to be the creation of Friar Martín de Valencia, the first to mix toasted amaranth seeds with honey. It was given the name *alegría* because of the joy it gave anyone who ate it.

Even though today most Mexicans associate amaranth with *alegrías*, for Tulyehualco residents, its special value continues to be its past, the fact that its use in the sacred rites and daily life of their ancestors has turned it into a historic food to be celebrated. It is sacred in the collective imaginary not only because it reminds them of their indigenous roots, but also because a great deal of the value they place on the seed is anchored in its preservation down through history.

Just talking to any of the amaranth-product vendors shows how important its role has been in the town’s traditions. María del Carmen Mendoza, the owner of a small sweets stall where she sells *alegrías*, *pepitorias* and amaranth cookies, says that making *alegrías* is a family tradition; she even seems to remember—or perhaps she dreamed it—her great-grandmother making amaranth candies. Her life story also reveals the importance of amaranth as a source of work and survival. She learned how to make *alegrías* as a child, and by the time she was 15, she was selling her sweets outside the church. Today, she speaks nostalgically and proudly about her children, who have gone to university and no longer earn a living making amaranth products.



Amaranth cookies.

One of Tulyehualco’s most important festivities, when local residents have the chance to sell their wares, is the Amaranth and Olive Tree Fair held every year in October. José Luis Velázquez, who makes mainly amaranth cookies and has served as president of the fair, explains that it was first held almost 40 years ago so merchants could sell their products in the town itself, since at that time, they were sold in the surrounding areas, particularly in Mexico City.

Velázquez talks about the new dishes made with amaranth, their success at the fairs, particularly in pastry-making, and reminds us a little about the seed and its indigenous roots. He remarks that the Spaniards thought that the red prickly-pear juice mixed with the amaranth seed was blood, which is what alarmed them and led them to ban its consumption. He tells us how delighted the indigenous were when they found that the seed popped when thrown into the fire. He also underlines the importance of caring for the land their ancestors left them since it is the source of life, and of the Teuhtli volcano overlooking the town, where he works as a forest ranger guarding the natural areas and fields of amaranth.

In Tulyehualco’s traditional landscape, the urban and nature coalesce. A few of the houses still have the stone mills from the viceregal period when olives were ground there, another important activity for the townspeople. In addition, in the downtown area, the Santiago the Apostle Parish Church retains valuable examples of sacred art from the viceregal period. Although



it is to care for it and preserve it because they live off its fruits. Amaranth is many things at the same time: a historical legacy, a nutritious food, a plant whose medicinal uses are recognized today, and, above all, a form of expression and the economic sustenance of an entire town. Honey and chocolate *alegrías*, cookies, cakes, hors d'oeuvres, soft drinks and even amaranth *pulque* are some of the delights sold here, born of a single ingredient. And everything seems to indicate that it will continue evolving thanks to the creativity of those who cultivate and appreciate it. **VM**

part of this treasure has been looted, both this church and the new one still have figures carved in wood and ornamented with natural hair and teeth, wine glasses, candelabra and two more than three-meter-high carved wooden planks painted with gold covered with oil paintings of Biblical scenes.

Tulyehualco's completely urbanized streets contrast with its traditional landscape, but some of the streets lead to the highest part of the town where you will find the fields of amaranth and the olive trees. Also an important resource for the town, olive oil is sold in the street stalls next to the *alegrías* and amaranth cookies.

It is said that the *alegría's* creator, Friar Martín de Valencia was the same person who taught the indigenous to cultivate olive trees in 1531, since the land here is very similar to Spain's Andalucía province, thus favoring excellent production of olives and olive oil.

It is an extraordinary experience to see amaranth fields so close to Mexico City and to see the plant itself, since very few people have ever seen it or the place it comes from. The leaves are a beautiful iridescent color, and the panicle, much like a corn cob, can be as big as 50 cm to a meter long; the panicle can be crimson, white or yellow and is formed by ears on which the flowers that hold the amaranth seeds grow. It is said that the nutrients that the Teuhtli Volcano spewed out when it erupted favored the cultivation of amaranth.

The natural scenery on the skirts of the Teuhtli is a constant reminder of the traditions rooted in this land, and Tulyehualco residents know how important

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The Santiago the Apostle Parish Church.