

# MEXICAN CUISINE

## An Entire Cultural System

Sol Rubín de la Borbolla\*



Many people ask why, beyond the ritual or festive aspects of certain customs, a historian or an anthropologist would be interested in the way food is prepared and served. This interest is born of a broader definition of what culture is and how different peoples have dealt with the effects of globalization. The definition includes the way in which inhabitants in a given region resolve their day-to-day problems, how they procure the food they need to eat, how they build their homes, use the environment, dress, and communicate among each other. And, of course, it involves their inner world, the spiritual world: the way they celebrate important events like birth and death, the way they explain the origin of the world and humankind, their relationship with nature, and also their art.

The culture of a people, region, or country also includes the way the inhabitants recognize each other as part of a group.

\* Director of the Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla Documentation and Information Center, [solrubin@gmail.com](mailto:solrubin@gmail.com).

Photos by Adalberto Ríos Szalay and Adalberto Ríos Lanz.

### NATURAL DIVERSITY

Mexico is one of the world's regions richest in plant and animal diversity. Several biological inventories rank it fourth worldwide in terms of the number of species it is home to: this is a mega-diverse country, a category only open to countries that are home to between 60 and 70 percent of the world's entire biological diversity. Indonesia, India, Australia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Brazil are the other nations that share this description. This natural diversity has made it possible for these peoples to have a rich, varied diet. It is sufficient to look at current recipe books, which mention the products needed to prepare a dish from the states of Chihuahua, Jalisco, Chiapas, or Campeche, to see our great variety of flora and fauna: cultivated and gathered plants, seasonal or perennial; animals that are fished for, hunted, collected, or raised. To give just a couple of examples, the shrimp from Sinaloa do not taste the same as those from Campeche or the little ones from Oaxaca; Mexican pepperleaf lends a special flavor to food in a large part of the country's South but is practically



Mexico is one of the world's regions richest in plant and animal diversity. Several biological inventories rank it fourth worldwide in terms of the number of species it is home to.

unknown in the North and Central Highlands. This immense biological variety is due, among other reasons, to the topography, the variety of climates, and a long, long geological, biological, and cultural history—we human beings have also contributed to changing the landscape and therefore, also the natural resources.

Mesoamerica is a concept cultural and archaeological scholars use to define a geographical space in which, down through the history of pre-Hispanic times, different societies shared cultural expressions and established a communications network. That space is bounded on the north by the states of Sinaloa, Jalisco, and Veracruz, and to the south by parts of Central America, including the northern part of Costa Rica. Corn is the best example of this shared history; for more than 10 000 years the inhabitants of Mesoamerica have improved and diversified its cultivation. Today there are more than 400 varieties, which, from the natural point of view, represent great biological wealth. But, in addition, from the gastronomic-cultural perspective, each of these varieties has its own specific use: for making tortillas, tamales, roughly milled





fresh corn pancakes called *toqueras*, the thick beverage *atole*, and for preparing ritual, holiday, or medicinal foods.

#### A CONCERT OF ETHNIC GROUPS AND CULTURES

The different groups that have inhabited for thousands of years what is now Mexico have left a very important mark. When the Spaniards arrived to these lands in the sixteenth century, a large number of peoples lived beyond what is known as Mesoamerica; to the north, south, and east there were human settlements with different degrees of economic and social development. Some oral versions of pre-Hispanic cultures were set down in the colonial codices, books the first evangelizing missionaries contracted indigenous chroniclers and painters, or *tlacuilos*, to write, and have also been rendered in writing at ceremonial centers and burial sites. However, little recovery work and study have been done of family and residential spaces. Nevertheless, ceramics, painting, and a few textiles and pieces of basketwork or woodwork found in archaeological explorations help explain their use. Some of these pieces are comparable to certain objects that are still to be found in the markets of rural and indigenous towns.

Settlements dating from after the conquest, above all those linked to mining, raw materials, and animal husbandry, attracted immigrants who came with their own cultural tradition:



Pulque bread, baked in a wood-burning oven.



Typical view of a *tianguis*, or open-air market.

From the mix of cultures also arose an infinite number of utensils adapted to the uses and fashions of each era; many of them have even lasted for hundreds of years because of their usefulness and beauty.



Traditional Michoacán wood-burning kitchen.



Corn atole in clay mugs.

Spaniards with their Arabic heritage, Jews, and groups who came as slaves from different parts of Africa. They all brought with them new products, culinary customs, crafted items, and other ways of explaining the world. To this was added the exchange through the Manila galleon trade with Asia, and the trade with Spain and its other colonies through the royal fleet during the entire viceroyalty. Later, starting in the nineteenth century, the growing trade was enriched with the presence of immigrants from countries like France, Germany, Italy, England, and Lebanon, among others, which gave rise to innovations in the way of eating, preparing, serving, and storing food.

All these changes were less evident among the indigenous peoples; but in urban and mestizo areas, the transformation was much greater given that in Mexico, the mix of the different groups took place in all spheres of life. The Spanish brought the lathe, enamel ceramics, colonial looms, new textile fibers like wool and fine silk, iron, glass, and numerous techniques and tools for production and household use.

#### POPULAR ART AND GASTRONOMY

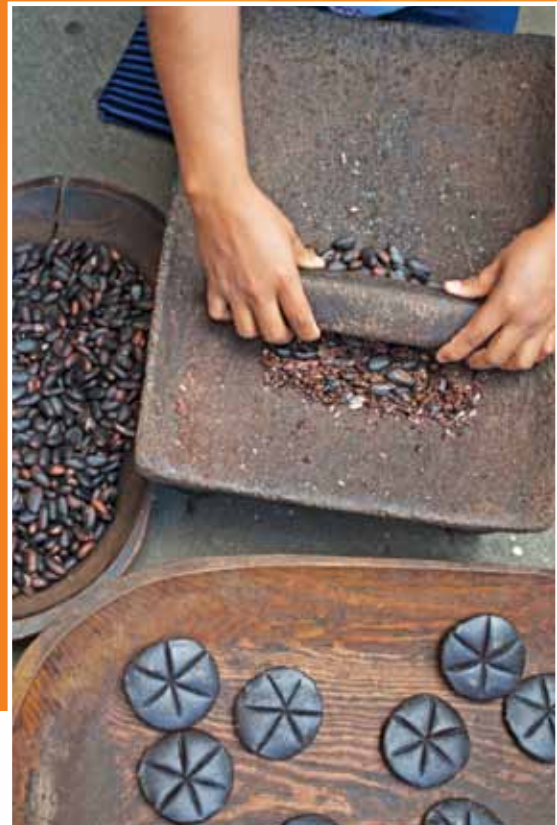
From the mix of cultures also arose an infinite number of utensils adapted to the uses and fashions of each era; many of them have even lasted for hundreds of years because of their usefulness and beauty and because they are part of the



identity of a region or a social group, whether indigenous or mestizo, from the countryside or the city. Just like with gastronomy, many of the transformations in folk art associated with the cuisine came about because of regional differences. In Mexico's South and Southeast, in indigenous areas, pottery maintains some of its original forms: little boxes or plates, large earthen jars for liquids, clay jugs and pots that are smoothed and burnished until they are waterproof. Baskets are used to store grain, placed above the hearth on lofts to preserve it. In Central Mexico, the most common kind of ceramics are enameled or glazed until they are vitreous, and baskets are still used to transport food; spoons and kitchen furniture like dish-holders, spoon-holders, and chests are carved from wood. Tablecloths are woven on colonial looms or embroidered in cotton in a wide variety of colors.

Knife sets are another of the important part of folk art linked to gastronomy. Although produced in many places, outstanding examples of knives are made in Oaxaca and, particularly, Michoacán, where perfectly tempered steel is combined with rare wood handles, and hammered copper pots are used to make caramel and fruit candy or to deep-fry the famous pork *carnitas*.

Volcanic rock is used to make water filters; mortars and pestles for grinding seeds and spices and to prepare a wide variety of salsas; mealing stones to grind *nixtamal* (corn cooked in a mixture of quicklime and water to make tortillas), cacao, and other products.



Grinding cacao on a *metate*.

Volcanic rock is used to make water filters; mortars and pestles for grinding seeds and spices and to prepare a wide variety of salsas; and mealing stones to grind *nixtamal*, cacao, and other products.





Gastronomy is undoubtedly an element for establishing identity in which the vast majority of Mexicans recognize themselves, as are all the tools and utensils used for cooking, storing, transporting, or serving food.



Today, it is not unusual to find a volcanic rock mortar and pestle next to an Osterizer in a Mexican kitchen, whether in the city or the countryside, or clay pots next to pewter or Teflon. Hot chocolate continues to be hand-beaten with turned wooden whisks, and millions of Mexicans drink coffee or other hot beverages in clay mugs.

*Mole* sauce, in all its regional variations, continues to be the most popular dish for family celebrations, which is why the huge clay pots continue to be produced in different states throughout the country like Puebla, Tlaxcala, Michoacán, and the State of Mexico. In contrast, the blown and pressed glass glasses typically used in the past to drink *pulque*, a fermented drink made from cactus sap, have practically disappeared and become collector's items since the beverage itself is not consumed as much today as before.

Gastronomy is undoubtedly an element for establishing identity in which the vast majority of Mexicans recognize themselves, as are all the tools and utensils used for cooking, storing, transporting, or serving food. And these are all intimately linked to the country's different cultural regions. This means that the different dishes that make up daily, ceremonial, family celebratory, or religious meals correspond to diverse artisanal pieces. This means it is not unusual to find in most homes a clay pot used exclusively for making *mole* for parties, even if it is only used twice or three times a year; clay pots used for making rice are often reserved exclusively for that; the pots for cooking beans are usually not used to cook other foods; and it is often common to find other implements



The appropriation of products, techniques, and ways of preparing and serving food has made Mexico's cuisine a lively, dynamic manifestation of its culture.



In a collective cuisine, everyone takes part.

like pots, tablecloths, mats, clay pots, cut tissue-paper decorations, among other things, reserved for special use for festivities and ceremonies.

Of course, these variations are closely linked to the cultural practices that endure in Mexico, as well as other factors like buying power, ethnic and social groups, and geographical regions.

#### FROM MEXICO TO THE WORLD

The concept of patrimony or heritage involves the value placed on a series of inherited goods, knowledge, and histories that, with the passage of time, are transformed by the generation that inherits them, which in turn, leaves them to those who come after. This is why, when the value of these goods is lost, their classification as patrimony is lost.

Traditional cuisines are considered the patrimony of a society because they are made up of a series of original or imported products that with the passage of time are naturalized by the country that adopted them; a series of processes carried out to transform and use the raw materials, like *nixtamalización* or using the cacao bean in the case of Mexico;<sup>1</sup> techniques for preparing food, like those used to make tortillas, to wrap tamales, to preserve certain meats, among others; rituals, like the ceremonies to pray for a good crop; objects, utensils, tools, and recipients that satisfy certain needs like the *metate* or mealing stone, the *molcajete* or stone mortar and pestle, the *molinillo* or turned wooden whisk for beating chocolate, the river nets and traps for fishing, the baskets for transporting and storing products, etc.; and oral histories through which knowledge and wisdom are transmitted. Using these parameters, certain criteria have been developed that characterize traditional cuisines and Mexico's fulfills all of them:

*Originality.* Mexico's cuisine emerged in its own territory. Its strength was born of a long historical process of more than 10 centuries of experimentation and the development of cultivation, use, and domestication of the local wild flora and fauna, of preparation techniques, and of ways of serving and sharing food. From pre-Hispanic times until today, it has been enriched by contributions from other cultures.

*Diversity.* Natural diversity is measured by the variety of species, and cultural diversity by the number of living languages in a specific territory; using the latter indicator, Mexico takes third place worldwide, after China and India.

*Historical continuity.* The most recent archaeological finds show that, since the humans inhabiting Mesoamerica began domesticating corn, their basic foodstuff, 10 000 years have passed. Therefore, the development of the body of knowledge and techniques for the use of local products has taken all that time.

*Authenticity.* The appropriation of products, techniques, and ways of preparing and serving food has made Mexico's cuisine a lively, dynamic manifestation of its culture. Since pre-Hispanic times, the trade routes and relations for conquest and tribute determined that products would travel from one territory to another. Today, the contributions from other cultures can still be traced without eliminating the basis for indigenous nutrition: corn, squash, beans, and chili peppers.

*Identity.* Food is present at all celebrations in Mexico: from birth until death, in civic and religious fiestas. In addition, it is a factor for social cohesion because of the community significance it embodies, from the cultivation of the products to the way the table or altar is laid out.

\* \* \*

Examples confirming why Mexican cuisine is part of the country's cultural patrimony are all around us: the recipes we inherit from our grandmothers have family value as a heritage,

but they also reproduce the forms of preparation and flavors that are close to us and our surroundings. What family, civic, or religious fiesta does not bring to mind a certain dish or special way of preparing it? Suffice it to think of *esquites* (corn cut from the cob and flavored with the pungent *epazote* herb) at a fair, or tamales on the Day of Our Lady of Candelaria. And even, day-to-day, who can resist that delicacy, a tortilla with salt just off the griddle? We have food patrimony at hand every day: the originality, authenticity, historical continuity, diversity, and identity of Mexico's cuisines accompany us in all spheres of life. It is our responsibility to preserve them. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The process of *nixtamalización* is used to prepare corn for making tortillas by slaking corn kernels with water and calcium oxide, or quicklime, to soften them.



Making a *corunda*, a kind of tamale.



Tortillas fresh off the griddle.

Traditional cuisines are considered the patrimony of a society because they are made up of a series of original or imported products that with the passage of time are naturalized by the country that adopted them.