



TRADITIONAL POPULAR Mexican Cuisine

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The Mexican cuisine included on the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is not just any Mexican cuisine: concretely, what is recognized is *traditional* Mexican cuisine.

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were added culinary customs brought by the Spanish, which in turn incorporated elements from Asia, Africa (particularly Arab traditions), and other countries of Europe. During the viceroyalty, the direct influence from Asia increased through the goods, particularly spices, brought by the Nao galleons from China and Africa at the cost of slave labor. Throughout the nineteenth century, European influences continued, particularly from France, because of the immigration beginning in the 1830s, the armed intervention of Napoleon III and the ill-fated Maximilian of Habsburg in the 1860s, as well

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as the curious “Frenchification” under Don Porfirio Díaz at the end of the century, with his black frock coat and top hat, he who as a young man in his native Tuxtepec had been a shoemaker and carpenter.

From nineteenth-century France, we received dishes, techniques, and terminology. Among them are the words “restaurant,” “menu,” “chef,” “buffet,” “consommé,” “mayonnaise,” “champignon,” “omelette,” “vol-au-vent,” “crêpe,” “canapé,” “mousse,” and “soufflé.” The gastronomical term “*haute cuisine*” is very debatable when applied to our culinary tradition, since, while in France it has a clear, precise meaning that applies to the food of the rich as distinct from that of the poor, in Mexico, it only confuses matters.

The fact is that traditional Mexican cuisine is the food of the people, the kind recognized by the UNESCO, and that is the highest gastronomical form because of its authenticity, antiquity, constancy, current relevance, territorial and demographic coverage, day-to-day use, and also its festive character.

To accept something else as Mexican *haute cuisine* would be to accept that the popular cuisine is *basse cuisine*; more than an injustice, this would simply be completely untrue. When the best and most luxurious authentic Mexican restaurants and the most privileged private dining rooms in the country serve real Mexican food, they are actually decking themselves out with the country’s most common popular dishes: *mole* sauces, *adobo* marinades, pit-roasted meat, braised pork *carnitas*, a long list of other dishes, and, of course, tortillas. Any restaurant in Mexico, from Tijuana to Tapachula, even if its specialty is international cuisine or any other, will include enchiladas or *chilaquiles*, the most pristine expression of the poorest tables, on its breakfast menu. Mexico’s *popular* traditional cuisine is the kind that adorns and is boasted of at genuine Mexican aristocratic and plutocratic banquets.

Quite another matter is fusion cuisine—frequently “confusion” cuisine— or what is called “signature cuisine,” which uses Mexican ingredients or dishes as a starting point. The supposed connoisseurs call it *haute cuisine* and even Mexican *nouvelle cuisine*. But our authentic traditional cuisine, the highest, is popular cuisine, and that is what the UNESCO recognized.

However, the advances of the new trends in Mexican cooking should be recognized, and when they are happy advances and on the mark, they may one day become part of traditional cuisine. All traditions, even the most ancient, had to be born sometime. Quite a different thing is snobbery,



passing fads, and a love for the spectacular that sometimes perverts traditional cuisine.

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Just as it is not advisable or fruitful to try to look for apples in a pear orchard or French food in Namibia, but rather in an apple orchard or in Paris, we should keep in mind that the natural habitat of traditional Mexican cooking are the most ordinary places like neighborhood, hole-in-the-wall eateries, markets, and those endless street stalls on the sidewalks, on corners, and at people's front gates, where the fact that they are modest does not necessarily mean they are unhygienic.

In every city in Mexico, when a local middle-class family wants to have a good meal of the regional delicacies, they do not go to fashionable "Mexican" watering holes —where what predominates is mainly their decoration and the prices more than their cooking— but to traditional places. The following is an itinerary of obligatory stops if you want to taste regional delicacies, known as Mexican *antojitos*:

Roast suckling pig *tortas*, or sandwiches on a roll, at the Santa Ana Market and shredded pork in *pibil* sauce (*cochinita pibil*) at the central market in Mérida; seafood cocktails at Ensenada's little carts; tostadas at the Coyoacán market and beef shank tacos at the San Cosme Market in Mexico City; iguana or mussel tamales at the Pinotepa Nacional Market; drained *pozole* soup and juicy brain tacos at Colima's evening

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diners; *tortas "de la barda"* in Tampico; thin, crunchy *chalu-pita* tostadas and a spicy *chileatole* corn beverage bought at stands set up at people's front gates in downtown Puebla, and a *torta* served on a sesame seed *cemita* egg roll at the same city's Carranza Market; water-based hot chocolate served with egg-yolk bread at Oaxaca's main market; spicy *birria* meat stew and *tortas ahogadas*, dipped in sauce and fried, at Guadalajara's "nine corners," and beef-stomach stew (*pancita*) at the city's Central Market; the seafood restaurants at Cancún's Mercado 28 and Playa del Carmen's seafood cocktail stands; the tacos at Ciudad Victoria's train station, as well as the pig's head tacos at 16th, Juárez, and Zaragoza Streets in the same city; the seafood tacos in downtown La Paz and the sailfish tacos in Manzanillo, both sold from carts; the green tamales with cumin on a corner in Real del Monte, and the deep-fried maguey worm (*gusanos de maguey*) tacos sold in local neighborhood hole-in-the-wall eateries in Pachuquilla; the miniature deep-fried tacos served in sauce in evening diners in



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Culiacán and the crabs sold at stalls in Altata; the soft, thick oyster *sope* tostadas and the Nayarit *pozole* soup in Mexcaltitán; the unborn-calf tacos in the Chiapa de Corzo Market, and the roasted porpoise in Acapetahua; the *cahuamanta* (or faux “sea turtle”) broth and, tacos in Ciudad Obregón, and the cheese tacos with smoked marlin in Guaymas; the roasted freshwater gar (*pejelagarto*) in Saloya’s neighborhood hole-in-the-wall restaurants and the *pochitoque en verde*, or mud turtle in hot green chili pepper sauce in Nacajuca; the “wrapped” tacos in Cuernavaca’s López Mateos Market and the “basket” tacos (*tacos de canasta*) on that city’s Nezahualcóyotl Street; the roast suckling pig *tortas* in Acapulco’s market, and the braised pork *tortas* in Guanajuato’s market, where you can also get pickled pig-ear tostadas at a little cart in the Reforma Garden; the enchiladas *placeras* in Morelia’s San Agustín Plaza; the dried-beef broth in Durango; the beef-head tacos in Mexico City’s Tizapán; the *tejate con pétalos de rosa y almendra de mamey*, a beverage made from ground maize, cacao, and mamee pits, and scented with rose petals, in Oaxaca’s Juárez Market, and the *pozol*, a fermented corn



drink, at the Sabines Market in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, both drunk from gourds, of course; the dried spiced beef or pork burritos in Chihuahua and the deep fried *chimichanga* burritos in Hermosillo; the bean and sliced *Poblano* chili pepper tamales and the prickly-pear-flavored maize-based *atole* drink in Aguascalientes’s evening diners; the miniature-shrimp cocktails sold at Champotón embankment carts; Torreón’s enchiladas with thick yoghurt; the barbequed *obispos*, bone marrow and brain sausages, sold at the Ixtapan de la Sal Market; Nuevo León’s finger tamales (*tamales de dedo*); the “virile” cocktails at one Querétaro market; the San Luis Potosí enchiladas at that town’s evening diners; the meat cooked in *pulque* at the Huamantla Market; and finally, the apple snail cocktails (*coctel de tegogolos*) on the streets of Catemaco. This apparently prolific list is actually a minimal sample of some of Mexico’s traditional gastronomy.

However, if we look more closely at one of the most deeply rooted categories with the most history in our culinary tradition, like tamales, to the three or four we have already mentioned, we have to add another enormous list. A veritable encyclopedia could be written about tamales, but here, it is worth just naming a few additional examples:

In Aguascalientes, they make pineapple tamales with eggnog, pine kernel and barrel cactus tamales, and other sweets made of peanuts. In Baja California there are what they call *güemes* tamales made of pork and chicken, olives, raisins, and olive oil. In Campeche, they make a tamale with *guajillo* chili pepper sauce, annatto, tomatoes, garlic, onions,



and spices; in addition to the corn dough and pork, its filling contains olives, capers, raisins, and almonds. Similar ones are made in Chiapas, adding diced carrot and potato, peas, pepper, and boiled egg. Around the Comarca Lagunera region, they make spinach tamales. In Colima, there are what are called “kingly” or “splendid” tamales for which they add rice and pork ribs to the corn dough. In Chiapas there are *cambray*, chipilín, and “ball” tamales, another kind called pea *padzitos*, and others called “delicacy” tamales, filled with confectioner’s custard; there are also tamales made from Mexican pepperleaf using beans, toasted, ground shrimp heads, squash seeds, and *piquín* chili peppers. Chihuahua boasts pig’s head tamales prepared with oregano. In the Valley of Mexico, the tasty tamale *torta* is common, and “naked” tamales are also delicious, fried before serving. In Durango they make cream tamales with almonds, pine nuts, and raisins. In the State of Mexico’s Zumpango, they make them of pork backbone in green sauce with pungent *epazote* herb and *ayacotes* (those big, purple beans), as well as sweet tamales made of *capulín* cherries. In Guanajuato they prepare ash tamales and also “tamales of the dead,” made with blue corn. In Taxco, they make bean tamales with lard that they bathe with green squash seed *pipián* mole sauce to serve, and others made of candied



squash; in Tloloapan, there are set-milk tamales, and in Tlamacazapa, they make them of mutton, a rather uncommon choice of meat for making tamales. In the Huasteca region, they prepare the largest known tamale, the *zacahuil*, up to a meter long, and enough for all the guests at a wedding reception; it is made with pig’s head and turkey meat. In Jalisco, they make Guadalajara tamales with mixed corn and rice dough. In Michoacán, we have the *corundas* and the *uchepos*, as well as the Tarascan tamales made of corn, beans, and small *charales* lake fish. In Tepoztlán, they make tamales out of the flower from the naked coral tree, and in Nayarit, a corn tamale “soup,” a kind of deep-dish tamale. In Oaxaca, in addition to the classic black *mole* sauce tamales, they also make them with six other kinds of *mole* sauces, outstanding among which are the green and yellow *mole*. In Puebla, they make tamales out of purple *ayacote* beans, and others out of fava beans with chili pepper veins and avocado leaves, plus the *pulacles*, tamales with zucchini, beans, and sesame seeds. In Querétaro, there are “canary” tamales with raisins. In Ciudad

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Valles, they have tamales made of *chilpán* sauce and others of palm heart; and in the capital of San Luis Potosí, they make them out of lime and others out of oranges with *chilacayote* squash. In Sinaloa, they make “bearded” tamales out of shrimp, and others out of pork with sweet potatoes and papaya. In Sonora, there are sweet bean tamales with raisins, and others made with purslane and garbanzo beans. In Tabasco, they make them out of freshwater gar, out of *chaya* leaf, and out of beans and peas. In Tamaulipas, there are dried shredded beef tamales, and others made of squash with shrimp. The list of Veracruz’s tamale rainbow is as long as the state itself. The ones that stand out are sweet corn with pork and red sauce tamales; shredded shark-meat tamales; tamales made of corn with green chili pepper and coriander; of squash seeds with beans; of *izote* flowers with pork; pork cracklings with brown sugar; fresh coconut with cream; and, of course, fish with Mexican pepperleaf. In Yucatán, the *muchi*pollos or *pibi*pollos are traditional, and of course, the *vapor*citos. Finally, in Zacatecas, no one can pass up the “Bufa

Hill” tamales, where the corn dough is accompanied by pork, cumin, and *ancho* chili pepper salsa.

The other ubiquitous exponents of traditional Mexican cuisine are tacos. This is not simply a tortilla rolled up with some kind of food inside; rather, they have patterns, that give rise to whole families of tacos, clearly differentiated among themselves. In general terms, these are the braised pork tacos; the barbequed meat tacos; the “basket” or “sweaty” tacos; tacos made out of fried meats (beef shank, goat entrails sausage, cured pork sausage); flute-shaped, golden fried *flautas*; beef-head tacos; tacos made out of different stews; *al pastor* tacos (the only ones with a foreign origin); and grilled tacos—these are actually neo-tacos, invented by those who prefer to order a steak or pork chop taco instead of a pig uterus, cow lung, eye, or pig esophagus taco. We would have to add burritos, or the tacos from the North, made with flour tortillas, and tacos filled with insects, that in more than one family constitute a relationship with regional indigenous customs.

All these delicacies—tamales and tacos, the most day-to-day examples of traditional Mexican cuisine and its *antojitos*—are not something typical of real restaurants, but rather of little hole-in-the-wall neighborhood eateries and markets, corners, and sidewalks. Another reason for this particular kind of venue is that you need neither plates nor cutlery to eat them. *Antojitos* are undoubtedly the most genuine example of traditional popular Mexican cuisine. **MM**

