



Traditional Fare From the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

*Natalia Toledo**

*To my grandmother,
Doña Florencia Toledo,
who nurtured my taste for cooking.*

I am Natalia Toledo, a woman from Juchitán, Oaxaca, a city in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Juchitán has a little over 100,000 inhabitants, mostly bilingual: there the language spoken is Zapotec, a language filled with metaphors and beautiful sounds. When people speak Zapotec,

they constantly paint, sing and imagine the words: for example, to say "beach", you say "*rua msaló*" that translated literally means "the lips of the sea." To say "the dawn", you say "*siadó guieru*," or "the opening flower," a morning, a possible flower. I have always thought that this constant painting with words is the reason there are so many visual artists in Juchitán, the native land of painter Francisco Toledo.

This place is famous for the beauty of its women and the courage of its men.

Down through the years, important artists like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Tina Modotti, Miguel Covarrubias, Graciela Iturbide and more have visited it, as have writers like Anaïs Nin, who dedicates a paragraph of her diary to Juchitecan women, or Andre Pieyre de Mandiargues, who wrote a chronicle of the trip he made here with his beautiful wife Bona, a painter, who in Paris had been the girlfriend of Mexico's Nobel-prize winning poet, Octavio Paz.

Many have been fascinated by and fastened their gaze on Juchitan.

*Bilingual poet Spanish-Zapotec .

Well, I'm from those lands, a Juchiteca who lives in Mexico City, writing a little poetry in the indigenous tongue and Spanish, and cooking food from the isthmus.

Something we always take with us wherever we go are the smells and flavors of the kitchens of our childhood. In the house of my grandmother Na Aurea, the meeting place then and now for the whole family that for whatever reason has scattered throughout the country, the food is delicious. When you get to Na Aurea's house in the morning, you lie right down in one of the cotton hammocks hanging like pendulums in the corridor or in the patio under the black olive tree while she makes breakfast, which could well be a plate of iguana meat in mashed wild green tomato sauce with red tomatoes.

The iguana is cooked in a pot with garlic, onion and sea salt; then, the green tomatoes are squashed with the hands and popped right into the pot along with some green chili peppers already burst in boiling water. Those in the know say that this dish cures anaemia. It is served in its sauce and can be garnished with a scoop of very dry refried beans and dark, almost burned, fried onions. Women go door to door selling this dish in almond tree leaves.

In Juchitán, tortillas are hand made, cooked on a *comiscal*. The *comiscal* is a hollow clay pot buried in a base of mud and river sand in which firewood is burned until it becomes charcoal; inside, the raw tortillas are stuck to the walls by hand and, once cooked, removed with tongs. A great variety of tortillas are made like this; for example the *gueta zuquii* are typical fat little tortillas with three

or four little holes in the center; the *gueta bicuni* looks like a dog's leg; and the famous *totopos* are large, thin tortillas with thousands of little holes that look like they are always laughing. This same clay oven is used to roast *tepalcates* or banana tree leaves, fresh or smoked fish, or the tiny *lisa* river fish wrapped in *totomostle* (corn husks), and meat.



Graciela Iturbide



Ricardo Hernandez

In Juchitán tortillas are hand made.

My grandmother Aurea's table never lacks a white corn *atole* drink, or *biipu*, a pre-Hispanic drink made of cacao, or *guie' chachi* (May flowers) and *guie' xhuba* (jasmin flowers).

At the time of the large midday meal, my grandmother might surprise us with a shrimp *mole* or a pot of *bizaa dxima*, beans from the Chimalapa forest between the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. I will explain how my grandmother makes these dishes:

For a shrimp mole, buy a half kilogram of salt dried shrimp, a handful of squash seeds, a half kilogram of tomatoes, a fist-sized ball of corn meal, a sprig



Graciela Iturbide



Ricardo Hernández

of *epazote*, two or three *cuaresmeño* chili peppers, a piece of *achiote* chili pepper paste and four eggs. Take the heads and tails off the shrimp and soak them in water for about 10 minutes. Separately, pour the ground and strained tomatoes, garlic, onion and green chili peppers into a pot with hot pork lard and bring it to a boil. Brown the squash seeds and grind

multaneously, add a teaspoon of lard, bits of *epazote* and salt to 1/4 kilogram of corn meal and roll into little balls, adding them to the soup. When the mixture comes to a boil, add four raw eggs.

This can be served with a goodly piece of armadillo meat in chili pepper sauce. (Armadillos are raised in Juchitán and consumed rationally; they have been part of the indigenous peoples' diet since pre-Hispanic times.)

For supper, grandmother Na Aurea takes us to the portals downtown, the restaurants under the arches surrounding the central plaza, for some delicious *garnachas* or *garnachero* chicken¹ and a good cup of coffee.

This is what I can eat in one day in my hometown.

The other days are the same, only the recipes change: roasted *mecate* meat or pork ribs browned with *achiote* paste and garlic, *cuajada*, *lisa* caviar, bulls' blood with eggs, chili peppers and onion, and more. Oh! and dessert: almond sweets, *jicaco* or some *anonas*; plums or *nanche* fruit preserved in alcohol.²

Cooking is an art as long as whoever is doing it is passionate. **MM**



Ricardo Hernández

The *comiscal*. A great variety of tortillas are made in it.



Graciela Irujo

them together with the shrimp heads and the corn meal; add this mixture to the pot. When the mixture boils again, add the shrimp, the *achiote* paste dissolved in a tablespoon of water and the *epazote*. Beat the eggs and ladle them into the liquid; allow the mixture to boil again. Serve with limes, dry cheese and *totopos* for a delicious meal.

The *bizaa dxima* is a tiny, very black bean that is toasted and reduced to a powder that is dissolved in a gourd full of water. Heat three tablespoons of pork lard in a pot and add the bean liquid, stirring constantly to prevent sticking. Si-

NOTES

¹ In Juchitán, *garnachas* are corn tortillas covered with meat, onions, hot sauce, dry cheese and cabbage in vinegar; *garnachero* chicken is chicken fried in garlic served with sauce, cabbage in vinegar, potatoes and fried onions. [Translator's Note.]

² *Mecate* meat is salt-dried meat in the form of a rope or *mecate*; *cuajada* is very fresh cheese; *jicaco*, a pink or black seed, cooked with sugar to make a sweet; *anona*, a fruit similar to the guanabana; *nanche*, a fruit native to southern Mexico. [Translator's Note.]