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## Mexican Cuisine - From the Maya to McDonalds

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## MEXICAN CUISINE – FROM THE MAYA TO MCDONALD'S

Good afternoon – I'm pleased that you've offered me another invitation to spend some time with you and today's topic will be very different than the previous one. Last time, we talked about México's political and economy history. Now, we shift to the more filling topic of Mexican cuisine.

The food a people place on their tables tells us much about their history and their culture. In México, we have two very different traditions of cooking that came together gradually during the past hundred or so years. The traditions were those of the Spaniards on the one hand and of the Indians and mestizos who comprised the majority of Mexicans during the colonial era.

The indigenous people and their mestizo ancestors had a basic diet of corn, beans, squash, and chiles. This diet was a healthy, if basic one. Beans provided a fine source of vegetarian protein; squash provided trace minerals; and corn provided an excellent source of complex carbohydrates. In most parts of the country, tropical fruits such as mango, papaya, guava, avocados, and nopal cactus were readily available. They added both some additional tastes and nutrition to the diet. In addition to these staple foods, the first Mexicans created regional variations. For example, on both coasts of México fish supplemented the protein supplied by the beans.

Prior to the Spanish conquest, México had no cattle, sheep, pigs, horses, oxen or chickens and so animal protein proved rather scarce. Deer as well as turkey, rabbit, squirrels, and other small creatures were the main source of such protein and they often were reserved for the highest-ranking members of society. The first Spaniards to visit the Mexican capital commented on the dozens of courses brought to the Aztec emperor. He could afford such luxuries.

Indian cuisine had five basic cooking instruments of this cuisine, some of which can be found today throughout México. They include the:

*Cazuela*, or earthenware pot.

*metate*, which is a three-legged slightly curved grinding stone.

*molcajete*, which was a three-legged stone mortar in which cooks ground spices with a pestle, or *mano*. The term *mano* also referred to the grinder, or rolling pin (*metate*).

*comal*, or earthenware griddle.

With these, a wide variety of dishes could be prepared. The most basic were the *tamal* and the *tortilla*. The tamal is a cornhusk filled with various mixtures of food. But the daily serving of corn came in the form of the tortilla, which was made by first separating and softening the kernels of corn and then laboriously grinding them on the *metate*

before they were tossed on the *comal* to be heated and immediately served. The only drawback to this process was that a great amount of time was required to produce the tortillas.

For alcoholic refreshment, *pulque*, a mildly potent beverage distilled from cactus and still brewed today, provided a nutritious distraction at table. While a small measure of pulque could be taken without attracting frowns, intoxication was regarded as a social sin at home and a severe criminal offense in public.

When the Spanish invaded in the early part of the sixteenth century, they brought with them the sheep, cattle, pigs, horses, oxen, and chicken that were to transform Mexican life and in particular the Mexican kitchen. However, the Spanish also brought with them an attitude of superiority. They thought of themselves as superior people who had nothing to learn from the Indians. Consequently, they and those of their colonial descendents who preferred to think of themselves as white sought to duplicate the European diet in México.

They had little difficulty establishing considerable herds of livestock in México or planting a great amount of acreage with their favorite grain, which was wheat. The meat and bread they considered an essential part of their European heritage soon was readily available, although the bread proved far more expensive than a comparable amount of corn. Happily, the lemons, watermelons, chickpeas, and spinach the Spaniards brought with them flourished on Mexican soil as did many of the European and East Asian spices.

Other elements of the Spanish table proved harder to duplicate. Olives could not be easily grown in México and neither could grapes. But Spanish economic policy as well as conditions of climate and terrain ended the colonists' hope of producing olive oil or wine on their own soil. Imperial policy dictated that colony existed to produce raw materials that the mother country would process the grapes and olives into finished goods for shipment back to México. Consequently, the price of both items proved too high for many Mexicans to buy.

So the colonists substituted. For frying, pork fat replaced olive oil. Those colonists who could not afford the imported wine instead drank *aguagardiente*, a potent brew distilled from sugarcane. And in 1763, Jose Cuervo responded to the situation by inventing *tequila* and then opening México's first distillery.

The Indian and mestizo majority took a mixed view of these developments. On the positive side, pork fat was valued as a means of producing fluffier tamales and chicken received an enthusiastic response. The hens were easy to raise and could be seasoned in an infinite variety of ways with the dozens of chiles found throughout México. On the other hand, Indians thought wheat was no better than the worst corn grown during years of drought and famine. The point at which the two cultures first met was in the sauces, or as they are known in México, *moles*.

According to tradition, a colonial-era nun created the national *mole* of México, which is *mole poblano*. She began by toasting red and black chiles on a *comal* and then put those in the earthenware pot, adding cloves, cinnamon, peppercorn, coriander, and sesame seed. She poured turkey broth over this mix and applied heat. Then, deciding that another ingredient was needed, Sister Andrea de la Asuncion of Puebla added a bit of good Mexican chocolate. While she received credit for inventing *mole poblano*, we have other evidence indicating that *moles* of various sorts existed long before that. In any case, the *moles* some became a matter of pride among all Mexicans and there are many varieties consumed today. Aside from the *mole poblano*, the seven *moles* of the southwestern state of Oaxaca remain the most famous.

After México became independent in 1821, the two cuisines existed side by side with at least a few points in common. As noted, both treasured their moles; both enthusiastically embraced the wide variety of more than fifty types of chiles as authentically Mexican, and both regarded hot chocolate as a national treasure. In these earlier decades of the nineteenth century, regional specialties received more recognition and respect. The northern Mexicans favored roasted meat and to this day, *cabrito*, or roast young goat, remains the specialty that our neighbors in the city of Monterrey claim as their own. By contrast, in the Yucatan peninsula, the Maya specialized in roasting meat in the ground, particularly pigs. In the Caribbean state of Veracruz, seafood took center stage as did vegetables. To this day, Mexicans refer to dishes of meat or fish cooked in the same pan as the vegetables as food cooked *a la veracruzana*. One of México's first cookbooks, the 1831 *La Cocinera Mexicana* (The Mexican Chef) reflected all of these tendencies.

However, the distinctions between the European-oriented outlook of the people who owned and governed much of México and the rest of the population remained. The powers-that-be readily embraced foreign foods and regarded the table as a place to display their prosperity and sophistication. Affluent Mexicans ate five times a day.

Breakfast, or *desayuno*, consisted of hot chocolate and a pastry eaten soon after awakening. Then at 10:00 a.m. came the *almuerzo*, or brunch. This included grilled red meat or chicken, a stew, or perhaps an omelet in place of the stew. At 1:00 p.m. or 2:00 p.m., the main meal of the day, the *comida*, was served. This began with chicken or beef broth accompanied by limes and chiles, followed by a course of pasta or rice with tomato sauce. The third course included a stew with frijoles and to finish off the feast, a dessert. All of this eating required a nap, the *siesta*. Between 4:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. came the late afternoon snack, or *merienda*. Usually, this included hot chocolate and pastry. Lastly, the *cena*, or supper, was served at 10:00 p.m. and featured stewed meat and a salad to aid one's digestion. Formal dinner parties often ran to ten courses and this included small servings of rice to cleanse the palate after each plate had been served. By contrast, the majority of nineteenth-century Mexicans ate as they had eaten in the preceding century.

During the late 1900s, the government of President Porfirio Diaz made vigorous efforts to Europeanize the Mexican diet. Their principle target proved to be the humble tortilla. Declaring corn to be a nutritionally inferior food that stunted individual development, they sought to establish the wheat tortilla as the preferred source of nutrition. This scientifically unsubstantiated perception was part of the Porfirian belief that whatever was foreign was superior and that which was indigenously Mexican was inferior. During this era, French cooking held pride of place among the powers-that-be.

The nationalist reaction to this ideology began in the 1890s and culminated in the embrace of all aspects of Mexican culture by the victors of the 1910-1916 Mexican Revolution. In this construct, Mexicans learned to take pride in all aspects of their cultures and the indigenous heritage was embraced as enthusiastically as that of Europe. In the best selling and still-in-print 1946 cookbook entitled *Regional Cooking of the Mexican Republic*, Josefina Vasquez de Leon published the first complete collection of México's regional recipes and included numerous courses that never would have appeared on Porfirian dining table.

During the twentieth century, several other interesting trends emerged. First, the industrialization of food production accelerated. The *tortillas* whose creation once required hundred of hours per household each year now could be bought ready-made in plastic bags at the store and kept in a refrigerator; the *moles* that took hours to cook now could be poured out of a tin can; and the *bolillos* (rolls) picked up at the bakery every morning rapidly gave way to the *pan de caja*, or bread in a wrapper stored on the shelf. While many traditionalists mourned the decline of traditional cooking, I doubt most of them would have been willing to spend the time necessary to cook them in the old-fashioned way.

Another noteworthy twentieth century development was the confidence with which Mexicans adopted foreign dishes to their own tastes. Instead of accepting Eggs Benedict or Eggs Florentine without question or instead of simply rejecting them as foreign, Mexican chefs invented new ways of preparing eggs. *Huevos a la ranchera* (ranch style eggs) and *huevos mexicanos* (Mexican eggs) appeared on countless menus and they remain there to this day.

Also, the brewing of beer, begun in the late nineteenth became a major industry. In 1865, one of the nation's two major brewers was founded with the help of German immigrants who settled in the Monterrey. There, Wilhelm Hasse and Joseph Schnaider joined with two of the city's most prominent businessmen, Isaac Garza and Francisco Sada, to found the Cuauhtémoc Brewery. This firm produces the Tecate, Bohemia, Dos Equis, Sol, Sol Brava, Carta Blanca, Noche Buena, Indio and Casta brands. Most of these are lagers, with the exception of Bohemia, which is a pilsner beer and has won more awards than any other Mexican beer. Their descendents recently sold the company to a Dutch brewer, Heineken.

Their larger competitor, Grupo Modelo, holds sixty-three per cent of the domestic market and produces eight beers: Corona, Victoria, Pacifico, Negro Modelo, Modelo Especial, Modelo Light, Estrella and León in addition to the Anheuser-Busch products Mexicans can be persuaded to drink. With the exception of Estrella and León; all of these are lagers of one type or another. By contrast, the Estrella is a pilsner beer and León is bittersweet.

Another modern aspect of Mexican cuisine is the success with which some of its creations have been successfully transplanted. In the United States, salsa now outsells ketchup, the familiar ears of corn smothered in mayonnaise known as *elotes* are sold at Chicago stadiums alongside hot dogs, and Corona remains the best-selling imported beer in the United States.

Conversely, American fast food franchises in México have established quite a presence. In my favorite section of México City there is a Kentucky Fried Chicken store two blocks from a traditional *rostería* (roastery). At the *rostería*, some 120 chickens rotate slowly on a dozen skewers. After considerable time, the whole chicken is taken down and sold in amounts of one chicken, half a chicken, or a quarter of a chicken. For about two dollars, I still can buy half a chicken accompanied by beans, rice, and a drink. The meat is very juicy with most of the fat having fallen off into the fire and the beans and rice are nutritious.

By contrast, the KFC outlet charged twice as much for less meat than does the *rostería* and that meat seems to contain far more fat and grease than does the *rostería's*. Yet the KFC had far more customers than the *rostería* and I remained convinced that they, like McDonalds, appeal to people not by virtue of the quality of their food or its taste, but simply because they are foreign. Sadly, the crowds at the fast food chains appear about two decades younger than those of us at the *rostería*. This does not bode well for the future.

However, the street vendors who cook all sorts of authentic items for hundreds of thousands of people each day are doing quite a business and that bodes very well for the future. There are the latest of many generations of Mexicans who have sold fresh food to pedestrians. A wide variety of lunches and dinners are sold from these carts. Many belong to restaurants whose owners see a cart or a sidewalk counter as a way to sell food people who do not have the time or inclination to sit down.

In conclusion, Mexican cooking, like so much of Mexican cultures, remains a mixture in which the oldest traditions are combined with the new ones, both foreign and domestic, to create a cuisine uniquely Mexican.