

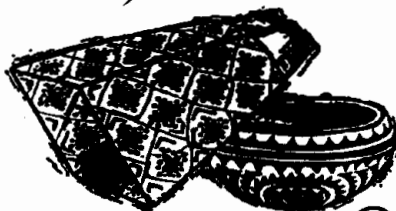


Simple Cooking

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FOUR DOLLARS

LETTER FROM MEXICO



FRUITS OF THE OVEN

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SUNDAYS ARE BUSY DAYS IN MEXICO. Everyone goes to the center of town to attend mass, see friends, and buy a few things for the big meal at mid-afternoon. This Sunday in May, the hottest month of the year, was no exception. At noontime the town square, shaded by the Indian laurels that no town square in Mexico is without, was thronged with people. I joined them, lining up for the fruit drinks, the *aguas frescas* of jamaica (pronounced "hah-my-kah," made from the dried calyxes of hibiscus flowers), lime, rice, and tamarind—gleaming crimson, lime green, milky white, and chestnut brown—in big glass barrels. I wandered round the stands selling ices, freshly frozen that morning in metal buckets floating in barrels of ice. And I approached the mother and daughter selling small *frutas de horno*, fruits of the oven, from a table covered with a plastic tablecloth.

Frutas de horno are pastries. Some are puff pastries: *campechanas*, layers sprinkled with sugar, and *gasznates*, cylinders with a white or pink filling, rolled in sugar. Others are more like cookies: *coronitas*, a scone-shaped pastry with a white or pink topping, or *polveroncitos*, a little like what we call Mexican wedding cookies. And then there are turnovers, *empanadas* in Spanish, filled with fruit conserves or spicy minced meat, and sponge cupcakes, called *mamomes*, breasts.

I had come to Comonfort to learn more about *frutas de horno*. Comonfort is a small town on the high central plateau of Mexico. It differs from dozens of others, if at all, only in that it is slightly wealthier. A river, a rarity in these parts, runs through it. It was probably the water that attracted the pre-Hispanic peoples who built a small pyramid on a hill just out of town, though it's never been investigated because Mexico is burdened with more ruins than its archaeologists can deal with.

It must have been the water that made the Spanish settle here. Haciendas ruined in the Mexican Revolution are scattered all through the valley. It is

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certainly the water that accounts for the prosperous farms around town that grow garlic for export to the US. And all this means that people have money for pastries. I bought a few from the women at the stand and asked where I might find out more.

They sent me off to their family home. I walked the better part of a mile through the streets. On each side, blank walls bounced sun off the plastered façades. Young men off to see their girlfriends and young wives hurrying covered dishes for their mother-in-law's Sunday meal hugged the sliver of shade on one side of the street. So did I as I scanned an iron garage door here, a front room converted into a shop there, in search of 125A.

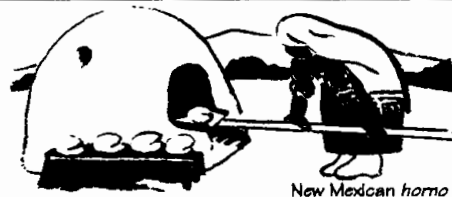
A small girl let me in and asked me to sit down while she fetched her father, the pastry maker. There were no windows and the floor was tiled so it was deliciously cool, if a little on the murky side. I groped for a chair. It was part of a modern overstuffed three-piece suite arranged around a plastic and glass coffee table, the other objects in the room being two bicycles propped in one corner and a couple of sacks of flour in another. After about five minutes, Señor Rafael Centeño bustled in and shook hands. As soon as he heard I was interested in his pastries, he began dictating recipes as he disappeared through the door to the back of the house. Within seconds, he emerged with a plastic plate of samples covered with a paper napkin.

I asked if he could show me where he made his ware. He led me down a dark corridor past one, or possibly two, rooms on the left, emerging in the kitchen that stretched, like the front room, the width of the house. The window at the back let onto a small patio dominated by a portly rubber tree. It let in so little light that it was a few seconds before I could make out the freestanding kitchen cupboards of the kind that were popular in the United States in the 1930s, the small gas stove, and the large wooden table, perhaps five feet by three feet.

Gesturing, Señor Centeño showed me how he piled the flour on the table, added the sugar and shortening, mixed it all in various proportions, with or without water and spices depending on the pastry. He always used vegetable shortening. Some of his relatives had gone over to oil, but their pastries tasted rancid within the day.

He had no mixer. For mixing large quantities of egg and sugar, he used a handheld beater. For making powdered sugar, he poured granulated sugar into a blender—standard equipment in even the humblest of Mexican kitchens. For rolling out pastries, he had a homemade pin about one inch in diameter, and for cutting them, an old saw blade. He told me that when he made flaky pastry, he needed the entire table surface—he cut off the surplus that fell over the edges. His wife made the white and pink fillings and toppings (*pastas*) by cooking a sweetened flour paste (*pasta*) in a great copper cauldron that was balanced in a hole in the typical brick counter stove.

He led me across the patio, dodging the rubber tree, to see the real oven, the *horno*, where the baking was done. He had built it himself, he said, following the traditional methods. He had begun by using local single-fired bricks to construct the walls of the base, about five feet square and something over three feet high. Then he filled it: first went in a layer of earth, then a layer of gravel, and then a layer of granulated salt to hold the heat. He sealed it with *baldosa* (flooring tile or stone). Now came the tricky part. He used more bricks, mortaring them in ever-diminishing circles without any scaffolding (as we popularly suppose igloos are constructed), until the dome was complete. He covered it with a smooth layer of cement.



Mopping sweat from his face, Señor Centeño explained that he spent the first two days of each week collecting firewood from the orchard behind the house. He dried it in the residual heat of the oven. On baking days, he got up about three in the morning. He stacked logs in the center of the oven and lit them with newspaper. In half an hour the oven was hot and the logs crumbling down to ashes. He used a long oar-shaped peel to sweep the ashes to the front left corner of the *horno*. Then he inserted the trays of pastries he had prepared in the meantime. He watched carefully as they baked and then slid them out and stacked them on homemade bamboo shelves to cool.

If he got up at three, he could have all his baking done (at least three hundred flaky pastries, not counting the others) by about ten in the morning, ready to take to market. He wrapped them in clean tea towels, arranged them in baskets and trays, and packed them into the large square superstructure welded on the front of his bicycle. From ten to four he went back and forth to the market, replenishing the stall that his daughters tended. At four, the family ate dinner, and then he collapsed in bed.

Tour completed, Señor Centeño pushed his bicycle out again and I took my leave clutching the plate of pastries. I'd love to say they were the best I've ever tasted. Like all of us, I want to believe that small artisans turn out something better than our modern kitchens. But that's not always true, and it wasn't in this case. I'm used to light and tender pastries and to frostings richer than a flour and water paste flavored with a little sugar. Those are luxuries beyond the means of bakeries in small Mexican towns—and of their customers. So although I liked the simplest flaky pastries, the rest were, to my pampered taste, so-so.

The taste might not have been overwhelming, but the echoes of the past were. Señor Centeño built his oven according to techniques that went back to Roman times, taken to Spain in antiquity and to Mexico with the conquistadors. For all those centuries, bakers—and their customers—believed that such ovens, in which flour and water miraculously rose by the action of yeast or air or eggs were imitation wombs. They had in mind the womb of the earth that—warmed by the heat of the sun—created the fruits of the earth. And just as important, the womb of the mother that—fired by her internal heat—brought to full growth the embryo, the fruit of the loin. Fruits of the oven are our puny attempt to imitate Mother and Mother Nature.

Rachel Laudan has written several books on food history. Her book on fusion foods of Hawaii, *THE FOOD OF PARADISE: EXPLORING HAWAII'S CULINARY HERITAGE*, won the Julia Child Jane Grigson prize in 1997, and her article on the origins of modern French cookery won the Sophie Coe prize for the best food history essay in 1998. Currently she is working on a book about world food history.

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