



VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 2 SPRING 2003

Repast

Quarterly Newsletter of the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor

WHERE DO MEXICAN CULINARY TRADITIONS COME FROM ?

or

“WE NEVER ATE MEXICAN FOOD”

by Rachel Laudan

Dr. Rachel Laudan is a well-known and widely-published food historian who lives in Guanajuato, Mexico. She grew up in England, where she was trained in the history and philosophy of science. Among many academic appointments, for several years Prof. Laudan taught courses in the history of science and technology and in the world history of food at the University of Hawaii. She spoke to CHAA in October 1996 shortly after publishing her award-winning book, The Food of Paradise: Exploring Hawaii's Culinary Heritage. She can be reached at rlaudan@webtelmex.net.mx.

“What you have to realize, Rachel,” said María Dolores Yzabal, good friend of Diana Kennedy and author of the highly regarded *Mexican Gourmet* (1995), “is that when I was growing up we never ate Mexican food.” The foremost Mexico City gourmets of the previous generation, assembled round the table in the antique-filled dining room of the city’s most prominent caterer Victor Nava, nodded in agreement.

Lula Bertrán, a key proponent of Mexican food, had organized the get-together so that the cuisine of mid-20th-Century Mexico City could be set on record. Lila Lomeli, gastronomic writer and investigator, Graciela Flores, author of the leading text for Mexican culinary schools (classic French cooking, of course), José Jorge Lopez Paez, the well-known novelist, and Guillermina de Martino, who acted as hostess for the Presidents of Mexico, all repeated the claim. This group of Mexicans did not come from the kind of families who ate Mexican food.

This was confirmation of what I had suspected for some time. Well-to-do Mexicans in the past did not eat what we think of as Mexican food. That they did not eat anything like Tex-Mex or Cal-Mex is not so surprising. But perhaps what is less widely recognized is that they did not eat anything like what I am learning to call “Interior Mexican”—the food made famous by such well-known authorities as Diana Kennedy, Rick Bayless, and Zarela Martínez. Many of them still do not. One

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friend, Patricia Begne, a lawyer specializing in women’s rights, never serves corn *tortillas* at home. Another friend, Godfrey Guillamin, who teaches philosophy at the University of Guanajuato, never touches chiles.

Randy Schwartz’s kind invitation to contribute to this newsletter offers me a splendid opportunity to muse with fellow culinary historians about some puzzles in the history of Mexican food. Please understand that all that I write is tentative and that I would love to receive comments and questions.

The Vogue for French Food

Obviously the first question is what did well-to-do Mexicans eat? The answer to that is clear. Throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries, they ate French food. In this they were just like the élite throughout the rest of the world. French food, like the French language, was a badge of belonging to the upper class from St. Petersburg to San Francisco, from Tokyo to Rio de Janeiro. If anything, the Mexicans were more Francophile than other peoples. French ideas and institutions became the official model for a Mexico that wanted little to do with Spain, the United States or England and that wanted to take its place amongst the most prosperous and sophisticated nations in the world. Although the French attempt to install Maximilian as Emperor of Mexico in the 1860s led to political disaster, it reinforced France’s cultural supremacy in Mexico. This lasted at least a hundred years. Only in the present generation has English replaced French as the second language of well-to-do Mexicans.

The Francophilia was reflected in the cuisine of Mexico. A Spanish translation of Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiologie de Gout* (1826) was published in Mexico City in 1852. The famous French chef Jules Gouffé (1807-1877) spent several years working at the Jockey Club in Mexico City. Until very recently, many cookbooks such as Luisa De Calderon’s *Técnicas de la Alta Cocina* (1979) offered French food with an occasional Mexican touch. Single women from well-to-do families made a living instructing the daughters of their compatriots in French cooking. After marriage, these young ladies were well-prepared to supervise their cooks. Consequently generations of Mexican

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servants became skilled in French cooking.

Far from being regarded as un-Mexican, French cooking was one part of a strategy to bring Mexico to its desired and deserved level in the world of nations. A telling story illustrates this. In 1876, the long presidency of Porfirio Díaz began, surviving until 1911, and bringing a period of stability to the country after many years of coups and foreign invasions. To show the deep historical roots of the Mexican nation, Díaz ordered the excavation of the pyramids at Teotihuacán just north of Mexico City. If you go there today, one of the few places to escape the scorching sun and muscle-aching ascents and descents of the ruins is a cave about half a mile from the largest pyramid. Today this huge lava tube going deep into the earth houses an enormous two-level restaurant. Hung on the uneven walls are photographs of the presidential dinner held there to celebrate the excavation. Díaz and a multitude of other dignitaries gaze at the camera. Seated at tables covered with snowy white linens and laid for a formal French meal, the diners wear formal morning dress or dinner jackets. Not a sign of the indigenous is to be seen.

Two Different Nations, Two Different Diets

It might be tempting to conclude that the vogue for French food was simply an interruption in the mixing of Spanish and indigenous cuisines. That is certainly the story that is endlessly repeated today. But it won't do. In the three centuries between the Conquest and the French culinary epoch, the élite ate the cosmopolitan food of the Hapsburg Empire that in the 16th Century stretched from Spain to southern Italy, Austro-Hungary, the Low Countries and parts of Germany. Although in 1519 Cortéz and his men reported glowingly on the sophisticated cooking of the Aztec élite, they were quick to get

rid of it. By 1538, when Cortéz and the new Viceroy from Spain gave a feast in honor of Charles V's peace treaty with France, they served a complete Hapsburg meal: roasted kids and hams, quail pies, stuffed fowl and pigeons, *blancmange*, and *escabeche* of chicken, partridge, and quail. Birds and rabbits hopped out of great pies, the beaks of the roast birds were gilded, ladies nibbled on candied fruits, comfits and marzipan, and the three-day celebration finished with olives, cheese, cardoons and (the one concession to New Spain) native fruits. The publication of Francisco Motino Martínez's *Arte de Cozina* (1623) provided cooks in New Spain with inspiration for the next couple of centuries. They turned out raised wheat bread, stewed meats spiced with costly black pepper, cinnamon, and cloves, and delicate confections of sugar, nuts, fruits and egg yolks, all typical of Hapsburg cuisine.

The division between the foods of the upper classes and the foods of the poor mirrored the basic division of the New Spain into two "republics," the republic of the Spanish and the republic of the Indians. As the Crown granted permission for the settlement of the country, it designated two kinds of urban areas: the towns (*villas*) of the Spanish and the towns (*pueblos*) of the indigenous. The Spanish, as we have seen, ate Hapsburg food. The indigenous continued to eat corn *tortillas*, beans, and chiles.

In the convents, an important civilizing and culinary force in New Spain, the pattern was repeated. To be a nun, not only did you have to be literate and numerate but you also had to be Spanish. The nuns, whose chief duty was to sing the praises of God, also undertook charitable and educational duties. More important for culinary history, they ran the large institutional kitchens that were part of every convent. These kitchens turned out meals for the nuns, often very frugal at least in fasting periods, but invariably accompanied by white bread. The nuns provided what were essentially catering services, creating meals in the Hapsburg tradition, including versions of the famous *mole*, for their benefactors and for feasts for town dignitaries on the festival day of the patron saint of the convent.

Every nun, at least in most of the convents, had her own servant and, in addition, there were servants who worked for the convent as a whole. Servants, never Spanish but always indigenous, were essential. Preparing flour for bread and spices for main dishes meant grinding wheat and whole spices on grindstones, something Spanish ladies did not do. The servants, though, did not eat the results of their labors. They had corn *tortillas*, beans, and chiles. Within the convents, the culinary spearhead of New Spain, the sharp division between the meals of two races and two classes continued.

Four Forces That Shaped Mexican Taste

So where did the Mexican food that we learn from Diana Kennedy, Rick Bayless, and Zarela Martínez come from? It's a complex question and I'm not sure that I yet understand the story. I believe, though, that four forces have played a role: nationalism, provincial pride, a nexus of children and servants, and the interest of foreigners.

The role of **nationalism** in creating Mexican food has been well explored by Jeff Pilcher in *¡Que Vivan*

Los Tamales! (1998). Nationalist sentiment originated no later than the 18th Century as Mexican-born Spaniards (*criollos*) began to assert their difference from the Peninsular Spaniards. Although the *mole* created in the convents had Hapsburg and ultimately Arab origins, it was reinvented in Mexico in the 18th Century as a *criollo* answer to Hapsburg cuisine.* After independence was wrested from Spain in 1821, *chiles en nogada* (*poblano* chiles stuffed with pork meat *picadillo*, topped with walnut sauce and sprinkled with flat-leaf parsley and pomegranate seeds) became a national symbol, its green, white, and red colors echoing those of the Mexican flag.

To heal the wounds of the Mexican Revolution, a bloody civil war that began in 1910 and petered out at the beginning of the 1930s, intellectuals and artists, such as the archeologist Manuel Gamio, the politician, philosopher and historian José Vasconcelas, the film maker Emilio "El Indio" Fernández, and the muralists, created the movement known as *mestizaje*. According to this, Mexico's strength and identity derived from its mixing of Spanish and indigenous resources. In defiance of historical reality, they celebrated Mexican food as a prime example of *mestizaje*. Just as Paris-trained Diego Rivera painted murals of Indians harvesting maize, so his wife the painter Frida Kahlo, the granddaughter of Jewish immigrants, dressed in Indian costume and served *tortillas* and *tamales*, welcoming Trotsky to Mexico with a feast served in peasant bowls with spoons on the side. Even the group of Mexico City gourmets admitted that as a sign of patriotism their families did serve Mexican dishes on national holidays.

In the **provinces** the French influence, although always present, was muted compared to the cosmopolitan capital. In the dignified and ceremonious settings of provincial towns such as Oaxaca, Puebla, Morelia, and Querétaro, middle-class families, even those with Spanish or French origins, had begun creating a bourgeois Mexican cuisine no later than the 19th Century and probably much earlier. Like the families in the capitals they employed cooks, teaching them the dishes they loved, and jotting down notes in a wealth of manuscript cookbooks. In the 1940s, the indefatigable cooking teacher and cookbook author Josefina Velasquez de León began collecting the provincial recipes that form the core of the corpus we now call Mexican cooking.

Servants from the countryside thus learnt, in convents or in households, the dishes of the *criollo* middle class. These dishes often had roots in Hapsburg and Arab cuisine but they had been modified by Mexican techniques: the use of some local ingredients such as chiles and fruits, the grinding of grains, seeds and other ingredients on a grindstone, the toasting of tomatoes, onions, chiles, and garlic on a griddle. Servants, I suspect, did a great deal to disseminate Mexican bourgeois cooking. They doubtless took much of what they had learnt back to their villages, enriching the simple peasant food of corn *tortillas*, beans, chiles and cactus products. They or their children moved to big cities, even to Mexico City. The Mexico City gourmets told me that their families picked servants known to come from regions that had a flourishing bourgeois

cuisine. They were unanimous that they were introduced to Mexican cooking by the servants, not by their parents, reporting with glee how they snuck into the kitchen to get tastes of the servants' food.

Finally, from the late 1960s or early 1970s **foreigners** became entranced with Mexican bourgeois cooking. The Spaniard Josefina Howard, who came to love Mexico's food while working as an interior decorator, was later to found the restaurant Rosa Mexicana in New York and write a fine memoir cookbook by the same name. The American Thomas Gilliland tasted Mexican food in San Angel Inn, one of the few restaurants in Mexico City that served it, and returned to Austin, Texas to found Fonda San Miguel. The Englishwoman, Elisabeth Lambert, married Mexican diplomat César Ortiz-Tinoco and went on to write *The Complete Book of Mexican Cooking* in 1967. And fast on her heels followed another Englishwoman, Diana Kennedy, who published *The Cuisines of Mexico* in 1972 and who for this, and her continued advocacy of Mexican food, was awarded the Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest honor given to foreigners in Mexico.

The Culinary Scene Today

Many of the Mexico City gourmets that I met moved smoothly from their backgrounds in high French cuisine to become promoters of Mexican food. They founded a support group for the *mayoras* (majors), the female cooks who in general substitute for male chefs in Mexican kitchens. They dug up recipes for foreign authors such as Diana Kennedy. They and others have advised on restaurants in Mexico City and abroad. Lila Lomeli has taken over the management of Rosa Mexicana in New York. And they wrote their own cookbooks such as María Dolores Yzabal's *Mexican Gourmet*, already mentioned.

Even today, though, the cuisines of the rich and the poor in Mexico are worlds apart. The poor continue to eat corn *tortillas*, beans, and chiles. The rich, even though they include Mexican food in their repertoire, eat the international and ethnic cuisine that is displacing French High Cuisine as the élite preference. A young couple who live down the hill from me reported how they sought out ethnic restaurants. They regularly drive the forty miles to the nearest big city, León, for a choice of Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Argentinian, Brazilian, Lebanese, or good old Tony Roma's for Ribs. Mexican middle class housewives take Italian cooking classes and go to Italian restaurants with their families. Teenagers demand sushi. Their parents pick up Viennese-style cakes and pastries from the venerable bakery chain, El Globo. Lula Bertrán, who had arranged the meeting of Mexico City gourmets, had welcomed me on my previous visit: "Where do you want to eat, Rachel?" she asked. "Since you know Mexico, we don't have to choose Mexican. What about the new Japanese place in Polanco (an upmarket section of Mexico City). Or the great new French bistro I've heard about?"

And should we be surprised? It is all too easy to divide the culinary universe into two worlds. In one world—the United States and perhaps England—westerners eat modern western food. In the other, people still eat their traditional ethnic foods. But if the above speculations are correct, the division is nothing like that stark. ■

* In the notion of *mole* as a symptom of *criollo* nationalism, I depart from an article I wrote with Jeff Pilcher, "Chiles, Chocolate and Race in New Spain: Glancing Backward to Spain or Looking Forward to Mexico?," *The Cultural Topography of Food* focus issue, *Eighteenth-Century Life* 23 (1999), 59-70.