



Culinary Treasures of Mexico

The last few years have seen a quantum leap in America's understanding of Mexican cuisine. In the seventies, we "discovered" tacos, burritos, and salsa. In the eighties, we learned that salsa could be *verde* as well as *rojo*, and in the nineties we proudly added the exotic *mole* to our culinary vocabulary. Thankfully, an influx of superior Mexican restaurants have brought the fresh, vibrant, and satisfying foods of this region north of the border, and Americans are now becoming aware of how wonderfully diverse Mexican cuisine really is.

While tortillas are indeed a staple of the Mexican diet, they are no more the essence of Mexican cooking than bread is the essence of our own. Tacos, burritos, tostados and the like are comparable to sandwiches or hamburgers here – simple foods that can be absolutely delicious, but not what you'd eat in a fine restaurant, and rarely what you'd call a meal at home. In essence, these are Mexican street foods, and what's more, they're the street foods of one region (the northern border states) in this large and various country. To the extent that one can generalize about Mexican cuisine, it is characterized by abundant and superior fresh ingredients as well as loving, labor-intensive preparation. But regional cooking is the real key to Mexico's culinary landscape; the nation's 32 states each have their own staples, styles, and specialties.

Regional Cuisines: Beyond the Burrito

Two hours south of Mexico City lies Puebla, the colonial city where mole originated. Legend has it that a local order of nuns developed the recipe by emptying their pantry into a pot, combining herbs, spices, and cocoa and simmering the blend to create a wonderfully thick and infinitely complex sauce that they served over turkey. Today, every Mexican chef has his own *mole* recipe; some include as many as 30 different ingredients, and the results are correspondingly diverse, hitting notes from sweet to spicy to smoky. (*Mole Oaxaqueno*, for example, sweetens things up with the addition of bananas.) Puebla is also renowned for desserts like the sweet potato confection *camote* and its pastry shops are almost as common as churches.

In the Yucatan, land of the Maya, fruit-based sauces predominate, and the vibrant cuisine is notably less fiery than in other parts of Mexico. A typical dish is chicken or pork baked in a banana leaf with a mouthwatering mix of red annatto seeds, Seville oranges, pepper, garlic and cumin. Fish is the specialty of seaside Veracruz, where the eponymous sauce covers all manner of the ocean's bounty with a piquant mix of tomatoes, olives, capers, and chillies. Exotic fruits like *guanabana*, *mamey*, and *cherimoya* are other highlights of the region.

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Michoacán is renowned throughout Mexico for its fruits and vegetables, and a cuisine that is characterized by rich, mellow flavors rather than spice. The traditional *churipo* is a stew of beef, chicken, and pork with sour cactus fruit and *ancho* chiles. *Sopa Tarasca* is a regional soup of pureed beans, *guajillo* chiles, cream and the distinctive herb *epazote*. Nutty cream sauces, wild game, and an enormous variety of *agues frescas* – sweet and semi-sweet fruity drinks – are all a part of the local bill of fare.

National Specialties

In addition to *mole*, Mexicans are justifiably proud of many of their native dishes, and Mexican chefs – at home and abroad – continue to work new variations on these classics, expanding upon a vibrant culinary tradition and winning legions of fans worldwide. National specialties include *pozole*, a deliciously thick and comforting hominy and pork soup; *barbacoa*, or barbecued lamb, served with a variety of sauces; *chiles en nogada*, large *poblano* chiles stuffed with beef or cheese, raisins, onions, olives, and almonds, and topped with a creamy walnut sauce and pomegranate seeds; *sopa azteca*, a soup of avocado, chunks of chicken, and tortilla in broth; *huitlacoche*, a cooked corn fungus with a mushroom-y taste that is incorporated into many dishes and served in *crepas*; and a full range of savory small-dish *antojitos*, comparable to Spanish tapas.

The Mexican Market

The market, or *mercado*, is both the culinary and social center of Mexican life, a combination food hall, discount store, and meeting place. Every small Mexican town has at least one market; in larger cities, each neighborhood has a street market on a different day of the week and there are multiple permanent indoor markets. Colorful, lively, and exuberantly eclectic, the Mexican market offers everything from fresh fruits and vegetables, to fish and meat, to fresh and dried herbs and spices, to pastries and sweets, to all manner of chiles, to clothing, trinkets, toys, and household goods. Strolling through a Mexican market is perhaps the ultimate way to experience this country and the bounty of excellent food it has to offer.

Fiestas and Other Celebrations

The Mexican love of celebration combines two of the defining aspects of Mexican life: family and food. Markets are transformed with the approach of national holidays in preparation for the extravagant feasts to come. Author and chef Patricia Quintana, “the Julia Child of Mexico,” has written about this aspect of the culture in *Mexico’s Feasts of Life*, and traveled to fine Mexican restaurants like New York City’s Rosa Mexicano to prepare special Day of the Dead feasts. Food is a particularly important part of this unique holiday; in addition to the candied skulls for which it is famous, elaborate meals are prepared to entice the spirits of the departed to return – and to provide earthly comfort to the living.

The Day of the Dead is, of course, the most fundamentally Mexican of celebrations, and offers rare insight into the Mexican character as it relates to food. Perhaps no other culture in the world better understands the central relationship between food and wellbeing, and between meals and familial love.

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It's no surprise, then, that Mexican cuisine, in all its infinite complexity, is "heating up" throughout North America – and even attracting new attention across the Atlantic.

Modern Mexican Cuisine

Today, restaurants from Mexico City to Los Angeles to New York serve modern Mexican cuisine, which often pairs the hearty characteristics of authentic Mexican cuisine with European techniques for a modern direction for Mexican food. Creating a balance of contrasting flavors, restaurants such as Maya in San Francisco to Tamayo in Denver embrace the delicious principles of modern Mexican cuisine and help to reflect the modern vibrancy of Mexico.