

Dining in the Aztec Empire



At the time of the Spanish conquest (1519-1521) the Aztec Empire was at its height. Its military and economic power extended from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico and Guatemala. Emperor Moctezuma II (1466-1520) ruled from the capital of Tenochtitlan (today, downtown Mexico City) – one of the largest cities in the world, with several hundred thousand people and another million or so in the surrounding cities.

When the Spaniards made their way to Tenochtitlan from present-day Veracruz under Hernán Cortés (1485-1547), they were astonished by the foods and luxury goods found in its thriving markets. Corn, chocolate, squash, beans, avocados and a vast array of chiles and spices did not exist in the Old World. They discovered a life centered on home and hearth. Women prepared food, wove cloth, harvested and processed maguey sap, and sold their wares in the markets. Men farmed, labored as construction workers and performed military service. Both men and women made daily offerings of food, incense and prayer to the gods.

Though no cookbooks were written during the pre-colonial and colonial times (the first Mexican cookbook doesn't appear until the late nineteenth century), culinary observations are documented in the diaries of missionaries. The most notable of these is *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España (General History of the Things of New Spain)*, or the Florentine Codex by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590). Regarded as the father of ethnography and one of the first culinary historians, he began collecting material on the Aztecs from native informants and illustrating and recording their culture in Spanish, Nahuatl (the Aztec language) and Latin. This codex gives us exhaustive lists illustrating food and dining in sixteenth century Mexico.

Tour *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of the Empire*, prepare a meal using New World ingredients and celebrate the bicentennial of Mexican independence.

¡Buen provecho!

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Images from left to right:

Squash vessels from Colima, Mexico, 200 BC – 500 AD, clay, LACMA; Map of The Aztec Empire in 1521; Woman cooking maize, from the Florentine Codex, 1575-77

Ensalada de Maíz con Calabaza Corn and Zucchini Salad

The life force of the Americas, there is evidence that maize (corn) has been domesticated in Mexico for over 10,000 years. The Aztecs grew over 760 species of squash. The Spaniards made conserves with it – a Middle Eastern tradition of cooking fruits in sugar syrup.

5 ears of corn, shucked
2 cups zucchini, finely diced
1 tablespoon butter *
¼ cup red onion *
3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar *
3 tablespoons olive oil *
½ cup cilantro, chopped
salt and pepper

1. In a large pot of boiling salted water, cook the corn for 3 minutes. Drain and immerse in ice water to stop the cooking. When cool, cut the kernels off the cob, cutting close to the cob.
2. Sauté the zucchini in butter over medium high heat until tender, about 4 minutes. Set aside.
3. Toss the kernels and zucchini in a large bowl with the red onions, vinegar, olive oil, salt, and pepper. Just before serving, toss in the cilantro. Taste, adjust seasoning and serve cold or at room temperature.

Serves 6

* Old World ingredients

Ensalada de Camaron con Nopales Shrimp and Cactus Salad

Sahagún describes the young stems or paddles of the cactus as eaten raw or cooked. Lake shrimp, fish, frogs and tadpoles were popular among the Aztecs. He goes on to describe jícama as almost always eaten raw and praised for its cool crispness.

There are three species of cultivated chiles in ancient America, one of which was found in Mexico, wild, in cultural deposits in the Tehuacan valley dating from 7200 to 5200 BC. The use of chiles in the New World was not confined to food. Chile smoke was used as a fumigant, as a means of chemical warfare, and the Aztecs disciplined their children with it! The word "tomatl," in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, means something round and plump, and was used for many fruits.

1 pound cactus paddles
2 cloves garlic, minced *
2 medium tomatoes, diced small
1 small onion, diced small
½ jícama, diced small
2 serrano peppers, finely chopped
¼ cup cilantro, finely chopped
3 tablespoons lime juice *
salt to taste
1 pound shrimp

1. If necessary, use a small sharp knife to remove any residual thorns or nodules from the cactus leaves. Dice the cactus into ½ x ½-inch pieces and blanch in boiling water for 5 to 7 minutes or until tender. Drain and rinse thoroughly under cold water. Place in a bowl.
2. Simmer the shrimp in water until pink. Drain under cold water and coarsely chop.
3. Add the shrimp and remaining ingredients to the cactus. Taste, adjust seasoning, chill and serve.

Serves 6 to 8

* Old World ingredients

Guacamole

Of Aztec origin, avocados were originally valued for their high fat and vitamin content. The word guacamole comes from the Nahuatl word "ahuaca-mulli" – a combination of "ahuacatl" (avocado) and "mulli" (sauce). It was referred to as the "poor man's butter" by the Spanish conquistadors.

3 large ripe avocados

salt

3 tablespoons lime juice

1. Cut the avocado in half by first making a cut down the length of the avocado straight through to the pit. Continue cutting all the way around the pit until you wind up where you started. Twist the two halves in opposite directions and pull them apart. Scoop out the pit with a spoon. Then scoop out the avocado flesh from the skin and add it to a bowl. Do the same with the remaining avocados.
2. Using a potato masher, or the back of a large spoon or fork, mash the avocado flesh into a pulp.
3. Season the guacamole with the lime juice and salt. Start by adding a teaspoon of salt. Taste and continue seasoning with lime juice and salt until the guacamole tastes just as you like it.
4. Cover by placing plastic wrap directly on the surface of the guacamole and refrigerate until you are ready to serve.

Makes about 2 ½ cups

Pozole de Pavo

Turkey and Hominy Stew

Turkeys were the most important domesticated bird of the Aztec empire. There were religious festivals held twice a year honoring them. Eggshells from which the chicks had hatched were saved throughout the year and, at dawn on the day of the festival, were spread on roads and streets in memory of the goodness of the god who had given them fowl. In the markets of Tepeyacac, one of several suburban markets around Tenochtitlan, eight thousand turkeys were sold every five days. According to Cortés, turkeys were not only for human consumption, but also used to feed the animals in Moctezuma's zoo.

For the stew:

3 lbs turkey legs or breasts
water
1 head garlic, peeled
1 large white onion, quartered
handful dried oregano
5 dried ancho chiles, stemmed and seeded
5 dried pasilla or guajillo chiles, stemmed and seeded
4 cups hominy, rinsed and drained
salt

For the accompaniments:

4 limes, cut into wedges
6 cups thinly sliced cabbage or lettuce *
15 radishes, thinly sliced *
6 tablespoons dried Mexican oregano
tostadas

1. Bring the turkey with enough water to cover to a boil in a large pot, skimming froth, then reduce heat to a simmer. Add 2 tablespoons salt, onion, garlic and oregano. Partially cover and simmer over medium-low heat until the meat is tender. Remove the meat from the broth, let cool, shred and set aside.
2. Strain broth and return to the pot. Transfer the cooked onion and garlic to a blender with 1 ½ cups of the broth. Puree until smooth and add to broth.
3. While the meat is cooking, stem and seed the chiles and rehydrate them in enough hot water to cover – keeping them submerged – for about 20 minutes.
4. Puree the chiles with 1 ½ cups water. Add the pureed chiles, shredded meat and hominy to the broth and simmer for about 5 minutes.

5. Taste, adjust seasoning and serve hot with tostadas, shredded lettuce, radishes, oregano and lime wedges.

Serves 8 to 10

* Old World ingredients

Frijoles Negros

Black Beans

When combined with corn, beans provided the necessary protein to the diet of the Americas. The conquistadors embraced beans, immediately equated them with Old World lentils and garbanzos.

1 pound black beans
2 ½ quarts water
½ yellow onion
3 garlic cloves
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon chicken bouillon
handful fresh parsley, cilantro or epazote*
salt

1. Rinse beans well to remove any stones or debris. Pour into a heavy pot, add water and all other ingredients and bring to a roaring boil. Reduce heat and simmer. Partially cover pot and cook until beans are tender (1 ½ to 2 hours).
2. Stir the beans every 15 minutes or so to make sure that none are sticking to the bottom of the pot and that the water still covers the beans, allowing them to more or less float freely. Add additional water if necessary.

To refry:

1. Strain the beans and save the broth. Place beans in a blender and puree, adding a little broth at a time.
2. Heat olive oil in a sauté pan, add the beans and cook until thickened to the consistency of soft mashed potatoes, stirring constantly. Taste and add additional salt if necessary.

Makes about 8 cups whole frothy beans or 5 cups refried beans

Serves 6 to 8

* Aztecs used epazote as an essential ingredient in black beans because of its anti-gas properties. Mexican cilantro is more pungent than the Old World equivalent.

Tortillas de Maíz

Corn Tortillas

Fray Bernardino Sahagún kept his observations of the New World in a diary, later published as "Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España (General History of the Things of New Spain)." He describes the Aztec diet as based on corn, tortillas, tamales and a wide variety of chiles. His work is known as the most complete record of Aztec foods and eating habits.

Traditionally, corn tortillas were made by soaking corn kernels in a lime/water solution to remove their skins, and then grinding them into corn dough (masa). A golf ball size piece of dough was patted down by hand into a thin pancake shape. It was then placed onto a hot griddle (comal) and cooked on both sides. This tortilla-making process is still used today.

2 cups *masa harina*
1 ¼ cups hot water
1 teaspoon salt

tortilla press

1. Combine the *masa harina*, salt and about 1 ¼ cups water. Mix for about 2 minutes to form a soft – but not sticky – dough. If it is too dry add more water, a tablespoon at a time.
2. Scoop out pieces of dough and roll them into balls about the size of a ping-pong ball. Cover the balls with a damp cloth while you work to keep the dough moist.
3. Line a tortilla press with plastic wrap.
4. Place each ball in the between the plastic and press, using the handle to flatten the ball into a disk 5 to 6 inches in diameter. Open the press and peel off the pieces of plastic wrap.
5. To cook preheat a skillet, griddle or *comal* on medium-high heat. Place the tortilla on the skillet and cook for about a minute then flip and cook the other side for another minute. At this point the tortilla should puff up.
6. Transfer to a cloth-lined basket and continue making tortillas, stacking them and keeping them covered.

Makes about 16 tortillas

Galletas de Amaranto

Amaranth Cookies

Many Aztec ceremonies involved making an image of the god with ground amaranth, or maize and amaranth, made into a dough with honey or blood. The image was then worshipped, broken up, and eaten by the worshipers, a practice that the Spaniards regarded as a blasphemous parody of the Christian communion. When a baby boy was born, a shield and bow and arrows of amaranth dough were made for him to encourage him in manly pursuits.

Vanilla is a member of the orchid family. The secrets of its cultivation made vanilla a mystery plant to seventeenth and eighteenth century Europeans. The 1779 edition of Diderot's Encyclopedia hints that blood-curdling oaths were sworn by the native inhabitants of Veracruz, Mexico, to prevent the dissemination of their knowledge on the subject.

6 tablespoons vegetable oil
6 tablespoons water
½ cup honey
1 ½ cup amaranth flour
2/3 cup all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon baking soda
¼ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon vanilla extract
2/3 cup bittersweet chocolate chips (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 350° F. Line a baking sheet with parchment.
2. Combine oil, honey and water in small saucepan and heat gently to melt the honey. Remove from heat and set aside to cool. Stir in the vanilla extract.
3. Sift together the amaranth flour, all-purpose flour, baking soda and salt in a bowl.
4. Add the dry ingredients to the honey mixture in batches, mixing well after each addition. If adding chocolate chips, do so now.
5. Roll out dough to about 1/8-inch thick and cut rounds. Place on prepared baking sheet and bake 12-15 minutes, until brown. Let cool before serving.

Makes two dozen

Chocolate Caliente

Hot Chocolate

The "food of the gods," chocolate is native to Mexico where it was consumed by priests and nobility as an unsweetened foamy drink. The Aztecs prepared a highly spiced beverage called "xocoatl," with cocoa beans that were roasted, pounded in a mortar and flavored with chiles, vanilla, annatto, and sometimes honey and dried flowers. Emperor Moctezuma drank 50 cups of chocolate a day from a goblet of solid gold because he believed it made him more charming and attractive to women! Chocolate was introduced to Europe in the sixteenth century and for centuries exclusively consumed by the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Europeans added cinnamon, sugar and rose water to their hot chocolate. It was first used for baking in eighteenth century England.

5 cups milk or water *

2 cups Mexican chocolate (Abuelita or Ibarra brands are good options)

1. In a medium saucepan, combine the milk and chocolate.
2. Stir over medium heat until steaming hot and the chocolate has dissolved.
3. Pour into a pot, put a wooden *molinillo* in the pot and begin whipping the chocolate by rolling the handle quickly back and forth between your palms to produce a frothy drink. (If a *molinillo* is not available, blending the chocolate for about 30 seconds produces the same effect.)
4. Pour into cups and serve immediately.

Serves 6 to 8

* The Spaniards brought cows – and dairy – to the New World. Traditionally, hot chocolate was made with water and served lukewarm.

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Instructor Biography

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Maite has a BFA from the University of Texas at Austin, an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Grande Diplome from the French Culinary Institute in New York City. Since 1995 Maite has worked in the education departments of such renowned museums as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Getty Villa; and has worked as a private chef and caterer. In 2008, Maite founded ArtBites (www.artbites.net), art and culinary history combined with hands-on cooking instruction, which she has taught at the J. Paul Getty Museum's Villa and Center sites, the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, LACMA and Norton Simon Museum in Los Angeles, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Maite's blog "cooking art history" appears in *The Huffington Post's* Arts section.

