



CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

The cooking of Central America and Mexico reflects, like their peoples, a mixing of cultures, as these are countries where European, particularly Spanish, flavors are combined with Native American foods.

TRADITIONAL INGREDIENTS

GARLIC

CHILES

LIME JUICE

RICE

CORN

BEANS

SQUASH

ONIONS

TOMATOES

AVOCADOS

BANANAS

CHOCOLATE

Despite the Spanish conquest, it is generally the countries that had the strongest native civilizations, namely Mexico and Guatemala, that have the region's most complex and individual cuisines today. That of Mexico is particularly varied and inspired.

However, the different styles of cooking in each country do not mean that Mexican and Central American foods are not linked; they are tied by a common ingredient: corn. Indigenous to the Americas, corn has always been the staple here, both before and after the 16th-century Spanish colonization. The other native foods that link these countries are beans, chile peppers, tomatoes, and squash. The Spaniards introduced rice—along with many other foods—and it, too, has become a mainstay throughout this part of the world. As well as foods, the Spanish brought Christianity, which remains the major religion.

husk, and cooked by steaming. El Salvador's most popular dish is the *pupusa*. These are stuffed corn tortillas, which are a legacy of the Native American population. The Spanish influence is noteworthy in two popular El Salvadorean dishes, *gallo en chicha*, capon cooked in wine, and *la semita*, a pineapple torte. *Casamiento* is a mixture of rice and beans that is eaten daily. Despite El Salvador's long Pacific coastline, seafood does not play a great role in the country's cooking.

Central America

This region can be divided into three geographic zones: a fertile Pacific plain, where bananas and sugar are widely grown and much of the land is owned by foreign fruit companies; the central highlands, where coffee is grown and cattle raised; and the forested northeast, which is not well suited for agriculture.

While native beans, rice, and corn dominate much of this region's daily foods, each of the Central American countries has its distinctive specialties. Nicaragua's most famous dish is the cornbased *nacatamal*. This is a tamale, which is filled with meat or vegetables, wrapped in a corn

Eating on the go

Though everyone stops at lunchtime for a full meal, breakfast may be eaten on the go, at a café, or a food stall.



The cuisines of the tropical Central American countries of Panama, Nicaragua, Belize, and Honduras have Caribbean overtones. Coconut milk, plantains, bananas, *achiote* (anatto seeds), and cassava are widely used. These cuisines have been somewhat influenced by the Native American groups who populated them before the arrival of the Spanish, but not nearly to the same extent as the cuisines of Guatemala and Mexico.

Costa Rica's population is mostly non-Native American; consequently its cooking has very little native influence and is not too spicy. It is based mainly on beef, chicken, and fish, supplemented by rice, corn, beans, and fruits.

Belize, half of which is covered in tropical rain forest, was a British colony until 1981, and its population is descended from many ethnic groups, including Caribs, Africans, Mayans, Asians, and Europeans. The character of its food is Caribbean, including coconut milk and plantain, with many English overtones. Its main staples are rice and beans.

Guatemala has the largest Native American population of the Central American countries. About half of its people are direct descendants of the Maya. The Mayan Guatemalans live, for the most part, in highland villages, subsisting on the same foods as their forebears, such as corn, beans, squash, and some turkey. The cooking of the highlands is one of the three cuisines of Guatemala. There is also a colonial Ladino cuisine reflecting a mixture of Spanish and Mayan foods and techniques. This is based in the major cities of Guatemala and Antigua. Finally, there is the cooking of the tropical Caribbean coast, centered in Livingston, where indentured labor from India and Africa, brought to work on the sugar plantations, left their mark. Here the cooking is based on seafood, coconut milk, and bananas, more Caribbean in nature than Mayan or Ladino. The African-influenced Caribbean food is known as Garifuna food.

Food through the day

Breakfast is usually early, consisting of coffee, beans, and tortillas, and if they can be afforded, eggs and cheese. As in Spain, many people



FONDAS: A VARIETY OF FOODSTALLS

Markets in Mexico are some of the most popular eating places. Among the colorful stalls selling all manner of produce are food stands called *fondas*. Some sell simply drinks such as juice, *aguas frescas* (fruit-and-water drinks), and frothy *licuados* (blended milk, sugar, and fruit drinks); others serve substantial cooked dishes, such as soups, roasted meats, and beans and tortillas. Still others might specialize in *masa*-based *antojitos*, such as tacos, enchiladas, and tamales. In Puebla, most of the *fondas* at one market are devoted to the local sandwich specialty, *cemitas*. Other market stands sell *nieves*, ice creams, made with every fruit under the Mexican sun.

observe the tradition of having a mid-morning snack, called *merienda*, consisting of coffee and a sweet pastry. Lunch, eaten at about 1 pm, is the main meal of the day, as it is in South America. This is a time when everything comes to a halt; working lunches are unheard of. Dinner, in contrast, is a light meal, usually eaten at around 7 or 8 pm. It often consists simply of a soup or a bean dish, and tortillas.



Mexico

It may come as a surprise to many that the cuisines of Mexico are as varied as the cuisines of France or Italy. Yet, like French or Italian cooking, no matter what the regional differences are, the food has a national character; everywhere, it is distinctly Mexican. A large country (about a third of the size of the United States), with long coastlines bordering on the Pacific to the west and the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean to the east and south, Mexico is a land of high mountains, deserts, jungles, coastal plains, and plateaus. The diversity of its plant life is astounding, as is the spectrum of flavors that characterize its food.

A taste of history

When the Spaniards arrived in Mexico in 1519, they found that the Aztecs had already developed a sophisticated court cuisine, based on ingredients that the Europeans had never seen before: corn, chiles, beans, tomatoes, avocados, squash, turkey, and chocolate, as well as little dogs. Foods were simmered in tomato and chile sauces or in chilli sauces thickened with pumpkin seed, called *pipians*, and were eaten with corn tortillas, as they are today. The other cornbased dishes that we associate with Mexico, such as tamales, date from this pre-Colombian era. Cortés and his men were enchanted with many of the native fruits, like pineapples and papaya, and were so enthusiastic about chocolate that it gained quick acceptance in Europe, unlike many of the other New World foods such as tomatoes and potatoes.

It did not take the conquistadores long to defeat Moctezuma, the Aztec emperor, and to lay waste to the beautiful Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlan, on the site of which Mexico City now stands. What ensued over the next three centuries of European subjugation was a mixing of indigenous and Spanish bloodlines and cultures, known as *mestización*. Gastronomically, this found expression in the evolution of a cuisine that brings together foods and traditions from the New and Old Worlds.

The Native Americans of Mexico readily incorporated European foods and cooking techniques into their diet. Spices, such as cinnamon, black pepper, and cloves, herbs, such as thyme and bay leaf, and sesame seeds, almonds, and citrus fruits were all brought in by Spanish traders. These food items are now associated with Mexican cooking. The Spanish introduced such basics as wheat, chickpeas, and onions. Meat, which had been a luxury in pre-Colombian Mexico, became a widespread commodity after the Spaniards brought in cattle, chickens, and hogs, all of which thrived in the New World. It is hard to imagine Mexican cuisine without the hog, every bit of which is important, from the lard used as a cooking fat, to the skin that is crisp-fried and eaten as a snack.

Before the arrival of Europeans in Mexico, cooking oils and fats were not used; dishes were stewed or roasted rather than fried. Frying, so prevalent in Mexican cooking today, is a Spanish legacy, as is the widespread use of vinegar marinades, called *escabeches*, both in Spain and in Mexico. The Native Americans had no cows or

other beasts of burden, thus the presence of milk and its by-products—the wonderful cheeses and creams that flavor, garnish, and enrich Mexican dishes—also reflect this mixed heritage.

Spanish gastronomy had been greatly influenced by Arab traditions—the Moors had occupied Spain for 700 years and were only expelled shortly before the discovery of the Americas. This filtered through to Mexican cuisine and is most evident in the country's love of sweet confections, particularly the Arab invention, marzipan. The widespread use of spices like cinnamon, anise, and cloves also reflects Hispano-Arab gastronomic traditions.

Staple foods

But what gives Mexican cooking its unmistakable identity are the indigenous ingredients, particularly corn and chiles (see box, page 236). Corn is the country's staple, consumed mainly in the form of flat griddle-baked tortillas, which are made from ground corn that has been treated with slaked lime to break down the kernel shells and render the corn more digestible and nutritious. The corndough basis for tortillas and tamales is known as *masa*, and this is often used as a thickener in stews and soups.

Another important staple is the dried bean. In southern Mexico black beans are preferred, whereas in the north a light brown pinto bean is prevalent. Beans, along with chiles and tortillas, have been standard daily foods since well before the Spanish conquest.

One ingredient that typifies the taste of Mexico is the rather tart tomatillo, a small, green, husk-covered fruit, which is related to the gooseberry. The tomatillo, which is also known as the Mexican green tomato, even though it is not related to the tomato, is used in marvelous stews and for many sauces, both cooked and uncooked. Mexicans love crisp white and red onions, which they sprinkle, plain or pickled, over many foods. Many other dishes are garnished with the well-known fresh tomato and chile sauces called *salsas*.

Not only ingredients but certain cooking techniques give Mexican food its particular

Agave (opposite)

Produced mainly in the western Mexican state of Jalisco, Tequila is made from the sap of the agave plant (*top picture*). The hearts of the plant are baked (*below*) before the juice is fermented and distilled to produce this popular drink.



Tamales

These neat packages consist of *masa* dough wraps, spread on maize husks. Tamales are filled with meat or vegetables and steamed.

SIGNATURE DISHES

Sopa de tortilla A Mexican chicken soup topped with chillis, lime juice and cheese.

Pozole This hominy soup is either verde (green), with pork, chicken and tomatillos, or rojo (red) with pork and dried red chillis.

Frijoles de la olla Cooked beans in broth.

Enchiladas These tortillas include various fillings, such as chicken or pork.

Frijoles refritos Refried beans are often used to top tostados (toasted tortilla chips).

Pescado a la veracruzana Fish, usually snapper, served in a seasoned tomato sauce.

Gallo en chicha A dish from El Salvador, also known as "Monday rooster," as it often uses the losing bird of the Sunday cock fight.

Rondón Nicaraguan beef in coconut milk.

character. Many of the seasonings, like garlic, chiles, onions, tomatoes and spices, are toasted on dry griddles before being incorporated into dishes, which gives the food a unique dimension. Blended sauces are often seared in hot oil, then simmered, adding a smoky aspect to the food.

A regional flavor

According to Mexican food writer Rick Bayless, in *Authentic Mexican*, the country can be divided into six distinctive gastronomic regions: central Mexico; southern Mexico and, particularly, the state of Oaxaca; west-central Mexico; the southeast state of Yucatan; northern Mexico; and the Gulf states, particularly Veracruz.

Central Mexican cooking reflects a clear mix of European and Native American traditions. The city of Puebla, for example, is famous for its marzipan sweets and its rich egg-based pastries. The pastries are a legacy of the French who had a presence in this part of Mexico in the 19th century. The same city is the namesake for the local dish, *mole poblano*, a rich sauce made from ground chiles, nuts, herbs, spices, and chocolate, which is usually served with turkey.

The cuisine of southern Mexico has more of a Native American flavor. Oaxaca is famous for its *moles* (chile and nut-thickened sauces), made with the state's astounding variety of dried chiles. The chocolate is magnificent in Oaxaca; people bring cocoa beans, sugar, and almonds or cinnamon to local mills, where the ingredients are ground into rich mixtures for hot chocolate and *atoles* (masa-thickened hot drinks). Wherever you go in southern Mexico, the sweet aroma of corn *masa* is ever present.

In the western states, many of the dishes commonly associated with Mexico—such as dried tacos filled with *carnitas* (stewed and crisp-fried pork), *pozole* (hominy stew), and red chile enchiladas—are popular foods. In the state of Michoacan, where numerous cattle graze on the green hillsides, cheese and particularly cream are much loved. Cream enriches soup and is spooned over enchiladas and sweet, corn tamales, a specialty of this state.

Yucatecan food is descended from the Mayan Native Americans, and is unlike the rest of the food of Mexico. It is characterized by red *achiote* seasoning (a paste made from annatto seeds), which is rubbed over fish and meats before they are cooked. Many dishes are cooked in banana leaves. The Spanish influence can be tasted in several of the region's vinegar-sauced dishes, and here, as well as in Veracruz, olive oil is used in some of the cooking.

The food of northern Mexico is rustic. Broiling and roasting are widely used cooking techniques, for fish along the coasts and for steaks everywhere. Shredded barbecued meat fills both corn and wheat tortillas.

Some of the most interesting food in Mexico comes from the Gulf states, particularly Veracruz, which was where the Spanish conquistadores landed in 1521. Veracruz remained the main east-coast port of Mexico, its gateway, until the era of the airplane, and its food retained many Spanish characteristics. Olive oil is widely used and capers and green olives are important ingredients in many Veracruzana dishes. The jalapeño and the hot, smoky *chipotle* are the most widely used chiles here. Seafood is abundant;

CHILES: A VAST ARRAY

The variety of chiles on display in every market in Mexico is tremendous. Different types are popular in different regions: The jalapeño and its smoke-dried version, the *chipotle*, are widely used in the state of Veracruz—the capital of which, Jalapa, gives this chile its name. The fiery *habanero* is a speciality of Yucatan, whereas the *poblano* gets its name from the state of Puebla. Chiles are used in their dried and fresh states, and there are different names for each form: the dried *poblano*, for example, is called *chilli ancho*. Dried chiles are often rehydrated and ground, for use in stews and thick, complex sauces, like *moles*, *adobos*, and *pipians*.





huachinango a la veracruzana, red snapper cooked in a pungent tomato sauce flavored with capers, green olives, and pickled jalapeños, is one of Mexico's best-known fish dishes. There is a Caribbean/African element in the cooking of coastal, tropical Veracruz, with a widespread use of plantains and coconut. This is because the population here is descended, in part, from African slaves who were brought over by the Spanish to work in the sugar plantations.

Food through the day

Breakfast in Mexico is a substantial meal, one that offers up some of the country's most beloved dishes. Eggs are prepared in a number of ways: they are fried and served over tortillas with a tomato and chile sauce, to make *huevos rancheros*;

scrambled with chiles, tomatoes, onions, and tortillas for *migas*; or mixed with refried black beans for *huevos tirados*. Eggs may be served in combination with refried beans, which are cooked beans that have been mashed and thickened in hot lard.

Lighter breakfasts might consist of brioche-like rolls or sugar-sprinkled pastries eaten with fruit. Coffee is generally the beverage of choice, but hot chocolate is also very popular, particularly in southern Mexico. Hot chocolate is made from the sweetened, cinnamon-laced chocolate, which is melted and brought to a froth in hot water. Mexican Indians enjoy hot *atoles*; chocolate, nut, pineapple, and strawberry are among the most popular *atole* flavors.

The main meal of the day is the midday meal, the *comida*, eaten between 1 and 4 pm. The traditional *comida* begins with an appetizer such as cactus salad or shrimp cocktail, or with a *antojito* (a *masa*-based dish, such as *quesadillas* or *enchiladas*), followed by a light soup. A rice dish sometimes follows, and then comes a main dish based on meat or fish. The main dish may consist of a stew. Dessert is often a sweet pastry or *flan*, or fresh fruit, followed by coffee.

The midday meal often stretches into the evening, but light meals are served at night. Sometimes this will be nothing more than a pastry and hot chocolate, coffee, or herb tea. *Tortas* make another popular supper. These are nourishing sandwiches made on round white rolls called *bolillos* and filled with meat or cheese, tomatoes, chiles, avocados, and lettuce.

There are many regional variations on the sandwich in Mexico, all with different names: in Veracruz a flaky bread called *pambazo* is used for a sandwich of the same name; the sandwich of Puebla is the *cemita*, made on a crusty roll and filled with cheese, avocado, pickled *chipotle* peppers, meat, and a peppery green, called *papaloquelite*; and Oaxacan *molletes* are buttered rolls slathered with refried black beans, toasted, and sprinkled with cheese.

HERBS AND SPICES

CILANTRO Mexican soups are invariably garnished with lime juice and chopped cilantro

EPAZOTE this is a native herb which has an earthy, astringent taste

AVOCADO LEAVES in southern Mexico these are used to impart an aniseedlike flavor to beans

OJA SANTA another leaf with a complex aniseedlike flavor, used in Veracruz and southern Mexico

Mexican breads

Aside from the more widely known corn-based tortillas, there are many other breads and rolls, made with different grains, which are widely used in a variety of sandwiches.