

The Food of Oaxaca

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An Introduction to Oaxacan Cuisine

While Mexican cooking varies from one region of the country to another, no State compares with Oaxaca in the variety of cuisines found within its borders.

The natural geographic divisions created by the mountain ranges (Sierras) criss-crossing the state, have given rise to distinct cultures and micro climates within Oaxaca. Differing local foods and their culinary use by indigenous peoples combine to provide the enormous variety of Oaxacan dishes.

Oaxacan cuisine is also the perfect marriage of Mediterranean and Mesoamerican culture, lending it an exotic combination of colours, flavours and aromas.

Known as the "*Land of the Seven Molés*," Oaxaca is blessed with an abundance of vegetables grown in the central valley; fish and shellfish from the southern coast and Isthmus regions; and a year-round supply of tropical fruit from the lush area bordering Veracruz.

As in other southern Mexican states, corn is the staple food, and creative variations with corn dough are found all over - from *empanadas de molé amarillo* of the central valleys, to the exotic *iguana tamales* of the Isthmus. Tortillas, known as *blandas*, are an integral part of nearly every meal - from the most sophisticated mole to the humble but delicious lentils and beans.

Oaxaqueños are particularly fond of black beans, and these *frijoles negras* are commonly served in the form of soup, snack-food topping, and as a sauce for *enfrijoladas*.

One of the most distinctive ingredients used to flavour beans and other regional specialties is the *pasilla oaxaqueña chilli*, with its hot, smoky taste and deep red colour. *Amarillos*, *chilhuacles*, *chilcostles* and *costeños* are other Oaxacan chillies used in molés and sauces.

Herbs provide yet another facet of flavour in Oaxaca's culinary repertoire. *Hoja santa*, perhaps the most well-known of the region's unique herbs, is guaranteed to lend a true Oaxacan touch to chicken, pork and fish dishes, and is indispensable in making the herb mole called simply *verde* in most parts of the state. *Epazote* and *pitonia* are other herbs favoured by Oaxacan cooks.

In addition to molé, Oaxaca is probably most famous for its chocolate. Frequently hand-ground, cacao is combined with almonds, cinnamon and other ingredients to make what is generally acknowledged as the best chocolate in Mexico. It is also commonly used in hot drinks. Mezcal, made from the maguey plant (a form of agave) is the most common tipple and comes in a multitude of flavours.

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A Quick Guide to Oaxacan Food

Atole

Atole (Mexican Spanish, from *Nahuatl atolli*) is a traditional *masa*-based Mexican and Central American (where it is known as *atol*) hot drink. Chocolate *atole* is known as *champurrado*. It is typically accompanied with *tamales*, and very popular during the Christmas holiday season (Las Posadas).

The drink typically includes *masa* (corn hominy flour), water, *piloncillo* (unrefined cane sugar), cinnamon, vanilla and optional chocolate or fruit. The mixture is blended and heated before serving. *Atole* is made by toasting *masa* on a *comal* (griddle), then adding water which was boiled with cinnamon sticks. The resulting blends vary in texture, ranging from a porridge to a very thin liquid consistency. *Atole* can also be prepared with rice flour or oatmeal in place of *masa*. Although *atole* is one of the traditional drinks of the Mexican holiday Day of the Dead, it is very common during breakfast and dinnertime at any time of year. It is usually sold as street food.

Champurrado

Champurrado is a chocolate-based *atole*, a warm and thick Mexican drink, based on *masa* (hominy flour), *piloncillo*, water or milk and occasionally containing cinnamon, anise seed and or vanilla bean. *Atole* drinks are whipped up using a wooden whisk called a *molinillo* (or, a blender). The whisk is rolled between the palms of the hands, then moved back and forth in the mixture until it is aerated and frothy.

Chapulines

Chapulines are grasshoppers of the genus *Sphenarium*, that are commonly eaten in certain areas of Mexico. The term is specific to Mexico and derives from the Nahuatl language. They are collected only at certain times of year (from their hatching in early May through the late summer/early autumn). After being thoroughly cleaned and washed, they are toasted on a *comal* (clay cooking surface) with garlic, lime juice and salt containing extract of agave worms, lending a sour-spicy-salty taste to the finished product. Sometimes the grasshoppers are also toasted with chilli, although it can be used to cover up for stale chapulines.

One of the regions of Mexico where chapulines are most widely consumed is Oaxaca, where they are sold as snacks at local sports events and are becoming a revival among foodies [1]. It's debated how long Chapulines have been a food source in Oaxaca. There is one reference to grasshoppers that are eaten in early records of the Spanish conquest, in early to mid 16th century.

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Cheese

Queso Oaxaca or *Quesillo Oaxaca* is a white, semi-hard cheese from Mexico, with a mozzarella-like string cheese texture. It is named after the state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico, where it was first made. It is available in several different shapes. It is also known as *quesillo Oaxaca* or thread cheese when shaped like a ball. Shaped in bricks for slicing, it is called *asadero* (meaning "roaster" or "broiler") or *queso quesadilla*.

The production process is complicated and involves stretching the cheese into long ribbons and rolling it up like a ball of yarn. Italian Mozzarella is another cheese which is processed by stretching (the *pasta filata* process). *Queso Oaxaca* is used in Mexican cuisine, especially in *quesadillas* and *empanadas*, where the *queso Oaxaca* is melted and other stuffings such as *huitlacoche* and squash flowers are added to the filling.

Chilli de Árbol (literally "tree chilli", a.k.a. bird's beak chilli and rat's tail chilli)

A small, but potent Mexican chilli pepper believed to derive from Cayenne pepper. Two to three inches long typically, and bright red when mature, they reach about 50,000 and 65,000 Scoville Units (about 7.5 on a 1 to 10 scale). They can be used fresh, dried or powdered. They are often used in wreaths in parts of Mexico due to their bright colours which do not fade quickly. For more on chillies see our guide to the Chillies of Oaxaca below.

Chillies

Oaxacan food is famous for its use of chillies. See [our guide to the chillies of Oaxaca](#) below.

Chocolate

Chocolate, which is grown in the state, plays an important part in the making of certain moles, but is best known for its role as a beverage. The cacao beans are ground then combined with sugar, almonds, cinnamon and other ingredients to form bars. Pieces of these bars are mixed with hot milk or water and drunk.

Churros

Churros, sometimes referred to as a Spanish doughnut, are fried-dough pastry-based snacks, sometimes made from potato dough. Originally from Spain.

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Empañadas

An *empañada* is a stuffed bread or pastry baked or fried in many countries of Latin America and the south of Europe. The name comes from the verb *empañar*, meaning to wrap or coat in bread. *Empañada* is made by folding a dough or bread patty around the stuffing. The stuffing can consist of a variety of meats, cheese, *huitlacoche*, vegetables or fruits among others. Mexican *empañadas* can be a dessert or breakfast item and tend to contain a variety of sweetened fillings; these include pumpkin, yams, sweet potato, and cream, as well as a wide variety of fruit fillings. Meat, cheese, and vegetable fillings are less common in some states, but still well-known and eaten fairly regularly. Depending on local preferences and particular recipes the dough can be based on wheat or corn, sometimes with Yuca flour.

Epazote (a.k.a. Mexican Tea, Wormseed, Pigweed and Jerusalem Parsley)

A Mexican herb that has a very strong taste and sometimes has a gasoline or perfume-like type odour. It has been used in Mexican cuisine for thousands of years dating back to the Aztecs who used it for cooking as well as for medicinal purposes. Although *epazote* is poisonous in large quantities, it has been used in moderation to help relieve abdominal discomfort (gassiness) that can come from eating beans. It has become a distinct flavour in Mexican cuisine and is now used to season a variety of dishes including beans, soups, salads and quesadillas. The older leaves have a stronger flavour and should be used sparingly. Younger leaves have a milder, yet richer flavour.

Epazote grows well in tropical and sub-tropical climates and will reach a height of over 2 feet. It grows in the wild in Mexico and America and you may even have it growing in your own backyard. It is hearty and sometimes is referred to as a weed.

Epazote has a distinct taste that cannot be replaced by other herbs. If you do not have access to it, you can leave it out. If you leave it out, use more of the other seasonings to balance out the loss of the *epazote*.

It also known as wormseed because of its effects in preventing worms in animals. It is often added to animal feed for this reason. It is also known by the following names: Mexican Tea, Wormseed, Pigweed, West Indian Goosefoot, Hedge Mustard, Jerusalem Parsley and Pazote.

Hoja Santa (literally "holy leaf", a.k.a. eared pepper, anise piper and root beer plant)

The dinner plate-sized, heart-shaped leaves of this tall Central American herb are used fresh, never used dried. It is easy to cook with, and its pleasant anise flavour with herbal, flinty overtones is easy on the palette. The aroma carries enough of a whiff of black pepper to remind you that the two seasonings are closely related, belonging to the same genus. The name given to the plant in the Southern United States says it all: Root Beer Plant. Crush one of the velvety, heart-shaped leaves in your hand, and you'll understand - root beer. The complex flavour of *hoja santa* is not so easily

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described; it has been compared to eucalyptus, liquorice, sassafras, anise, nutmeg and black pepper. The flavour is stronger in the young stems and veins.

Mamey

Mamey sapote is a large and highly ornamental evergreen tree that can reach a height of 15 to 45 meters (60 to 140 feet) at maturity. The fruit is about 10 to 25 cm (4 to 10 inches) long and 8 to 12 cm (3 to 5 inches) wide and has orange flesh. It is eaten raw out of hand or made into milkshakes, smoothies, ice cream and fruit bars. The fruit's flavour is variously described as a combination of pumpkin, sweet potato, and maraschino cherries with the texture of an avocado. Some consider the fruit to be an aphrodisiac. The fruit's texture is creamy and soft. A *mamey sapote* is ripe when the flesh is pink when a fleck of the skin is removed. The flesh should give slightly, as with a ripe kiwifruit.

Masa

Masa is Spanish for dough, it is sometimes referred to cornmeal dough (*masa de maíz* in Spanish). It is used for making corn *tortillas*, *tamales*, *pupusas*, *arepas* and many other Latin American dishes.

Mezcal

There is a saying in Oaxaca, “Para todo mal, mezcal, para todo bien, también” (For everything wrong, *mezcal*; for everything right, also.) Alcoholic and non alcoholic drinks (as well as food items) based on the maguey plant have been consumed in many parts of Mexico since early in the pre-Hispanic period. The tradition of the making of the distilled liquor called *mezcal* has been a strong tradition in the Oaxacan highlands since the colonial period. One reason for this is the quality and varieties of maguey grown here. Some varieties, such as *espadín* and *arroquense* are cultivated but one variety called *tobalá* is still made with wild maguey plants. It is made with the heart of the plant which is roasted in pits (giving the final product a smoky flavour) and is sometimes flavoured with a chicken or turkey breast added to the mash. It is *mezcal*, not tequila, which may contain a “worm,” which is really a larvae which can be found in maguey plants. The final distilled product can be served as is or can be flavoured (called *cremas*) with almonds, coffee, cocoa fruits and other flavours.

Oaxaca's *mezcal* can be produced from 18 different varieties of agave. *Mezcal* can be consumed as a straight drink or in cocktails, such as the *Donají* made with orange juice, grenadine, gusano worm salt and ice. You can also choose the *mezcal* on the basis of aging - *joven mezcals* are very young. A strong drink is the *joven white mezcal*. Smoother options include *reposados*, aged for two months, and *añejo*, aged for at least one year. *Mezcals* can also be served with herbs and fruits as well. These are called *curados*.

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Molé

The story behind this sauce tells of two nuns surprised by a visitor. They had little in the way of food and so they used a molcajete (mortar and pestle) to grind every ingredient they could find and simmered it in liquid until it thickened into a sauce. Molé is a generic name for a number of sauces used in Mexican cuisine, as well as for dishes based on these sauces. Outside of Mexico, it often refers to a specific sauce which is known in Spanish by the more specific name *molé poblano*.

In contemporary Mexico, the term is used for a number of sauces, some quite dissimilar to one another, including black, red, yellow, colourado, green, almendrado, and pipián. The sauce is most popular in the central and southern regions of the country with those from Puebla and Oaxaca the best known.

Oaxaca is sometimes referred to as "*The Land of the seven molés*" – the seven being manchamanteles (literally, "tablecloth stain", chichilo (based on a thick beef stock with numerous types of chillies), Amarillo ("yellow"), rojo ("red"), verde ("green", using *hoja santa*), colouradito ("slightly coloured" using chocolate) and negro (meaning "black", an earthy complex sauce where the ingredients are charred for extra depth).

Piloncillo (a.k.a. panela, atado dulce and empanizao)

Unrefined whole cane sugar, typical of Latin America, which is basically a solid piece of sucrose and fructose obtained from the boiling and evaporation of sugarcane juice.

Quesadilla

A *quesadilla* is a flour or corn tortilla filled with a savoury mixture containing cheese and other ingredients, then folded in half to form a half-moon shape. It is a dish that originated in Mexico. The word *quesadilla* derives from the Spanish word *queso*, meaning cheese.

Rosita de cacao (a.k.a. Quararibea funebris, Molinillo and Funeral Tree)

South American sapote (soft fruit) relative known for its flowers which yield an aromatic spice, popular in hot drinks, particularly chocolate, in Southern areas of Mexico. The fragrance stays in dry flowers for decades, thus they were used for funeral ceremonies and were found in crypts still fragrant after many years, hence the name "funeral tree". It is also effective as fishing bait as fish are attracted by the smell. Its Aztec names include *Poyomatli*, *Xochicacaohuatl*, *Flor Cacahuaxochitl* and *Cacaoxochitl* (to be pronounced at your own risk!).

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Tamale

A *tamal(e)* is a traditional Latin American dish made from *masa* (a corn-based starchy dough) steamed or boiled in a leaf. They also typically contain one or more of the following: meat, cheese, vegetables, chillies, sauces (*molés*) and seasonings. *Tamales* originated in Mesoamerica as early as 8000 to 5000 BCE. Aztec and Maya civilizations as well as the Olmeca and Tolteca before them used *tamales* as a portable food, often to support their armies but also for hunters and travellers. There have also been reports of *tamal* use in the Inca Empire long before the Spanish visited the new world.

Tasajo

In Mexico is a dried cut of meat. Typical in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca particularly where it is most commonly the dried pork or beef. It can be from leg, rib, loin, and other parts of the animal. In the Historic Centre of Oaxaca City *tasajo* is often served with *tlayudas* and radishes, and with "chilli water" and onions.

Tejate

Tejate, one of Oaxaca's best known beverages, deserves a special mention out of all the region's traditional drinks. *Tejate*, after all, is not just a drink. It's a work of art with a recipe spanning thousands of years of Oaxacan history.

Tejate, touted as the drink of the gods, is considered the sustenance of the family. Such a heavy responsibility lies in the hands of the women of the pueblo, who are taught to prepare the drink even before they learn how to read or write. Female hands have carried on this tradition from the time of pre-Hispanic Zapotec kings and warriors to the present day.

The principal ingredient of *Tejate* is "*rosita de cacao*", which can only be found in San Andres Huayapam. Aside from this, *Tejate* is also made from corn, cinnamon and the seeds and flowers of a special kind of fruit called the *mamey*. Women who prepare this drink are called "tejateras." In markets and fairs, the tejateras stand behind green glazed tubs armed with checkered aprons and mixing tools. Making *Tejate* is no easy feat. It is vital, for example, that the seeds and bowls be impeccably neat. It is not uncommon for skilled tejateras to frown upon a brew with the wrong color due to grease on the mamey seeds.

Tejate was served in intricately made, finely painted bowls in the older days, but is now scooped up in opaque plastic cups. Whereas before *Tejate* was made with chile de arbol, now it is sweet rather than spicy. Still, *Tejate* is more than just a simple drink. It captures the allure and grandeur of an agricultural past and the romanticism of fields under the harvest moon.

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Tlayuda

The *Tlayuda*, (sometimes mistakenly called “clayuda”) originates specifically in the central valley regions of Oaxaca State. An age-old local specialty, *tlayuda* refers to the large, unique type of corn tortilla that’s native to central Oaxaca as well as to the dish using this same type of tortilla but topping it off with various ingredients. We might loosely call this dish “Mexican Pizza”, for lack of a better expression. The most important component of this dish is the big tortilla, which sometimes has a diameter measuring more than 40 centimetres (16 inches).

It’s baked on a clay skillet, grill, or directly over hot coals, then placed in a basket made of woven palm leaves in order to give it its characteristic texture – somewhat flexible, yet brittle, slightly moist, with a unique smoky flavour. It’s smothered in refried beans, with additional toppings such as chorizo, *tasajo* (beef), shredded chicken, *cecina* (pork), *asiento* (unrefined pork lard), *chicharron* (fried pork rinds), lettuce, avocado, tomato, Oaxaca cheese (the Mexican version of string cheese), and salsa. However, there are no hard-and-fast rules about the toppings. And you can eat your *tlayuda* open faced or folded in half, almost like an empanada or Italian calzone. *Tlayudas* are very popular *antojitos* (snacks) in the delicious array of Oaxaca Food, especially late at night after parties.

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A Guide to the Chillies of Oaxaca

Chillies have been grown in Mexico for thousands of years. There are more than 150 indigenous varieties with at least sixty varieties grown in Oaxaca and nowhere else. Many of them are used in the famous *molé* sauces of the region. (For example, one of the chillies, the "*Chilhuacle Negro*", is one of the main ingredients in *molé negro*.) In the 15th century Columbus brought Mexican chillies to Europe and from there they spread around the world. The rest, as they say, is history.

ANCHO Heat: 3

The most common dried chilli in Mexico, the ancho is a dried red *poblano chilli*, and has a fruity, slightly sharp flavour. When rehydrated, anchos can be used to make stuffed chillies (chillies *rellenos*), but should not be peeled first.

CASCABEL Heat: 4

The name means "little rattle" and refers to the noise that the seeds make inside the chilli. This chilli has a chocolate brown skin, and remains dark, even after soaking. *Cascabels* have a slightly nutty flavour and are often added to salsas such as *tomate verde*.

CHILCOSTLE Heat: 5

Bright deep orange-red with a splotchy skin. Elongated and tapered, measuring about 3 to 5 inches long and 1/2 to 3/4 inch across at the shoulders. Thin fleshed, with a dusty, dry medium heat and an orangey sweetness with hints of all-spice and fennel. Used in salsas, soups, tamales, and mole sauces.

CHILHUACLE AMARILLO Heat: 4

Related to the *chilhuacle negro* and *chilhuacle rojo* chillies. Dark amber to reddish yellow in colour, broad shouldered and tapering to a point. Measures about 2 to 3 inches long and 1-1/2 inches across at the shoulders. Medium thick fleshed, with a tart heat. The complex flavour is a little salty and acidic, with bitter orange and sour cherry tones, some melon and seediness, and sweetness in the finish. Mainly used to prepare yellow *molés* (mole Amarillo) and other sauces.

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CHILHUACLE NEGRO Heat: 4-5

This prized and very expensive chilli is grown, like the related *chilhuacle amarillo*, only in southern Mexico. Shiny, dark, mahogany in colour, and shaped like a miniature bell pepper or almost heart shaped. Measures about 2 to 3 inches long and the same across at the shoulders. One of the most flavourful of all chillies, it has a deep, intense fruit flavour, with tones of dried plum, tobacco, and liquorice, and a subtle, spicy heat. Used to make the black molé sauces that are a specialty of the Oaxaca region.

CHILHUACLE ROJO Heat: 3

Like the *chilhuacle amarillo* and *chilhuacle negro*, this chilli is grown exclusively in southern Mexico. Dark red to mahogany in colour, and either shaped like a miniature bell pepper or broad shouldered and tapering to a point. Measures about 2 to 3 inches long and 1-1/2 inches across at the shoulders. Richer and deeper flavours than the *chilhuacle amarillo*, with tones of dried figs, liquorice and a hint of wild cherry. Has a medium, sweet heat. It is used in the preparation of certain special mole sauces.

CHILTEPE Heat: 6

Bright orange-red, thin, usually curved, and tapering to a point. Measures about 2 inches long and 1/4 to 3/8 inch across at the shoulders. Thin fleshed; has a dry hay flavour, with nutty and sun-dried tomato tones, and a sharp, searing heat on the tip of the tongue. Primarily used in making sauces and pestos.

CHIPOTLE Heat: 5-6

A large, dried, smoked jalapeno; also known as a *chilli ahumado* or a *chilli meco*. Dull tan to a coffee brown in colour, veined and ridged, measuring about 2 to 4 inches long and about 1 inch across. Medium thick fleshed, smoky and sweet in flavour with tobacco and chocolate tones, a Brazil nut finish, and a subtle, deep, rounded heat. As much as one-fifth of the Mexican jalapeno crop is processed as chipotles. Used mainly in soups, salsas, and sauces. *Chipotles* are widely used in Mexican and Southwestern US cooking. They are available canned in a red adobo sauce. The *chipotle grande*, a smoked dried *huachinango chilli* has similar flavours, but is larger.

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COSTEÑO Heat: 6-7

Related to the *guajillo chilli*; also known as a *chilli bandeno*. Orange-red in colour, tapering to a point, and measuring about 2 to 3 inches long and 1/2 to 3/4 inch across at the shoulders. Thin to medium fleshed; has dusty, green, soapy flavours with apricot fruit tones and a fiery, intense, lingering heat. Good in salsas, sauces and soups.

COSTEÑO AMARILLO Heat: 4

Shiny, amber in colour, tapering to a point, and measuring about 2 to 3 inches long and 3/4 to 1 inch across at the shoulders. Wafer-thin flesh; has a light, crisp, lemon-citrus flavour with green tomato and grassy tones, and a subtle heat. Used in the preparation of yellow mole sauces. Also good in soups and stews.

FRESNO Heat: 8

Looking much like elongated sweet peppers, *fresnos* are about 2 1/2 inches long and 3/4 inch wide. They have a hot, sweet flavour and are used in salsas, as well as in meat, fish and vegetable dishes. They are particularly good in black bean salsa and guacamole.

GUAJILLO Heat: 3

Another popular dried chilli in Mexican cuisine, the *guajillo* is used in sauces or stews. It is about 5 inches long and 1 inch wide, and has a burgundy-coloured skin. A paste made from *guajillos* is often used for spreading on meat before cooking.

HABAÑERO Heat: 10

This is the granddaddy of them all, a chilli so hot that when it is puréed, even the fumes from the blender can scorch the skin. Lantern-shaped, it is about 1 3/4 inches long and 1 1/4 inches wide, and is also called *Scotch Bonnet*. *Habañero* are often used to make bottled hot chili sauces.

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MORA Heat: 6

Also known as *mora rojo*. Like the *chipotle chilli*, the *mora* is a type of dried, smoked *jalapeno*. Reddish brown in colour, tapered and wrinkled, and measuring about 2 inches long and 1/2 to 3/4 inch wide. Medium fleshed; has a sweet mesquite wood flavour with strong tobacco and plum tones. Has a medium heat that is somewhat lingering. The *mora grande* is a larger version of this chilli. It is brownish black in colour, measures about 2 1/2 to 3 inches long, and has similar flavour characteristics. Can be used in salsas and sauces.

ONZA Heat: 4-5

Rare chilli. Bright brick-red, tapered, and measuring about 3 inches long and 1/2 inch across. Thin-fleshed; slightly sweet and also slightly acidic, with flavours of carrot and tomato, and a crisp heat noticeable at the back of the throat. Mainly used in sauces and soups.

PASADA Heat: 3

This chilli is crisply dried, and has citrus and apple flavours. It is used in soups and in sauces used for cooking meat or fish.

PASILLA DE OAXACA Heat: 6-7

A smoked chilli grown only in the Oaxaca region. Shiny red-mahogany in colour, very wrinkled, tapered, and measuring about 3 to 4 inches long and 1 to 1 1/2 inches across. Thin fleshed; has an acrid fruit smoke flavour with strong tobacco tones and a sharp, lingering heat. Mainly used for the *rellenos* that are a regional specialty.

POBLANO Heat: 3

Like many chillies, *poblanos* are initially green, and ripen to a dark red. They are large chillies, being roughly 3 1/2 inches long and 2 1/4 inches wide, and are sometimes said to be heart-shaped. although not very hot, *poblanos* have a rich, earthy flavour which is intensified when the chillies are roasted and peeled. They are widely used in Mexican cooking, notably in stuffed chillies (*chillies Rellenos*). *Anaheim chillies*, which are widely available in the United States and sometimes in the United Kingdom, can be substituted for *poblanos*.

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SERRANO Heat: 8

This is a small chilli, about 1 1/2 - 2 inches long and 1/2 inch wide, with a pointed tip. *Serrano chillies* change from green to red when ripe, and are sold at both stages of their development. The flavour is clean and biting. *Serranos* are used in cooked dishes, guacamole and salsas.

HOT TIPS

- When handling chillies of any kind, wear rubber gloves to avoid getting the spicy chilli oils in your eyes or on sensitive skin.
- If you bite into a chilli that is uncomfortably hot, swallow a spoonful of sugar. Don't be tempted to gulp down a glass of water or beer, this will only spread the heat further.
- To diminish the fire of a dish but retain chilli flavour, discard the veins and seeds, which hold much of the heat.
- When shopping for chillies, avoid shrivelled fresh chillies or broken dried ones. Look for firm fresh chillies, with shiny skins. Try to avoid any specimens that are dull or limp, as they will be past their prime.
- Store fresh chillies in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. If they are to be chopped and added to cooked dishes, they can be seeded, chopped and then frozen, ready for use until needed.
- Dried chillies stay freshest in a dark, cool, dry place.

Buying and Storing Dried Chillies

Good quality dried chillies should be flexible, not brittle. Store them in an airtight jar in a cool, dry place. For short term storage, the refrigerator is ideal, although they can also be frozen. Do not keep dried chillies for more than a year or the flavour may fade.

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Oaxacan Recipes

TLAYUDA

Ingredients

- 2 Cups black beans (homemade or canned), drained with liquid reserved
- 1 Clove garlic, minced*
- 1 Onion, finely chopped*
- Chilli powder to taste
- Cumin to taste*
- Salt to taste*
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste*
- 2 Large (12-inch or bigger) corn tortillas
- 1 Cup shredded Oaxaca or Mozzarella cheese
- 1 Cup meat of your choice, like chorizo or shredded chicken, cooked, optional
- 1 Cup chopped lettuce
- 2 Roma tomatoes, diced
- 1 Avocado, peeled, pitted and sliced
- 1/2 Cup crumbly cheese of your choice, like queso fresco or farmer's cheese, optional
- Salsa to taste

Directions

Note: If you've prepared black beans from scratch and already added seasonings, these additional spices might not be necessary. If using plain canned beans, it's best to add these ingredients.

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees Fahrenheit.

If using canned beans, put them in a small saucepan set over medium heat. Add the garlic, onion, chilli powder, cumin, salt, and pepper. Warm the mixture, stirring occasionally, for about 5 minutes.

Place the mixture (or your homemade beans) in a blender. Blend after adding just enough reserved liquid from the beans to achieve a chunky-style purée.

Place one tortilla on a baking sheet or pizza stone and spread half of the beans on it. Add 1/2 cup of the Oaxaca cheese and 1/2 cup of the meat. Bake for 5 minutes

Remove and sprinkle with 1/2 cup lettuce, half of the diced tomatoes, half of the sliced avocado, and 1/4 cup of the crumbly cheese. Bake another 3-5 minutes, until the toppings are hot and the tortilla is crispy around the edges. Repeat procedure with the other tortilla.

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Top them off with salsa to taste. Eat them open-face, fold them in half, or cut them into slices and serve.

MOLÉ

Prep Time: 10 minutes

Cook Time: 1 hour

Ingredients

- 12 guajillo chillies, roasted, skinned, stemmed and seeded
- 3 tomatoes, roasted and peeled
- 1/4 cup lard
- 1 onion, peeled and sliced
- 8 garlic cloves
- 1 stick of cinnamon torn into small pieces
- 1 tablespoon Mexican oregano
- 1/4 cup unsalted peanuts or unsweetened peanut butter
- 1 clove
- 1/4 cup masa
- 1 teaspoon cocoa powder
- 1/4 teaspoon thyme
- 1/4 teaspoon anise seeds
- 1/4 cup raisins, soaked in water to soften (optional)
- 3 peppercorns
- 4 cups chicken broth

Preparation

Note: The traditional way is to mash all of the ingredients except the broth, with a *molcajete* (mortar and pestle) but a blender will also do the job just fine.

Heat the lard in a large saucepan. Add in the onions and garlic and cook until translucent. In a blender, puree the peanuts then add in the oregano, cinnamon, anise, peppercorns, thyme and cloves and blend with the tomatoes. Puree to make a smooth paste. Add in the onions and garlic and puree again. Finally, add chillies to blender to puree into a smooth paste.

Add the chicken broth to the pot and add the pureed ingredients. Make a roux, by mixing the *masa* with a 1/4 cup of the chicken broth. Mix the roux into the broth and whisk until mixture is smooth. Add the pureed ingredients and simmer for 1 hour, covered and then simmer uncovered until sauce has thickened.

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MOLÉ AMARILLO

Preparation 1 hr 0 min

Cooking 1 hr 20 min

Serves 8 servings

Level Intermediate

Ingredients

- 1 chicken, cut into 8 pieces
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 3 medium garlic cloves, crushed
- Salt
- 3 medium chayote
- 1/2 pound green beans
- For the mole:
- 2 anchos
- 12 guajillos or 6 chilcostles
- 10 tomatillos
- 1 large green roma tomato
- 1/2 medium onion
- 4 medium garlic cloves, unpeeled
- 8 whole black peppercorns
- 4 whole cloves
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup masa harina
- 1 cup water
- 4 large fresh hoja santa leaves or 6 sprigs cilantro
- Rajas de chilli:
- 3 chillies de agua or 1 jalapeno and 2 anaheims
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil, for frying
- 10 pearl onions
- 1/2 cup lime juice
- 1 teaspoon dried Mexican oregano, preferably Oaxacan
- Salt
- Cooked white rice, as accompaniment
- Heated tortillas, as accompaniment

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Directions

Clean the chicken pieces and place them in a stockpot with boiling water, onion, garlic, and salt, reduce the heat and poach the chicken until tender about 30 minutes. Remove chicken and reserve broth.

Heat 2 pots of water to boiling. Add salt. Add chayote to 1 pot and green beans to the other. Cook each to al dente. Drain. Slice chayote and set both aside.

For the Molé: Clean the anchos and guajillos with a damp cloth, cut them open, remove the seeds and stems, and spread them flat. Roast them on a hot comal or thin skillet. Remove from the skillet and place in a bowl of hot water and soak for 20 minutes.

On the same comal or skillet dry-roast the tomatillos, tomato, onion, and unpeeled garlic, remove the garlic when black spots appear and peel it, and leave the vegetables until blistered and soft.

In a small skillet, lightly roast the black peppercorns, cloves, and cumin until the aroma is released.

Transfer the reconstituted chillies to the blender with enough water to process. Meanwhile, heat 3 tablespoons oil in large pan and pour the chilli mixture through a sieve into the hot pan, it is important that all the pieces of chilli skin are blended or removed so the sauce will be smooth. Reduce the heat and let it simmer for 8 minutes.

While frying the chilli mixture, blend all the roasted vegetables and roasted spices with enough water to puree. Add this mixture to the frying chilli paste, let it simmer for about 20 minutes or until it is reduced. Add reserved chicken broth and simmer for 5 minutes. Dilute masa harina in 1 cup water and add to mixture. Let it cook 10 minutes, check for salt. Add the cooked chicken, peeled and sliced chayote and green beans and cook until heated through. Add hoja santa or cilantro.

For the rajas de chilli: Make a small slit in each of the chillies, fry them in hot oil, until all sides are blistered. Remove from oil. Let them cool down and remove the skin, discard it along with seed and stems, tear in pieces, and place the strips in a serving bowl, quarter the pearl onions, and add to the chillies along with lime juice, oregano, and salt.

Serve with white rice and hot tortillas along with the rajas de chilli.

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MOLÉ COLORADITO (OR MEXICAN CHOCOLATE SAUCE)

Ingredients

- 4 ancho chillies, stems and seeds removed
- 4 guajillo chillies, stems and seeds removed
- Boiling water
- 3 tablespoons sesame seeds
- One 2-inch piece canela (true Ceylon cinnamon; available in Mexican groceries)
- 5 whole cloves, or 1/8 teaspoon ground cloves
- 5 whole black peppercorns
- 1/4 cup lard (preferably homemade), or vegetable oil
- 1 small onion, coarsely chopped
- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 medium-size ripe tomatoes, coarsely chopped
- 1/3 small ripe plantain, about a 4-inch chunk, peeled and chopped (about 1 cup)
- 1/2 bunch fresh thyme, (about 2 dozen sprigs)
- 6 sprigs fresh Mediterranean oregano or 1/2 teaspoon dried Mexican oregano
- 1/4 cup dark raisins
- 3/4 cup blanched almonds
- 6 to 8 cups homemade chicken or pork stock, with the cooked meat shredded and reserved
- 1 1/2 ounces Mexican chocolate, coarsely grated or finely chopped
- 1 thick slice day-old challah or brioche, crushed to fine crumbs
- 1 teaspoon salt

Directions

I leave in the veins of the chillies— the hottest part—but you can cut them away if you want to tone down the heat. Rinse the chillies under cold running water and shake off the excess moisture, but do not dry them. Heat a griddle or cast-iron skillet over moderately-high heat until a drop of water sizzles on contact. Place the chillies, a few at a time, on the griddle and let them heat, turning occasionally with tongs, just until the water evaporates and the chillies are fragrant. Allow between 30 to 45 seconds for the anchos, slightly less for the guajillos, which are very thin-skinned. The chillies should just become dry, hot and aromatic; do not allow them to start really roasting or they will have a terrible scorched flavour. Remove from the griddle as they are done. Place in a bowl and cover generously with boiling water. Let soak for at least 20 minutes, then drain.

In a small heavy skillet, cook the sesame seeds over moderate heat, stirring constantly, just until you see them starting to turn golden. Scrape the seeds out into a small bowl and set aside.

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Grind the canela, cloves and peppercorns together in an electric coffee grinder or spice mill or in a mortar. In a medium skillet, heat 2 tablespoons of the lard over moderate heat until rippling. Add the ground spices and cook, stirring, just until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the onion, garlic, tomatoes, plantain, thyme, oregano, raisins, almonds and sesame seeds. Cook, stirring frequently, for 15 minutes. Let cool for 10 minutes.

Put half of the mixture in a blender with 1 cup of the chicken stock and half the drained chillies. Blend until smooth, about 3 minutes on high. Repeat with the remaining sauce mixture, another 1 cup of chicken stock, and the remaining chillies.

In a large Dutch oven or deep skillet, heat the remaining lard over moderately-high heat until rippling. Add the sauce, stirring well to prevent splattering. Stir in the remaining stock, a little at a time. Cover and cook, for 15 to 20 minutes, stirring frequently, until the chillies lose their raw edge. Stir in the bread crumbs and cook, stirring frequently, until the sauce is lightly thickened, about 10 minutes. Add the chocolate and cook, stirring constantly, until it is well dissolved. Add the salt and the shredded meat. Cover partially and cook, stirring occasionally, just until heated through, 7 to 10 minutes. Taste for seasoning and add another pinch or two of salt if desired.