Mexican cuisine

Mexican cuisine, a style of food that originates in Mexico, is known for its varied flavors, colourful decoration and variety of spices and ingredients, most of which are native to the country. The cuisine of Mexico has evolved through thousands of years of blending indigenous cultures, with later foreign elements added after the 16th century. In November 2010, Mexican cuisine was added by UNESCO to its lists of the world's "intangible cultural heritage".

Mexican foods

The staples of Mexican foods are typically corn and beans. Corn is used to make masa, dough for tamales, tortillas, gorditas, and many other corn-based foods. Corn is also eaten fresh, as corn on the cob and as a component of a number of dishes. Squash and chili peppers are also prominent in Mexican cuisine. Mexican cuisine is considered one of the most varied in the world, after Chinese and Indian.

The most frequently used herbs and spices in Mexican cuisine are chiles, oregano, cilantro, epazote, cinnamon, and cocoa. Chipotle, a smoke-dried jalapeño chilli, is also common in Mexican cuisine. Many Mexican dishes also contain garlic and onions.

Honey is an important ingredient in many Mexican dishes, such as the rosca de miel, a bundt-like cake, and in beverages such as balché.

Next to corn, rice is the most common grain in Mexican cuisine. According to food writer Karen Hursh Graber, the initial introduction of rice to Spain from North Africa in the 4th century led to the Spanish introduction of rice into Mexico at the port of Veracruz in the 1520s. This, Graber says, created one of the earliest instances of the world's greatest fusion cuisines.

Alcoholic beverages native to Mexico include mescal, pulque, and tequila. Beer in Mexico has a long history. While Mesoamerican cultures knew of fermented alcoholic beverages, including a corn beer, long before the Spanish conquest, European-style beer brewed with barley was introduced with the Spanish soon after Hernán Cortés arrival. The arrival of German immigrants and the short-lived empire of Austrian Maximilian I in the 19th century provided the impetus for the opening of many breweries in various parts of the country. There are also international award-winning Mexican wineries that produce and export wine.

History

Corn (maize), one of the world's major grain crops, is thought to have originated in Mexico. When conquistadores arrived in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), they found that the people's diet consisted largely of corn-based dishes with chiles and herbs, usually complemented with beans and tomatoes or nopales. The diet of the indigenous peoples of pre-Columbian Mexico also included chocolate, vanilla, tomatillos, avocado, guava, papaya, sapote, mamey, pineapple, soursop, jicama, squash, sweet potato, bell peppers, peanuts, agave, chili peppers, chicle, sunflower seeds,
Cheese

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the Mesoamerican diet did not include dairy products, so cheese making was unknown. The Spanish conquistadors brought cows, goats, and sheep to the New World, permanently changing Mexican dietary habits. The Spanish also brought techniques to make cheeses from their homeland, such as manchego. Over the colonial period, cheese making was modified to suit the mixed European indigenous tastes of Mexicans, varying by region. This blending and variations have given rise to a number of varieties of Mexican cheeses. These are most popular in the country although European cheeses are made as well. Most cheeses are made with raw (unpasteurized) milk, which has caused some health issues. Cheeses are made in the home, on small farms or ranches, and by major dairy product firms. There are somewhere between twenty and forty different varieties of cheese in Mexico, depending on how one classifies. Some, such as Oaxaca and panela, are made all over Mexico, but many are regional cheeses known only in certain sections on the country.

Chocolate

Chocolate played an important part in the history of Mexican cuisine. The word "chocolate" originated from Mexico's Aztec cuisine, derived from the Nahuatl word xocolatl. Chocolate was first drunk rather than eaten. It was also used as currency and for religious rituals. The Maya civilization grew cacao trees and used the cacao seeds it produced to make a frothy, bitter drink. The drink, called xocoatl, was often flavored with vanilla, chili pepper, and achiote. Chocolate was also an important luxury good throughout pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and cacao beans were often used as currency. For example, the Aztecs used a system in which one turkey cost one hundred cacao beans and one fresh avocado was worth three beans; and all of the areas that were conquered by the Aztecs that grew cacao beans were ordered to pay them as a tax, or as the Aztecs called it, a "tribute". Just as modern Mexicans do today, the Aztecs developed a range of chocolate cuisine. Using recipes handed down the generations, Mexicans incorporate chocolate into many of their meals, not using it simply as an ingredient for confections. Today one can find chocolate is used in a wide array of Mexican foods, from savory dishes such as mole to traditional Mexican style hot chocolate and champurrados, both of which are prepared with a molinillo.

Regional cuisine

Mexican food varies by region because of Mexico's large size, local climate and geography, ethnic differences among the indigenous inhabitants and because these different populations were influenced by the Spaniards in varying degrees. The north of Mexico is known for its beef, goat and ostrich production and meat dishes, in particular the well-known arrachera cut.

Northern Mexico is also known for its carne asada (lit. "grilled meat"), an item that consists of thin beef steak. The meat can be marinated by rubbing with olive oil and sea salt or with spice rubs such as lemon and pepper or garlic salt, lime and Worcestershire sauce, before being cooked on a grill.
The dish is traditionally in the states of Sonora, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Coahuila, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Durango, and Tamaulipas.

In the Yucatán, a unique, natural sweetness (instead of spiciness) exists in the widely used local produce along with significant use of achioté seasoning. In contrast, the Oaxacan region is known for its savory tamales, celebratory moles, and simple tlayudas, while the mountainous regions of the West (Jalisco, etc.) are known for goat birria (goat in a spicy tomato-based sauce).

Central Mexico's cuisine is largely influenced by the rest of the country, but has unique and tasty dishes such as pozole, menudo, barbacoa and carnitas.

Southeastern Mexico is known for its spicy vegetable and chicken-based dishes. Cochinita pibil (also puerco pibil) is a traditional Mexican slow-roasted pork dish from the Yucatán Peninsula. The cuisine of Southeastern Mexico has a considerable Caribbean influence due to its location. Seafood is commonly prepared in states that border the Pacific Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico, the latter having a famous reputation for its fish dishes, à la veracruzana. According to the book "Mexico One Plate At a Time," even though the dish ceviche has been a part of traditional Mexican coastal cuisine for centuries, ceviche is not a dish native to Mexico. Despite this, Mexican ceviche has developed its own distinct styles that make it unique from the other variations available. The origin of ceviche is disputed but its a seafood dish popular in the coastal regions of the Americas.

Mexican laws state that tequila can be produced only in the state of Jalisco and limited regions in the states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, Nayarit, and Tamaulipas. Mexico has claimed the exclusive international right to the word "tequila". The truest tequila of all is said to come solely from the highlands of Jalisco. In a similar fashion, Mezcal is distinctly known to originate and be exclusive to the Sierra regions of Oaxaca.

In pueblos or villages, there are also more exotic dishes, cooked in the Aztec or Mayan style (known as comida prehispánica) with ingredients ranging from iguana to rattlesnake, deer, corn fungus, spider monkey, chapulines, ant eggs, and other kinds of insects.

**Street cuisine**

Throughout the country one of the most popular forms to buy food is from informal street vendors. Despite sanitary concerns, its consumption is extremely widespread in cities because it's the most practical and often cheapest way to lunch after the fast food. The dishes most commonly offered by street vendors are tacos, tortas, quesadillas, tamales, elotes, abulon, camotes, water-based ice cream, and candy; and drinks such as aguas frescas, tejuino, tepache, and atole.

**Modern cuisine**

Recently other cuisines of the world have acquired popularity in Mexico, thus adopting a Mexican fusion cuisine. For example, sushi in Mexico is often made with a variety of sauces based on local ingredients like mango or tamarind and very often served with serrano-blended soy sauce, or complimented with habanero and chipotle peppers. The large immigration of Middle Easterns, Africans, Asians, and Europeans in Mexico has influenced Mexican cuisine as well, but the most influential is the Spanish cuisine. For example, Paella, Dates, Tacos Árabes and dolma have their origins in Arab cuisine.
In most regions of Mexico, it is unusual to put cheese in tacos or tostadas (unless it is the typically Mexican panela cheese). However, in southern Mexico, it is common to use cheese in both tacos and tostadas and in other Mexican dishes such as picadas and enchiladas. Cheddar cheese is not used in Mexican cuisine, whereas in the United States, it is considered an essential part of a "Mexican cheese blend".

While Mexican restaurants can be found in many parts of North America, Europe and in many cities around the world, restaurants outside of Mexico often feature non-traditional ingredients, such as grated American-style cheese, "nacho" cheese or tomato-based sauce substitutes for Mexican chile-based sauces or mole, or the common use in the United States of hard-shelled tacos instead of the Mexican style "soft" or fresh tortillas. In this particular case, the usual ingredients of hard-shelled tacos (fried tortilla, ground beef lettuce, diced tomato, onions and some form of salsa) have more in common with Mexican tostadas that they do with Mexican tacos.

The four states bordering Mexico (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California), and the other southwest states such as Colorado, Nevada, and Utah have large expatriate Mexican populations, which in effect has produced a wide variety of authentic Mexican restaurants. In other areas of the United States and Canada, Mexican dishes and restaurants vary as much as Chinese restaurants and dishes do between China and the US and other countries outside Asia.