

Taste | Food & Wine



Sabores de Oaxaca

Vibrant region of Mexico has rich culinary tradition



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

The Oaxacan cuisine utilizes a variety of seeds, nuts, beans and rice, as seen here for sale in the central marketplace.

The flavors of this Mexican state have been utilized since ancient times

Sabores de Oaxaca

By MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ and JULIO RAMIREZ
Herald Correspondents

The Mexican state of Oaxaca is a mountainous land of imposing pyramids, ornate cathedrals, colonial towns and small villages bordering the Pacific coast.

In this relatively inaccessible region of Mexico, tradition is treasured, and more than 14 different indigenous languages are still spoken today.

Food Wranglers Back Roads, Good Food



Nestled high in a valley of the Sierra Madres, the vibrant city of Oaxaca unites the legacies of two pre-Columbian empires — Zapotec and Mixtec — with that of Colonial Spain, and celebrates this heritage with dance, music, festivals and a rich culinary tradition.

Walking through the streets of Oaxaca is a feast for the senses. Bright white clouds and stone cathedrals reflecting the mountain sun

punctuate the cerulean sky. Cobble streets lined with multicolored houses lead to the tree-shaded central plaza where balloon vendors and ice cream men cater to laughing children and their families. The air is filled with the sounds of marimbas and guitars as street musicians serenade passing strollers and diners



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Chef Julio Ramirez speaks to a produce vendor in the marketplace.

socializing in the cafes and restaurants around the plaza.

A few blocks away, the large central marketplace bustles with shoppers and vendors haggling over the harvests from Oaxaca's orchards, farms, fields and sea.

This cornucopia includes many foods, herbs and spices unique to Oaxacan cuisine — many

cactus "paddles"; and mezcal, artesianally distilled juice from 10-year old agave plants.

Many stalls in the marketplace, like that of the Garcia family, feature quesillo, the unique Oaxacan "string cheese." Quesillo is formed in ribbons, then it's rolled up into a ball. To sell it, a length is unrolled, cut and weighed; then the strip is rewound and wrapped for the customer.

Somewhat like mozzarella, but more flavorful, quesillo is used extensively in Oaxacan cooking.

Besides cheeses, the Garcías also make and sell their own moles — arguably the most distinctive element of traditional Oaxacan cuisine. They proudly claim that "not all moles are the same; not everyone uses the same ingredients. We have our own recipe."

A mole is a complex sauce for poultry or pork, made by toasting, grinding, sautéing and blending chiles, nuts, seeds, herbs and spices. It can take more than a day to properly make some moles, and many families have mole recipes that have been handed down for generations. Oaxaca is often referred to as the "land of seven moles"

One of the key characteristics of Oaxacan cooking, exemplified in the making of moles, is the layering of flavors, the result of the attention paid to grinding, roasting and blending.

utilized since ancient times. Among them: cuilecochle, a corn fungus used in tacos; hoja santa, a distinctive anise-flavored herb used to flavor beans, soups and tamales; squash blossoms and vines, used in soups and quesadillas; chapulines, grasshoppers roasted or fried then sprinkled with dried chile, salt and lime; tamales, wrapped and steamed in banana leaves; chocolate made from cacao beans ground with almonds, sugar and cinnamon; a spectrum of chiles — dried, smoked and fresh; quelites, wild and cultivated field greens; nopalitos, young

Please see **Oaxaca** page 7

Oaxaca

From page 6

because there are at least seven types used extensively in Oaxacan cuisine. Mole *negro* (black mole) is probably the most well-known and most complex: this rich chocolaty sauce can include — depending on whose recipe you are using — hoja santa, chocolate, sesame seeds, cloves, walnuts, pecans, chiles negros, chilhuatles, anchos and guajillos, oregano, ginger, nutmeg, allspice and cinnamon. Then there's mole *coloradito* (little red mole), mole *rojo* (red mole), mole *verde* (green mole), *manchamantel* ("tablecloth stainer"), mole *amarillo* (yellow mole), and mole *chichilo*. Each mole has its own purpose; while mole negro is usually served with pork, mole verde is served with chicken or turkey.

One of the key characteristics of Oaxacan cooking, exemplified in the making of moles, is the layering of flavors, the result of the attention paid to grinding, roasting and blending. This attention extends even to the making of popular drinks such as chocolate, tejate, a Zapotec beverage made from corn, cacao, mamey seeds, *flores de cacao* (blossoms from an indigenous tree) and *horchata*. Horchata, a refreshing *agua fresca* ladled by street vendors from large glass jars, is made by soaking rice, grinding it and custom blending it with ground almonds, cinnamon, vanilla or lime rind, sugar and sometimes a hint of prickly pear.

Some Oaxacan foods seem exotic to Americans. One, the *nieve de leche quemada* ("burnt milk sherbet") is sold in ice cream shops all over town. We had assumed it would have a caramel flavor. It doesn't. It tastes just like burnt milk — a taste that screams "oops!" to the American palate. But *leche quemada*, especially paired with prickly pear sherbet, is a real favorite of Oaxacans. The flavor of "burnt" is very important in Oaxacan cuisine. Burnt tortillas are an ingredient in the mole called *chichilo*, and burnt chile seeds are used to acquire the black color for mole negro.

We sampled the chapulines (grasshoppers) at the marketplace — where a myriad of baskets and trays of these



Food vendors sell a variety of prepared dishes, from pickled pork and chiles rellenos to sautéed field greens, and salads of nopalitos (young cactus "paddles"). Below: A young couple share a kiss in the colorful main square.

insects are offered for sale — and we tried chiles rellenos with chapulines and tacos of chapulines at restaurants.

Where, we wondered, were all these insects coming from? Grasshopper ranches? No. In the rainy season, grasshoppers are in the corn fields or in the alfalfa fields; some

grasshoppers are gathered with nylon nets, but the majority of them are gathered manually as the harvesters pull their hands gently along the corn stalks.

We were told, "Oaxacans have eaten grasshoppers 'since forever.' They contain a lot of protein — almost as much as a beef steak." We heard the

Mexican government had once planned a project to make tortillas with ground chapulines to feed poorly nourished indigenous people, but it was never implemented.

Many of the cooks we encountered in the central marketplace in Oaxaca, as well as at local village markets, were women — entrepreneurs and true professionals. Up before dawn, they prepare their recipes to sell at the market. They know their customers well, and banter and gossip with them as well as with fellow vendors.

Rosalía Hernández has a stall in Etlá. Her table is full of premade dishes: fava bean paste, sautéed field greens, chapulines, *nopalito* salad, pickled pork, chiles rellenos . . . the list goes on. María Luisa Vásquez Cerero in Zaachila, on the other hand, prepares food as you wait. She ladles a spoonful of calf brains simmered in a spicy sauce onto an uncooked corn tortilla, adds a leaf of hoja santa, seals the ends and deep-fries the taco. She serves it on paper, topped with shredded cabbage and chile colorado sauce.

While there are cooking classes for tourists, there are no professional culinary schools in Oaxaca — cooks wanting to work in a Oaxacan restaurant must start at the bottom and learn the complex recipes from their mentors. The chefs in traditional restaurants jealously guard the integrity of their heirloom

recipes, often handed down from old family members. Talking to them, the pride in their cuisine is evident. While a few innovative chefs are tweaking traditional cuisine a bit — incorporating new ingredients into traditional recipes — most chefs see very little change in the future of Oaxacan cuisine: "Some people are starting to make mole negro with oil instead of lard — they say it's more healthful — but this just doesn't have the same flavor."

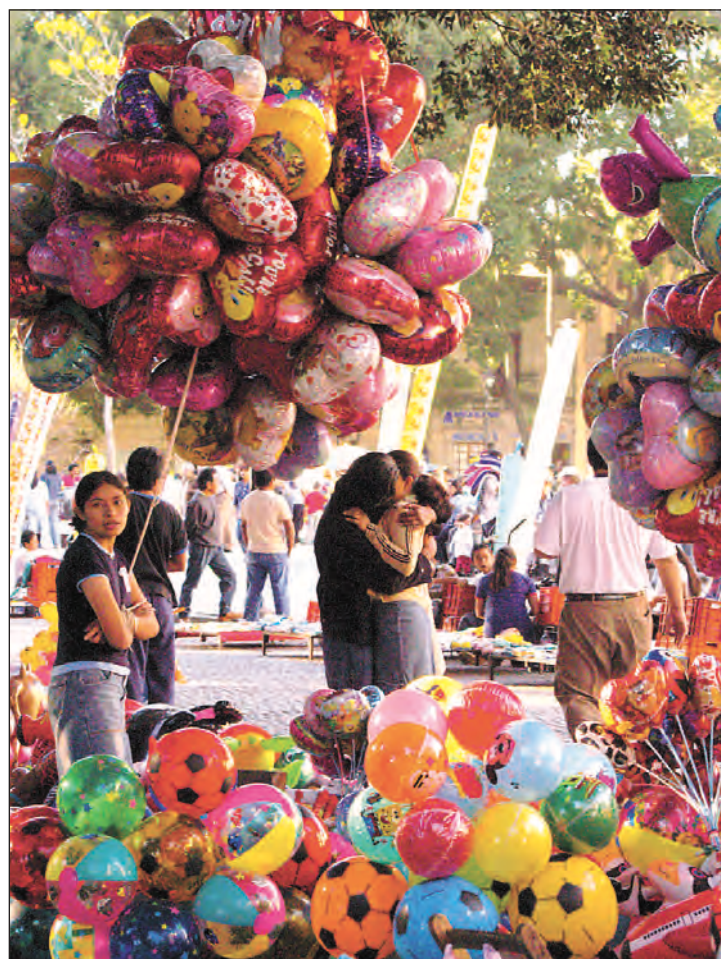
And in Oaxaca, flavor is everything.

Horchata del mercado (Makes 8 servings)

One of the favorite aguas frescas sold in the market places and on the streets of Oaxaca — as well as throughout Latin America — horchata combines rice with cinnamon, vanilla and sugar to make a refreshing drink that tastes like a liquid rice pudding. It goes well with spicy mole dishes.

- 2 cups of good quality rice, such as basmati or jasmine
- 6 cups of filtered water
- 1 cinnamon stick (about 3 inches), broken (or use 1 tsp. ground)
- 1 vanilla bean, split in half
- ½ cup of natural almonds (not peeled), ground
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon (for garnish)

Steps: Place the rice, water, cinnamon, vanilla and almonds in a large jar or pitcher, cover and let set overnight (or for at least 10



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

Oaxaca

From page 7

hours) — the longer the better. Stir occasionally.

Place the ingredients from the jar or pitcher into a blender and, beginning on slow, increase the speed and purée for 1 minute at high speed. Pass the contents of the blender through a sieve or a piece of damp cheese cloth folded twice. When all of the liquid from the blender has been strained, press on the remainder in the sieve (or squeeze the contents remaining in the cheesecloth) to extract as much of the liquid as possible. Discard the remainders and return the liquid to the blender; add the sugar and blend. Pour into a serving pitcher and chill.

Before serving, stir the mixture. Serve in a tall glass with ice; dust the top of the drink with a sprinkling of ground cinnamon.

Chicken tacos with mole coloradito (Makes 8 tacos)

Wondering what to do with leftover mole? Make these delicious tacos. If you have leftover chicken from making stock, or from another meal, use that, or simmer two legs and two thighs over medium low heat for 50 minutes until tender.

1½ to 2 cups shredded chicken meat (bones and skin discarded)
2 cups Mole coloradito (See recipe)
8 corn tortillas (7-to-8 inches in

diameter)

½ cup (4 oz.) cotija cheese, crumbled, (available at Latin markets, such as Mi Tierra in Seaside and Mi Pueblo in Salinas)
Salt to taste
3 T. chopped cilantro
3 T. sesame seeds
1 large Hass avocado (Mexican or Californian), ripe but firm, peeled and sliced into eight sections

Steps: In a small pot, bring chicken and mole to simmer over medium heat; heat for 5 minutes.

For each taco: Using tongs, heat the tortilla on an open burner over medium high heat, rotating occasionally, for about a minute (the tortilla will begin to have a roasted corn aroma); flip over and toast the other side for about 30 seconds — be careful not to burn. (Note: if you have an *asedor*, a metal screen for roasting chiles, place that over the burner to toast the tortillas). Place the tortilla on a plate, ladle 3 T. of the chicken mole onto the tortilla, top with 1 T. cheese and 1 tsp. sesame seeds; garnish with an avocado slice.

Mole coloradito (Serves 4)

This is one of the seven classic mole sauces from Oaxaca, and probably our favorite. Complex mole recipes are passed down like heirlooms in families, their secrets carefully guarded. Making a mole is very time-consuming, but satisfying. It is an art. When you make a mole from scratch, you really come to appreciate a culture that prizes the intricacies of blending flavors and the subtle contribution that each of the many ingredients adds to the final dish.

In Oaxaca you can buy premade mole pastes by the kilo from vendors in the marketplace; cooks there use them as a base. In the States you can buy jars of manufactured mole sauces; the sauces are not close to handmade moles, but they save time, and you can customize the sauce by adding ingredients.

To make Mole coloradito, you must first make the chicken stock.

Chicken stock

1 4-lb. chicken, cut into 8 pieces
¾ cup chopped celery
1 cup chopped onions
1 cup chopped carrots
8 cloves of garlic, chopped
1 bay leaf
8 peppercorns
1 chile serrano, chopped
3 T. kosher salt (1½ T. table salt)
Water to cover stock ingredients

Steps: Put all of the above ingredients into a large pot; cover with water; bring to a near boil over high heat, reduce the heat to low and cook for 2 hours uncovered. Remove from heat and allow to cool. Refrigerate in the pot. Before using, remove the solid cap of grease that will have formed over the stock in the pot.

When ready to make mole, remove the chicken pieces from the stock; place chicken in a separate container; keep refrigerated. Bring the stock to simmer over medium heat, when it simmers, remove from heat. Strain stock through a sieve; reserve the broth and discard vegetables.

Mole coloradito

20 ancho chiles, about 5 oz., and 18 guajillo chiles, about 4 oz. (sold dried, in cellophane bags at supermarkets or Latin markets)

2 qts. water
5 peppercorns
3 whole cloves
2 whole allspice “nuts”
1 cinnamon stick, broken
8 cloves garlic
1 med. onion, chopped
1½ lbs. chopped fresh tomatoes
1 tsp. thyme
1 tsp. oregano
5½ cups chicken stock (see chicken and stock recipe above)
5 T. sunflower oil
1 plantain (firm, not ripe), peeled and sliced into ¼-inch thick rounds.
1 T. (compacted) raisins
10 whole unpeeled almonds
1 French roll or 1 Mexican bolillo, cut into cubes
3 T. sesame seeds
8 oz. Mexican Chocolate, about 2½ tablets (e.g. Mi Abuela or Ibarra chocolate available in supermarkets or Latin markets), broken with a mallet (put the tablets inside of a

About the authors

Julio Ramirez and Marie Perucca-Ramirez, creators of the Fishwife Seafood Restaurants and Turtle Bay taquerias on the Peninsula, sold their restaurants to start The Food Wranglers Inc., a restaurant consultant group.

Julio is certified as an executive chef by the American Culinary Federation and in 1999 was inducted into the prestigious American Academy of Chefs. Marie is a writer with a degree in history and sociology and a master's in applied linguistics.

The couple have always enjoyed traveling the back roads of the world; they are interested in seeing what other ethnic groups grow, what they eat, how they prepare their food — what their various cultures “taste like.”

During their travels they have met many remarkable individuals, had a number of unusual experiences, eaten a variety of unfamiliar foods — and collected some great recipes they have adapted for home use.

Once a month they will share their experiences — through words and photos — with Herald readers. Write to them at marie@foodwranglers.com.

a blender and add ¾ cup of the chicken stock; purée into a smooth paste. Set aside.

Heat the heavy bottom sauté pan for 2 minutes over medium heat; add 3 T. of sunflower oil and sauté the plantain pieces for 2½ minutes on each side until they are golden brown. Remove from pan and place on paper towels and allow to cool. In the same hot pan with the same oil, add the raisins, cook for 1 minute — they will begin to plump up — add the almonds and continue to cook, stirring 2 or 3 minutes until the almonds are toasted. Remove from the pan and set aside with the plantains.

Put the bread, the plantain and the raisins and nuts into the blender, add 3 cups of the chicken stock and purée at high speed for 4 minutes until all the almonds have been puréed. Set aside.

Using the same sauté pan, wipe off the excess oil with a paper towel, return to heat and cook over medium heat for 2 minutes, add the sesame seeds and toast for 3 minutes, shaking the pan constantly, until they become golden brown. Be careful not to burn. Remove from heat, place on a paper towel to cool. Using a mortar and pestle or a spice grinder, grind them into a paste. Set aside.

Drain the chiles (reserve the liquid), and place them into a blender. Add 1 cup of the chile liquid to the blender and purée; add another cup, purée, add a third cup and purée until you have a smooth paste.

In a heavy-bottomed stock or soup pot, heat 2 T. of the oil over medium heat, carefully add the chile paste puree; when it reaches simmer, reduce heat to low and cook for 20 minutes, stirring constantly. Add the tomato spice purée to the chile paste, mixing well; cook for 10 more minutes. Add the plantain bread puree, mix well and cook for 5 more minutes, stir continuously. Add the sesame seed paste and the chocolate pieces, stir, add 2 cups — or more — of chicken stock (you want the sauce to be smooth with enough consistency to coat the spoon). Add salt, correct the seasoning, cook, stirring occasionally, for 20 minutes or more (more is better).

About a half hour before you want to eat, remove the chicken pieces from the refrigerator, remove the skin, and gently place the pieces into the simmering mole sauce — don't stir; cover and reduce the heat, allowing the chicken to heat up gently in the sauce. Simmer gently for 15 minutes; don't stir — you do not want the chicken to fall apart.

To serve: Place two pieces of chicken in a bowl, ladle on sauce; garnish with chopped cilantro, chopped roasted almonds, and sesame seeds.

Suggested accompaniments: rice, warm corn tortillas and roasted squash.

paper bag first)

1 T. or more kosher salt, to taste (½ T. table salt)

Garnish:

3 T. chopped tasted almonds
2 T. chopped cilantro
1 tsp. toasted sesame seeds (optional)

Steps: Heat a heavy-bottomed sauté pan or skillet over medium heat for 2 minutes; add enough chiles to cover the bottom of the pan (do this in batches), toast for 2 minutes then turn and toast for 2 minutes more. The chiles will begin to blister. Don't let them burn. (Put the fan on in the kitchen — chile fumes can be bothersome). Repeat until all chiles are toasted. When the chiles are toasted, remove the stems (they'll snap off) and shuck the seeds out and discard.

Bring the water to a boil in a teapot, put the chiles in container, cover them with a weight, such as a dish, to hold them down, pour the hot water over the chiles and let them soak for 20 minutes.

Heat the heavy-bottomed pan over medium heat for 2 minutes, add the peppercorns, cloves, allspice and cinnamon, heat for 2½ to 3 minutes until they begin giving off a spicy aroma; add the garlic and the onion, stir well; cook for 3 minutes. When the onions are translucent, add the tomatoes, the thyme and the oregano. Cook for 5 minutes, stirring. Remove from heat and allow to cool.

Put the tomato spice mixture into

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