

The state of Oaxaca is a mountainous land of imposing pyramids, ornate cathedrals, colonial towns and small villages bordering Mexico's Pacific coast. Tradition is treasured here. High in a valley of the Sierra Madres, the vibrant city of Oaxaca unites the legacies of two pre-Columbian empires—the Zapotec and the Mixtec—with that of Colonial Spain, and celebrates this heritage with dance, music, festivals and a rich culinary tradition.

In the past, limited air connections and poor roads kept Oaxaca relatively isolated from mainstream Mexico and off the beaten path for most travelers. But this is no longer the case. Increased tourism, the recent swell of immigrants from Oaxaca to the United States, and heightened interest on the part of American chefs in the regional cuisines of Mexico have introduced the American palate to the flavors of Oaxaca.

#### At the market

Blessed with several micro climates, Oaxaca has a variety of produce, dairy and seafood available in its central marketplace: bananas, plantains, coconuts, papaya and tamarinds from the tropical lowlands; black beans, corn, squash, pumpkins, chiles and herbs from the farms; coffee and *mezcal* from the highlands; fish and shellfish from the southern coast and isthmus; and specialty cheeses from the mountain valleys.

This cornucopia includes food items and ingredients unique to Oaxacan cuisine, many dating back to ancient times, among them: *cuitilecocble*, a corn fungus used in tacos; *hoja santa*, a distinctive anise-flavored herb; *chapulines*, roasted or fried grasshoppers sprinkled with dried chile, salt and lime; cacao beans ground Oaxacan-style with almonds, sugar and

# Savoring Oaxaca

*In Oaxaca, dishes from age-old recipes using unique ingredients from the region's orchards, fields, farms and sea grace restaurant tables, marketplace stalls and street vendors' cooking pots.*

BY MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ AND  
JULIO J. RAMIREZ, CEC, AAC



Julio Ramirez discusses produce with a vendor at the Zaachila market.

cinnamon; *tlayudas*, giant corn tortillas brushed with rendered pork fat, toasted and topped with fresh cheese, tomatoes, lettuce and chorizo; *quelites*, field greens; *nopalitos*, young cactus “paddles”; *mezcal*, artisanally distilled juice from 10-year-old agaves; and *cesina*, semi-dried thin slices of lightly salted pork infused with chile and spices.

Many stalls in the marketplace feature *quesillo*, the unique Oaxacan “string cheese,” formed in ribbons and then rolled up into a ball. *Quesillo* is somewhat like mozzarella, but more flavorful, and it’s used extensively in Oaxacan cooking. In addition to cheeses, the stalls sell a variety of *moles*, arguably the most distinctive element of traditional Oaxacan cuisine. These complex sauces for turkey, chicken and pork are made by toasting, grinding, sautéing and blending chiles, nuts, seeds, herbs and spices. It can take more than a day to make properly, and some families have recipes that have been handed down for generations.

In the central marketplace in Oaxaca, as well as at local village markets, most of the cooks of both fast food and what has become known as home-replacement meals are women. Rosalia Hernandez has a stall at the Wednesday market in Etna, and her table is full of pre-made dishes such as: fava-bean paste sautéed field greens, *chapulines*, *nopalito* salad, deep-fried potato balls, pickled pork and *chiles rellenos*. At the Thursday market in Zaachila, Maria Luisa Vasquez Cerero prepares food as customers wait. She ladles a spoonful of beef brains simmered in a spicy sauce onto an uncooked corn tortilla, adds a leaf of *boja santa*, seals the ends and deep-fries the taco. She serves it on paper, topped with shredded cabbage and *chile colorado* sauce. Another favorite from her stand is squash blossoms and *queso fresco*—a fresh, moist, crumbly cheese that doesn’t melt when heated—in a deep-fried taco.

### On the menu

Catedral is a white-tablecloth restaurant near the central plaza that has been owned by the Escobar family for 25 years. It is committed to serving the traditional cuisine of Oaxaca, and Adriana Aguilar Escobar says, “We don’t vary from the recipes, and there is no experimentation or alteration.”

Martina Escobar de Aguilar, Adriana’s mother, was given instruction in cooking in her native town of Tehuantepec when she was a young girl. She taught her recipes to Victoria Zarate Ricardez, who has been Catedral’s chef for 20 years. The restaurant makes its own authentic *mole* every day, and several *mole* dishes



Marie Luisa Vasquez Cerero prepares beef-brain tacos at her stall in the Zaachila market.

are featured on the menu. The restaurant also serves *lechón al horno*—pork marinated overnight in a mixture of spices, herbs, lemon juice and garlic, then wrapped in banana leaves and baked for hours in a low-heat oven—and *moloquitos*, ripe plantains stuffed with *picadillo* (spicy shredded beef) and topped with cream and *quesillo*.

Some of Catedral’s dishes would seem exotic to North Americans, such as the *nieve de leche quemada* (which, literally translated, is “burnt-milk sherbet”). Adriana Aguilar says the “burnt” flavor is important in Oaxacan cuisine. Burnt tortillas are an ingredient in the *mole* called *chichilo*, and, for *mole negro*, the seeds of the chiles are burned to acquire the black color.

*Chapulines* are on the menu at Catedral, as *tacos de chapulines* and *chiles rellenos* with *chapulines* and

cheese. Grasshoppers are abundant in the fields, and, according to Adriana Aguilar, people in Oaxaca have eaten grasshoppers “since forever. They have a lot of protein, almost as much as a beef steak,” she says.

Built around a courtyard, La Biznaga is an upscale restaurant attracting a crowd that appreciates the food cooked by Chef Fernando Lopez Velarde, who respectfully applies the concepts of fusion cuisine to the traditional cuisine of Oaxaca. Originally from Mexico City, Lopez began cooking 20 years ago, and learned his trade in kitchens in Mexico City, Madrid, Barcelona and San Diego. Then he “fell in love with Oaxacan cuisine,” and moved to Oaxaca with his brother to open La Biznaga.

The huge central marketplace in Oaxaca offers Lopez an opportunity to vary the menu each season and also incorporate new ingredients into traditional recipes. While he does not belong to the Slow Food movement, he looks for what he calls “the spirit of Slow Food” in his cuisine. “Oaxacan cooking is very traditional—it’s a ‘virgin cuisine,’” he says. Unlike the chefs in trendsetting Mexico City, he respects tradition but sees that there are many possibilities for development inherent in the cuisine.

He uses products in season, such as tuna, and *cuitlecochle*, the corn

fungus, which he buys in quantity and freezes. In the spring—blackberry season—he makes *mole negro* with blackberries. And when they’re in season, he takes *guayabas*, a fragrant tropical fruit, and makes *ave la Zandunga*: strips of chicken breast wrapped around boiled plantain and cheese, then grilled and served with *mole coloradito* and guavas, topped with pecans. He’s always trying new ideas, and one of his favorite dishes is the *flor de jamaica* appetizer plate. Lopez fries dried hibiscus flowers with dried chiles and onions, and serves them in flour cones with guacamole. “The dish is so unusual that people think it has meat,” he says.

Omar Hernandez is one of two chefs in charge of the kitchen at La Olla, a trendy restaurant whose



Etna is typical of local village markets where produce and fast food sell briskly.

menu is a mix of vegetarian and continental dishes, sandwiches on whole-wheat bread with housemade mayonnaise, and traditional Oaxacan plates such as *tlayudos* and tamales. This gallery/café calls its food “healthy Oaxacan.” While the food is healthful, and canola oil is used in most of its dishes, the *moles*, tamales and *tlayudos* are made with lard, in deference to tradition and taste.

Hernandez began his restaurant career as an assistant barman, but gladly accepted the opportunity to work in the kitchen, where, he says, “You learn more and earn more, and the work is more interesting.” Originally from Morelia in Michoacan, he says it’s difficult to cook traditional Oaxacan cuisine, especially if you are not a native, because the ingredients are specific to the area and people learn the

## Mole

Oaxaca is often referred to as the “land of seven *moles*,” because there are at least seven used extensively in Oaxacan cuisine. *Mole negro* (black *mole*) is probably the most well-known and complex: Depending on whose recipe is being used, this rich, chocolaty sauce can include *hoja santa*, chocolate, sesame seeds, cloves, walnuts, pecans, *chile negro*, *chile chilhuatle*, *chile ancho*, *chile guajillo*, oregano, ginger, nutmeg, all-spice and cinnamon.

Other varieties are *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*, made from tomatillos, *chile poblano*, walnuts, almonds, cloves, squash seeds, garlic, *hoja santa*, parsley and/or *epazote*, is served with chicken or turkey.



A ladle of *chile colorado* sauce tops beef-brain tacos.

recipes from their families. “Those coming from outside learn with difficulty, especially how to make the complicated *moles*,” he says.

Victor Hugo Baños Aquinos has been in the kitchen of Flor de Oaxaca, a locals-oriented restaurant serving traditional food at reasonable prices, for 20 years. Flor de Oaxaca is especially proud of the *mole negro* and *mole colorado*, and traditional dishes such as *cesina* and *tasajo*, air-dried, thinly sliced beef.

A native Oaxacan, Baños was inspired to cook by his father, and started work at age 14. “To be a chef, you must learn by working in the kitchen,” he says. “There’s no standardization, and each restaurant has its own way of doing things.” However, he says there are sanitation standards maintained through the department of tourism, and restaurants are inspected every three to six months. Produce for Flor de

Oaxaca is purchased fresh from the central market, with cash paid upfront. The idea of having produce delivered without being able to hand select the fruits and vegetables is not at all appealing to Baños. However, the restaurant does take delivery on meat and poultry orders.

#### A chef’s life

Chefs agree that there is little communication or organization among restaurants or their chefs in Oaxaca. Many chefs are working for traditional establishments that jealously guard their recipes, which are often handed down from family members.

Baños says chefs don’t really network or problem solve outside their own restaurants. When Flor de Oaxaca needs an employee, other restaurants are not asked for leads. An ad is put in the newspaper, and then the new employee is taught and trained according to the restaurant’s methods.

Innovative chefs, like Lopez, respect the traditional cuisine but are tweaking it and incorporating new ingredients into traditional recipes. But some, like Baños, see very little change in the traditional food. “Some people are starting to make *mole negro* with oil instead of lard,” he says. “But this just doesn’t have the same flavor.”

While there are cooking classes for tourists, there are no professional cooking schools in Oaxaca. According to Lopez, there is a school in Mexico City for chefs, and more men—as well as a few women—are attending culinary school today than in the past. The stature of the chef is changing, but, “Chefs haven’t received the respect that chefs in the United States have gained in the past few years,” Lopez says. “In Mexico, it is still the owners who have the recognition.”

He says there is no professional chef’s association in Oaxaca, and he sees a real need for chefs to organize. “Oaxaca is rich in gastronomic traditions, but aside from the *mole* festival, which is not well organized, there is no event celebrating this heritage,” he says.

While there are few professional women chefs, many women have opened *cocina casera* (homecooking) businesses, where they prepare homemade meals for takeout for a new generation of diners. This concerns Lopez, because he feels that the new generation has *pocas ganas de cocinar*—little interest in cooking—and he’s afraid that the roots of their culinary traditions will be lost. □

*Marie and Julio Ramirez, who own restaurants in Seaside, Monterey and Pacific Grove, Calif., visited Oaxaca in February 2005 to discover the region’s unique flavors and discuss traditional Oaxacan cuisine with chefs and cooks.*