

Mexican Cooking 1

The Magic is in the Maize

I have lived and worked in Mexico and have come to appreciate the fact that there is no such thing as Mexican food. Each region has its own distinctive flavors and ingredients although in most of Mexico, the staple is corn (maize) and it is used for every meal in one way or another. Sweet corn, the corn that we are used to, is not often found in Mexican cooking except as corn on the cob (elote), which most families will buy from a street vender rather than make at home. Corn on the cob is always smothered in a combination of powdered chili and mayonnaise.

Normally, the corn is dried and ground into flour and then used in a startling number of ways. Northern Mexico has been converted to wheat flour but southern Mexico remains tied to the use of maize despite centuries of attempts by the ruling Spanish to change the staple.

There are 4 basic components to any Mexican meal and these components• can be combined in a number of ways to change: 1) meat, 2) beans and/or rice, 3) corn tortillas and 4) condiments (see the “Comment on Heat:” below. In the next few pages, I will provide basic instructions for preparing each of these components and then I will make some suggestions as to how to put it all together.

•The two major elements of Mexican meals (without which a meal is not a meal) is corn in the form of tortillas and beans. That has been the case for literally thousands of years and relates to three plants that were first domesticated in southern Mexico and planted together. Even today you will find fields planted with the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash) in the traditional way. After making a small mound, some corn was planted at the top. After it has sprouted, beans were planted around the corn. As they grow, the corn stalk serves as a pole to support the bean plants. One of these two plants adds nitrogen to the soil and the other takes it away so they are nicely matched. After the beans sprout, a circle of squash plants ring the hill. These produce gourds that are used as contained for the beans and the squash. Note that eating beans and corn provide almost all of the nutrients anyone might need and the occasional addition of peppers and/or meat provide the rest. An amazing combination.

Tortillas

Tortillas are basic flat breads made with corn flour and water. Of course, you can buy these at any grocery store but I suggest you try making your own so that you can appreciate them more. At the grocery store, you are going to find two kinds of tortillas – wheat flour tortillas (these are the ones we are all used to) that originate in northern Mexico and corn flour tortillas – the more traditional tortilla from central and southern Mexico. Corn tortillas tend to be smaller and more dense than the flour tortillas and contribute their own flavor to the meals. I find that the flour tortilla adds texture but very little flavor.

Tortillas are versatile and I have seen folks use them for plates, spoons and napkins as well as for food. They are very handy.

To make your own tortillas all you need is masa harina (corn flour), available in most grocery stores and water. When purchasing your masa, check the ingredients and make sure there are two and only two listed – corn and lime (as in limestone) – as this is true masa harina. Some manufacturers will add wheat flour or preservatives thus rendering the flour useless for tortillas. Make sure that you buy corn flour and not corn meal as they are made by different processes and corn meal is unsuitable for making tortillas

Ingredients

Corn flour (masa harina)

Water

Equipment/Materials

- Flat-bottomed non-stick frying pan or a special comal (a crepe pan would work)
- Tortilla Press (available in some Latin Food stores) or you can use a rolling pin
- Wax Paper

Instructions

Put a flat-bottomed frying pan (a comal) on the stove and turn the burner to medium or medium high. Mix flour and water carefully according to package directions. Use only about 2 cups of flour at first to see how many tortillas you can make with that amount. Once the

flour and water has been mixed in a bowl, pinch off a small amount and roll it into a ball roughly 2 to 3 inches (5 to 8 cm) in diameter. Cover the bowl and the remaining dough with some plastic wrap to prevent the flour mixture from drying out while you work with the tortillas.

Place the ball of dough between two pieces of waxed paper and roll out thin and flat. Remove from the wax paper and place on the hot frying pan (Note: Use a non-stick pan and do NOT add any oil to it. The frying pan must be dry).

Cook on one side for about a minute than flip it over. Cook for about another minute. Remember that you want it soft, not crispy. If it starts to dry out too much it will not taste quite right.

Once the tortilla is done, cover it with a dish towel to keep it warm. Repeat until you have used up all of the mixture. Serve immediately. (If some time passes before the meal and the tortillas cool, put the stack (and the dish towel wrap) into the microwave for 15 to 30 seconds on medium (60%) to reheat. Enjoy.

Tortilla Chips

Enormously popular with non-Mexicans, tortilla chips are a classic way to use leftovers. A family will make enough tortillas for each meal but there are some left over on occasion but they do not keep well. Each reheating changes the corn flavor. The solution is to fry the leftovers and add salsa.

Ingredients

Left-over corn tortillas
Salt (Optional)

Instructions

Put a flat-bottomed frying pan (the same one you used to make the tortillas) onto a burner and add a small amount of oil – enough to just cover the bottom of the pan (in Mexico, they would use corn oil but feel free to use any vegetable oil except olive oil which has much too strong a taste). Heat the oil using a medium to medium-high setting. Cut the leftover tortillas into triangles and add enough to the frying

pan to form a single loose layer. Fry for about 30 seconds and then flip the chips over. Continue to fry until the chips are crisp (roughly 1 minute more) and then take the chips out of the oil with a lifter and place on paper towels to dry (the paper towel will absorb most of the oil). At this point, you can sprinkle the chips with salt if you wish). Repeat the process with the remaining triangles until you've fried all of the chips. Watch the oil as it may be too hot or too cool. Adjust as necessary.

The chips can be stored in a paper bag (loosely sealed) for several days. Serve the chips hot or cold with salsa or guacamole as an appetizer or as a snack with drinks and conversation. Be careful though as they are addictive and you may find yourself making too many tortillas just so you'll have leftovers.

Las Salsas Mexicanas

There are three basic salsas (or sauces) that will be on any Mexican table at mealtime. All three are easy to prepare and add the right amount of heat to any dish. Try them all and you will quickly develop a preference for one or the other (or a combination).

Note that the heat of the salsa depends on the seeds of the chiles. To obtain the mildest salsa, remove all of the seeds before using the chile peppers. For maximum heat, include all of the seeds in your mixture. Some of my younger (non-Mexican) friends like to find the hottest commercial sauces and challenge each other to see who can eat their food with the greatest heat. Although that can be fun, it is not part of the Mexican food experience. I have found that some of the spicier salsas simply burn and eliminate your ability to taste the more subtle flavors.

Also, you should be aware that the combination of tomatoes and the various chiles is affected by metal, you should never mix, store, or serve any of the following sauces in metal bowls or other containers. Ceramic or china bowls are best although wooden ones are acceptable.

The three salsas served as condiments at virtually every meal are

- 1) a basic fresh salsa often referred to simply as salsa or “Salsa Mexicana,”
- 2) Salsa Roja (made from roasted red tomatoes) and
- 3) Salsa Verde (made with Mexican green tomatoes called tomatillos).

I have included my recipes for all three but keep in mind there are hundreds of variations as each family has its own secret recipes. My recipes are as follows:

Fresh Salsa Mexicana

INGREDIENTS

3 ripe tomatoes, chopped

½ cup chopped onion

4 to 6 green chiles, finely chopped (either chiles serranos or jalapeños)

1 teaspoon salt

2 teaspoons lemon juice – freshly squeezed

½ cup cilantro leaves, chopped (OPTIONAL)

DIRECTIONS

Add all of the ingredients to a single mixing bowl in the order listed above. Stir gently with a wooden spoon. Serve immediately or refrigerate for up to 3 days)

Mexican Salsa Verde (Green Sauce) aka Salsa Molcajete

INGREDIENTS

3 cups water

1 teaspoon salt

2 cloves garlic

4 chiles verdes (serrano or jalapeño)

1 pound (500 grams) tomatillos (Mexican green tomatoes), husks removed

½ cup loosely packed fresh cilantro (optional)

¼ cup finely chopped onions

DIRECTIONS

Wash tomatillos and remove husks.

Put tomatillos, salt, garlic, and chiles in a saucepan with 3 cups of water. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 8 minutes. Drain. Reserve ½ cup of the liquid.

Transfer tomatillos, garlic, chiles, and reserved liquid to a blender. Add cilantro (if desired) and carefully puree the mixture. Transfer to a serving bowl and gently stir in the chopped onions.

Refrigerate before serving.

Mexican Salsa Roja (Red Sauce)

INGREDIENTS:

4 large tomatoes
5 Jalapeno chiles
2 onions, peeled
4 cloves garlic
½ teaspoon dried oregano
½ teaspoon cumin seeds
1 cup water
Sea salt to taste

DIRECTIONS:

Pan-roast garlic in a hot skillet until it is brown and soft. Peel and put in food processor and pulse several times till coarsely chopped. Pan-roast the whole tomatoes until well browned and soft. Add to processor but do not pulse. Pan-roast the whole jalapeños until well browned. Add to processor but do not pulse. Thickly slice the onions and pan-roast until well browned. Add to processor.

Pulse ingredients several times until starting to blend and coarsely chopped. Pour tomato mixture into a large bowl and stir in oregano, cumin and some of the water till desired consistency is reached. Add Sea salt to taste. You may serve immediately, or cover and refrigerate for up to three days. Bring to room temperature before serving.

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More Salsas Mexicanas

In addition to the 3 basic salsas on every table, there are five more that are popular in the south of Mexico and everyone is familiar with them. They are 1) Guacamole, 2) Pickled Chiles and Vegetables, sometimes called Escabeche, 3) Salsa Ranchera, 4) Salsa de Chile Chipotle, and 5) Salsa de Frutas.

Guacamole

INGREDIENTS

2 large avacodos, mashed with a fork

2-3 jalapeño chile, coarsely chopped

1-2 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1/2 cup diced onion (about 1 medium onion), coarsely chopped

1/2 cup diced tomato

1/2 cup chopped cilantro (optional)

Juice of 2-3 lime, freshly squeezed

Salt and Pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS

This is a chop and mix sauce with no additional work required. You can omit or add more jalapeño depending on how hot you want it. Once all of the ingredients are chopped or mashed, mix them together in a small bowl, pour lime juice over the mixture and serve. Avoid stirring or mixing it too much. Avocados, like apples, brown once they have been exposed to air. Lime juice will delay that color change but make only enough guacamole for immediate use. It cannot be stored – not even overnight.

Pickled Chiles and Vegetables aka Escabeche

INGREDIENTS

1/2 pound jalapeños (or serranos if you prefer)
6 carrots, peeled and sliced into 1/8th inch rounds
2 tablespoons salt
4 to 6 cloves garlic, peeled
1/2 teaspoon whole cumin seeds
2 whole cloves
8 small bay leaves
4 fresh sprigs of thyme or 1/4 teaspoon dried
4 fresh sprigs of marjoram or 1/4 teaspoon dried
8 fresh sprigs of oregano or 1/2 teaspoon dried
1/3 cup olive oil
2 large onions, cut into wedges
2 to 3 cups apple cider vinegar
1/2 teaspoon sugar

DIRECTIONS

Remove the stems from the chiles, then cut each in quarters lengthwise. Discard seeds. Place chiles and carrots in a large bowl. Sprinkle with salt and toss well. Let sit for one hour.

Place the garlic, cumin, cloves, 6 bay leaves, and the herbs in a blender jar. Add 1/4 cup of water and purée mixture.

Heat the oil in a saucepan. Add the blended mixture and the onions. Cook over medium heat until the onions are translucent.

Strain the chiles and carrots and reserve the juice. Add the vegetables to the saucepan. Cook for 10 minutes, stirring often. Add the reserved juice, vinegar, whole cloves, thyme, sugar, and remaining whole bay leaves. Bring to a boil and simmer for about 8 to 10 minutes.

Pack 4 pint-sized sterilized jars with the chiles and vegetables. Top with the vinegar and seal. Process in a hot water bath for 10 minutes. Cool and store. Will keep for a month or so in the fridge.

Salsa Ranchera

INGREDIENTS

3 medium tomatoes, quartered
1 or 2 fresh jalapeño (or Serrano) chiles, seeded and halved
½ cup chopped onion
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tablespoon olive oil
¼ teaspoon ground cumin

DIRECTIONS

Preheat broiler. Place quartered tomatoes and jalapeño halves, cut side down, on a broiler pan. Broil about 4 inches (10 cm) from the heat for about 10 minutes or until tomato and pepper skins start to blacken. Remove from broiler pan. Cool.

Remove skins from tomatoes and peppers. Finely chop both.

In a small saucepan, cook onion and garlic in hot oil for about 3 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, peppers and cumin. Bring to boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 10 to 15 minutes or until most of the liquid has evaporated.

Cool completely. Serve with eggs, chicken, fish or burgers.

Salsa de Chile Chipotle

INGREDIENTS

3 canned chipotle peppers in adobo sauce, rinsed, drained, seeded, and finely chopped (available in most grocery stores)
6 to 8 tomatillos (or 1 12 ounce can), rinsed and drained, husks removed, finely chopped
¼ cup chopped onion
½ teaspoon dried thyme, crushed
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon packed brown sugar
¼ teaspoon salt

DIRECTIONS

In a medium bowl, combine chopped peppers, tomatillos, onion, thyme, garlic, brown sugar, and salt.

Cover and let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes before serving. Can be kept in a covered container in the fridge for up to a week.

Makes a great dip or a relish for most barbequed meats.

Salsa de Frutas

INGREDIENTS

1 ½ cups chopped mango, papaya, peaches, plums and/or pineapple

½ cup chopped sweet red pepper

¼ cup thinly sliced green onions

1 or 2 fresh jalapeño chiles, seeded and finely chopped

¼ cup fresh parsley, chopped

2 tablespoons lime juice, freshly squeezed

DIRECTIONS

In a medium bowl, stir together all of the ingredients. Cover and chill at least 2 hours before serving. Can be kept for up to 2 days.

Use as a dip or on tacos or quesadillas.

A Comment on Heat & Hot Sauces

Many people are surprised to discover that Mexican food, by itself (and including the salsas discussed above), is not spicy hot. Indeed, it is often bland. Instead, there are always condiments – sauces in little bowls – on the table where people can add their own heat to the food they are eating. As a rule, there are always at least two salsas served with each meal – one green and one red. Both are hot but usually, the green one is the hotter of the two but since there is so much local variety, test them before using one or the other. You can easily make your own hot sauces (although there are many available commercially) but keep in mind that the seeds are the hottest parts of any pepper. If you want a mild salsa, remove the seeds. If you like it hotter, include the seeds.

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There has been a great deal of speculation as to why the spiciest foods are found around the equator. I believe that this developed because foods went bad quickly in the hot tropics and people began spicing up the meals so they could eat them longer without refrigeration.

Quesadillas

Quesadillas are by definition cheese filled tortillas (queso means cheese in Spanish) and are easy to make. You can add anything you want to the filling but the main ingredient is always cheese – preferably a stringy cheese that melts easily like Queso Oaxaqueño or mozzarella.

Chicken Quesadillas

INGREDIENTS

6-8 tortillas (either wheat or corn depending on your preference)

1 cup shredded cheese (mozzarella)

1 cup coarsely chopped chicken – cooked*

¼ cup finely chopped onion

¼ cup mushrooms

½ cup chopped tomato (or ¼ cup of Fresh Salsa Mexicana)

DIRECTIONS

Preheat a flat-bottomed frying pan (a crepe pan is perfect or you can get a tortilla pan from your local Latino market) over medium heat. Place a tortilla in the pan and spread a generous amount of the filling over half of the tortilla. Fold the tortilla over to cover the filling. Allow to heat until the cheese begins to melt. Then flip the tortilla and cook on the other side for an additional minute. Remove to a warm plate and put the plate in a warm oven (250°F). Place the second tortilla in the pan and repeat. These quesadillas tend to be quite filling so allow only 1 or 1 ½ per person. Serve with Guacamole or more Fresh Salsa Mexicana as a condiment.

* Quesadillas are perfect for using up leftovers in a delightful way.