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¡Que vivan los tamales!

FOOD AND THE MAKING OF MEXICAN IDENTITY



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While I hope this interpretation will encourage further research into Mexico's rich culinary history, I must warn scholars about the difficulties involved. Sitting in the handsome leather chairs of the Condomex reading room, I could never maintain any semblance of concentration. I paged for hours through well-worn cookbooks in search of the original recipe for *mole poblano*, but was always distracted by my grumbling stomach. In this book I hope to convey some of the expectation I felt each day, waiting anxiously for two o'clock, when the neighborhood *fondas* fired up their grills.

Introduction

The first thing Aztec women did when preparing a festival, according to the Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún, was to make lots of tamales. They also relished chile pepper stews and seed-dough breads, but the cornhusk-wrapped dumplings known as tamales held pride of place in pre-Columbian banquets. For the festival of the jaguar god Tezcatlipoca they stuffed tamales with beans and chiles, while celebrations of the fire god Huehueteotl featured shrimp and chile sauce tamales.¹ These same recipes reappeared, with some modifications, five centuries later in 1992 at the First Annual Week of the Tamal, sponsored by the National Museum of Popular Culture. The speakers at this event, including authors Laura Esquivel and Paco Ignacio Taibo, hailed tamales as icons of the Mexican nation. One might imagine that this has always been true, that shouts of "*¡Que vivan los tamales!*" (Long live tamales) have echoed through the ages. But to do so would be to ignore the treacherous course of Mexican history and the apocalyptic battles of the Spanish Conquest, the Wars of Independence, and the Revolution of 1910. These wars were violent outbreaks of a profound and ongoing struggle to define Mexico's cultural identity. The dinner table also became a battlefield as the wheat bread of Spanish bakers challenged the corn tamales of native women for inclusion in the Mexican national cuisine.

The final outcome of this struggle was not victory for one but, rather, a fusion of both; wheat and corn came to be seen as a complementary pair, each an authentic representation of a mestizo national cuisine. Eating such a mixed cuisine of foods from both Europe and America may provide Mexicans with little national distinction in the postmodern restaurant world. Nor is this global culinary exchange new; cooks since antiquity have spiced

their dishes with exotic ingredients from distant lands. Yet Mexican intellectuals of the twentieth century assigned a unique importance to their mestizo heritage, which unified Old and New World civilizations to form, in the words of José Vasconcelos, a cosmic race. This book examines the importance of a mestizo cuisine—and of the women who created it—in forging the Mexican identity.

While people have long recognized the connections between cuisine and identity, the aphorism that you are what you eat has seldom been applied to the study of modern nationalism. Nevertheless, cuisine and other seemingly mundane aspects of daily life compose an important part of the cultures that bind people into national communities. Witness the numerous culinary stereotypes of foreigners—"Krauts," "Frogs," "Limeys," and "Macaronis"—as well as the deep emotional attachment to childhood foods such as hot dogs and apple pie. Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities*, insightfully described the process of cultural formation that gave birth to nations. He showed that these political communities developed not from folk cultures of the distant past, but rather as a product of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The standardization of vernacular languages through the spread of print and literature allowed people from different ethnic groups to imagine "national" communities that had not previously existed.²

Culinary literature has great potential for contributing to the creation of these national cultures. Cookbook authors help unify a country by encouraging the interchange of foods between different regions, classes, and ethnic groups, and thereby building a sense of community within the kitchen. But these same works also have the power to exclude ethnic minorities or the lower classes by designating their foods as unfit for civilized tables. Government officials often try to dictate national cuisines by encouraging the consumption of particular foods for economic or nutritional purposes. At the same time, urban women may construct a national cuisine out of simple curiosity by exchanging recipes with neighbors from diverse backgrounds. The conflicting motivations for writing cookbooks as well as the arbitrary selection of recipes ensures that national cuisines are diverse and constantly evolving repertoires rather than immutable recipe collections preserved from the distant past, regardless of the claims of authenticity made by their authors. Uniting these multiple visions of the national cuisine is the common goal of making the abstract ideology of nationalism meaningful through the familiar domestic culture of the kitchen.

The making of a Mexican national cuisine was a long and contentious process, as was the forging of the Mexican nation itself. The Spanish con-

quest of America brought together two vastly different cultures with equally distinct culinary traditions. While the conquistadors spoke with awe of Moctezuma's splendid banquets, European settlers tried to transplant their cuisine of wheat to the New World and to eradicate the existing culture of corn. In the former task they succeeded, but only in part, for the new environment required adaptations of Old World cuisine. In the latter goal they failed completely as large parts of New Spain remained stubbornly Indian. The result of this process was a pronounced regionalism, with Spanish culture predominating around Mexico City and to the north while Indian ways prevailed in the south. Following independence in 1821, Mexican elites attempted to bridge the differences of region and class by formulating a national culture, including a national cuisine. Their efforts largely failed in the nineteenth century because they defined the Mexican nation and its cuisine in European terms and excluded the lower classes, particularly Native Americans. Only in the mid-twentieth century did an inclusive national cuisine emerge that combined Indian corn tortillas with European wheat bread.

Yet the acceptance of a mestizo cuisine was far from inevitable. At the turn of the twentieth century, Mexican elites launched a full-scale attack on maize, which they blamed for the failure of national development campaigns. Using spurious applications of the newly developed science of nutrition, intellectuals claimed that corn was inherently inferior to wheat and that progress would only be possible if the government could wean Indians of corn and teach them to eat wheat. This "tortilla discourse" was articulated during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) and implemented by the educational missions of revolutionary governments (1911–1940). Mexican elites ultimately achieved their goal, but not in the manner they had originally envisioned. Agricultural and industrial modernization served not to replace the tortilla but, rather, to commodify it, transforming corn from a subsistence crop to a market commodity. Finally in the 1940s, after peasant radicalism had been tamed, a growing urban middle class, self-confident in its mestizo identity, appropriated the popular foods of the streets and the countryside, and proclaimed them to be the Mexican national cuisine.

The study of national cuisines, in Mexico and elsewhere, offers new perspectives on the roles of gender, class, and geography in forging nations. Cuisine illuminates the complex interplay between regional and national identities, as well as providing a view from below of how women and the lower classes have influenced nationalist ideology.

The process of unifying regional cooking styles into a national cuisine

illustrates the new spatial conceptions implicit in the formation of national identities. Arjun Appadurai, in a study of cookbooks in contemporary India, described how middle-class women have combined the diverse regional and ethnic foods of the subcontinent into a unified national cuisine. Cookbook authors established standardized Indian menus, then suggested a variety of local specialties for soups, vegetables, cereals, and sauces. The mixing of dishes from different regions in cookbooks and restaurants tempted people to explore the culinary "other," and in this way helped to dissolve regional, ethnic, and caste boundaries and to foster Indian nationalism.³ Mexican culinary literature documents the historical transformation of regional dishes into components of a national cuisine. Cookbooks of the early republic recognized only a handful of regional variants, primarily those of heavy Spanish settlement. At the end of the nineteenth century, women started to publish community cookbooks, expanding the collection of regional recipes available to cooks throughout the country. Finally, in the 1940s authors made a standard practice of including what they considered the most representative recipes of each state in the republic. This cultural and economic integration resulted in a more inclusive nation, but the franchise was often purchased at the expense of local traditions.

The class origins of Mexico's national cuisine raise other important questions. Just as Benedict Anderson attributed modern nationalism to bourgeois consumer culture, Jack Goody has shown the importance of social divisions and unequal access to food in the development of cuisine. Egyptian pharaohs, for example, ate more animal protein than their subjects and as a result towered over them by as much as ten centimeters. Elites also sought to garnish their food with rare ingredients and practiced elaborate rituals to distinguish court cuisine from common fare.⁴ But one should beware of distinctions between high and low, for the term *haute cuisine* conveys two quite different meanings: a social hierarchy maintained through the use of costly ingredients and elaborate presentations, and a gastronomic "high" usually associated with sublime pleasures of the table.

Historian Michael Freeman argued that the latter meaning, a gustatory approach to foods, did not develop from court foods alone. He dated the appearance of Chinese cuisine in its modern form to the Song dynasty (960–1279), when four factors converged to produce a culture of gastronomy. First, China possessed diverse regional ingredients allowing cooks to experiment and create a broad range of possible menus. Next, the rise of a middle class yielded a large body of critical eaters beyond the ritual-bound environs of the royal court. These two elements derived from a third, an agricultural revolution that made diverse ingredients available to a sizable

public. Finally, the Chinese people held cultural attitudes emphasizing genuine pleasure in consuming tasty food.⁵

Freeman's definition, a sort of critical mass approach to cuisine, assumed cities to be the centers of gastronomic innovation. Jean-François Revel drew even more explicit distinctions between peasant and cosmopolitan cuisines. The former he described as parochial products of seasons and soil, transmitted by sturdy oral traditions and tied to the countryside from which they arose. Cosmopolitan cuisines, by contrast, were elegant and effervescent, an international artistry of individual chefs. Revel, like Freeman, conceded that peasant traditions served as indispensable raw materials for the creation of haute cuisine, but he believed that chefs had to transcend everyday methods to realize great art. Revel's history of haute cuisine thus followed an evolutionary, almost positivist, trajectory that began with Stone Age barbecues and culminated in the genius of nineteenth-century French chef Antonin Carême.⁶

A hundred years of anthropology have nevertheless shown that many paths lead to civilization. Diana Kennedy, the foremost author of Mexican cookbooks, and Craig Claiborne, *The New York Times* food critic, described Mexican cuisine as "peasant food raised to the level of high and sophisticated art."⁷ The recipes in Kennedy's classic volume, *The Cuisines of Mexico*, consisted not of regional ingredients refined by Mexico City chefs, as Revel's theory would suggest. Instead, it was the peasant women themselves who made their cooking a "high and sophisticated art." Nevertheless, the association with peasant food, however sophisticated, repelled many fashionable Mexicans, who preferred to import European haute cuisine rather than share tamales with the masses. The popular origins of the national cuisine inspired within the elite an ambivalent mixture of nostalgic love and aristocratic scorn, which, in turn, influenced their national self-perceptions and development policies.

Finally, the study of cuisine illustrates the significance of women and domestic culture in the formation of national identities. Explicit nationalist rhetoric appeared in some of the first community cookbooks published by women in the late-nineteenth century and became increasingly common in the twentieth century. How these domestic visions of the Mexican nation differed from government ideology will be a continuing theme of this work. But that it differed from official propaganda does not imply that cookbook authors attempted to subvert the patriarchal order. Middle-class women from the 1890s to the 1950s articulated a conservative, religious nationalism that favored social cohesion over radical reforms. They were, at least, more honest about their interests than the Institutional Revolutionary

Party (PRD), which mouthed the rhetoric of class conflict while pursuing trickle-down economic growth. And by proclaiming their culinary patriotism, women have established their claim to citizenship and thereby gained a basis for political participation. Laura Esquivel's best-selling novel *Like Water for Chocolate* is so persuasive because it cloaks a controversial feminist viewpoint in an unmistakable patriotic love for Mexican food.⁸ Lower-class women have also shaped the Mexican nation by preserving and refining the pre-Columbian cuisine of tortillas and tamales. After all, despite centuries of efforts to change them, Mexicans remain a people of corn.⁹

ONE

The People of Corn

Native American Cuisine



Canoes by the thousands blanketed Lake Texcoco, swimming like insects toward their nest. Torches danced over the dark waters to the rhythmic hum of churning paddles. Narrow five-meter skiffs darted nimbly along, carrying fresh fish and game from countless small villages along the shore. Bulky twenty-meter boats rode low in the water, weighted down by piles of maize from agricultural centers in the south. A few of these dugouts had originated at port cities such as Texcoco and Tacubaya with freight on the final leg of voyages from provinces as distant as the Yucatán peninsula. The pilots guided their canoes through a network of five shallow lakes that zigzagged between shadowy mountain ridges and dark pine forests within the Valley of Mexico, converging in the central and largest lake around the glowing beacons of Tenochtitlán. This island city, home of the Mexica people and capital of the Aztec empire, lit up the night with thousands of hearth and temple fires; its population of more than two hundred thousand people attracted goods in trade and tribute from throughout Mesoamerica.¹

As the sun rose over Popocatepetl (Smoking Mountain) and its volcanic spouse Iztaccíhuatl (White Woman), a steady stream of canoes entered the city. Poling through shallow channels, the boatmen passed neat rows of white-walled, flat-roofed homes, occasionally interrupted by parks, markets, and temples. Canoe traffic grew heavier near the city center, where passenger boats conducted visitors to the main plaza, water carriers floated door to door with ceramic jugs, and waste haulers collected sewage to fertilize corn fields. Finally the canals reached the central square, seat of the imperial government. Dominating this plaza was a massive pyramid large enough to serve as a platform for two huge temples dedicated to the rain

god Tlaloc and the war god Huitzilopochtli. Clustered around its base stood a host of government palaces including warehouses to which the canoes brought interminable loads of tribute.²

Merchant cargoes, meanwhile, converged on the great market of Tlatelolco at the island's northern end. Countless canoes waited in the adjacent channel for longshoremen to unload their provisions. The boat handlers then departed in search of return loads while customs agents descended on the newly arrived merchandise. These officials sorted through mountains of corn, beans, cotton, and cacti, collecting the government's percentage and sending it to nearby huts. Next, porters heaved the bulky baskets over their shoulders and weaved through crowds to the appropriate stands. Depositing their burdens, they returned to the waterfront, leaving merchants to display the products to hordes of housewives and servants. Every morning sixty thousand shoppers and shopkeepers, dayworkers and dignitaries gathered at this monument to commerce.³

Entering the market at the vegetable street, customers plunged immediately into a bewildering maze of colors, shapes, smells, and sounds. Vendors spread gardens of greens over white cotton blankets on the ground. They offered piles of red plump tomatoes, purple sweet potatoes, brown jicama roots, and green cactus paddles. Squashes and chiles varied in color from bright red and yellow to deep green and black, while countless red, yellow, orange, and green mushrooms added further splashes of color. Most gorgeous of all were the edible flowers of cacao, squash, and maguey plants waiting for some shopper to carry them home for soups or tamales. The merchants, not content with their colorful displays, sliced open samples and shoved them under the noses of passing shoppers. Aromatic roots resembling onions and leeks competed with bundles of pungent oregano, purslane, sorrel, and watercress. No European counterparts at all existed for many pre-Columbian herbs such as *hoja santa*, with its distinctive anise taste, and *epazote*, used to flavor bean stews. Other plants bore a coincidental resemblance to European plants, as in the case of *guaje* seeds, which tasted like garlic. Eager vendors attracted greater attention to their produce by chanting repetitive Náhuatl syllables, and these market calls, cries, barriers, and curses resounded across the city.⁴

Where the vegetables finally ended, meatsellers and fishmongers took up their trades. Stalls ran for blocks along the market's boundary, with meats displayed both by the cut and on the paw, for unlike Old World shops featuring beef and pork, in Tlatelolco rabbits, dogs, gophers, and possums composed the bulk of butchers' sales. Specialty meats included the *axolotl*, a larval

salamander found in nearby lagoons; armadillos, highly prized for their flesh; and iguanas, lizards described by Christopher Columbus as having white meat that "tastes like chicken."⁵ The Indians likewise delighted in venison from both the Chichimeca wilderness and the Yucatán peninsula. The Gulf Coast also provided many exotic delicacies to the fish traders who arranged their catches in rows parallel to the meat market. Dried shrimp ranging in size from minute specks to huge spirals lay in piles next to crabs, clams, snails, and oysters. The vendors also offered countless species of fish, salt-cured herring carried from distant coasts and clear-eyed trout pulled from nearby streams. White fish from western lakes brought the highest prices for its tender flesh. Other luxuries included lobsters, frogs, turtles, snakes, eel, and octopi as well as caviar from fish and insect eggs.⁶

Continuing toward the market center, shoppers entered the colorful fruit section. Some of these products had Old World counterparts such as apples, plums, and cherries. Others were unique to the Western Hemisphere, especially avocados and cactus fruits. The Spanish priest Toribio de Benavente Motolinía later likened the former to large pears with the taste of pine nuts. Of the many varieties of cactus fruit, he preferred the white-skinned ones, which he described as "very refreshing" with the taste of pears and grapes. The Indians also enjoyed black-skinned zapotes, salmon-colored mameys, firm green chayotes, yellow pulpy guavas, and countless other tropical delights.⁷

After this tour of Mesoamerican foods, the weary yet satisfied visitor had only penetrated the market center. Farther east, merchants sold ceramic cooking wares and other household goods; southward, multicolored tiles continued into the distance; and to the north, together with additional bundles of cloth and fur, lay streets filled with dried grains, pulses, and chiles. Just beyond the rabbit-skin salesmen were seemingly endless rows of corn in a multitude of colors — white, yellow, blue, red, and speckled combinations — in addition to piles of amaranth, nuts, and squash seeds. Legumes provided equal variety including tiny black beans from the Gulf Coast, plump brown specimens from nearby fields, and small white ones carried from distant provinces. Nearby rose mountains of salt as well as myriad dried chiles. Fortunately, by this point the exit had also come into view beyond a street of squawking birds.⁸

In culinary matters, a person could travel the breadth of Mesoamerica without leaving this vast square. But to gain historical perspective on the market of Tlatelolco, and to trace its influences on Mexico's national cuisine, one must consider three basic themes: the material culture that unified

Native American cuisines while preserving rich regional variations; the social relationships that depended on the feeding of gods and people; and the cultural significance of taste for pre-Columbian cooking and eating.

"*Dura pero segura*"

"Hard but sure," traditional Mesoamerican cooking required enormous effort.⁹ For thousands of years Indian women performed penance each morning, kneeling for hours to grind up corn and pat out tortillas. This ordeal nevertheless had a purpose, for Mesoamerican cooking evolved to provide dependable sustenance in an unforgiving environment. The riches of Tlatelolco belied the everyday fare of common *campesinos*, who ate an essentially vegetarian diet based on maize. Frost or hail could destroy a crop, plunging whole villages over the brink of starvation. The material culture of pre-Columbian cuisine therefore reflected the imperative of fail-safe cooking. In contrast to modern French chefs, with their lavish ingredients and intricate techniques, Mesoamerican women devised ingenious ways of cooking frugal yet tasteful meals. And these peasant cooks created a cuisine every bit as rich and diverse as any in the Old World.

Material scarcity had not always cursed the people of the Americas. Humans first arrived in the Western Hemisphere some fifty thousand years ago, after crossing a land bridge from Asia in pursuit of migrating mastodon herds. These woolly beasts nevertheless added little to the primitive diet, according to archaeologist Richard MacNeish, who observed that the hunters "probably found one mammoth in a lifetime and never got over talking about it."¹⁰ Meat did compose a large proportion of the diet, but it came in the form of less dangerous game such as antelope, sloth, horses, and very large rabbits. Even these species had become extinct by 7200 B.C. because of climatic changes that left North America a vast desert. With no large mammals subject to domestication, work was done exclusively by human power until the introduction of European horse and cattle. And save for a limited supply of deer and smaller game, the people of Mesoamerica had to depend on an essentially vegetarian diet.¹¹

Agriculture developed slowly in the Americas, as did sedentary life and hierarchical civilizations. Even before the extinction of large mammals, women in primitive bands had begun the process of plant domestication, by gathering seeds, pods, fruits, and leaves. Their work of sowing and gathering, weeding and winnowing caused genetic mutations that increased the

productivity of these plants so that chiles, tomatoes, avocados, and squash, the principal condiments of pre-Columbian cuisine, had reached their modern form by 5000 B.C. Nevertheless, wild maize still grew to a length of just a few centimeters, and gathering remained a more important food source than cultivation. Not until 1500 B.C. was corn fully domesticated to produce a large, hard kernel that could be stored for long periods and support sedentary populations. By this time, also, the bean had yielded a softened seed coat that made it edible after cooking. The Olmecs, the first people to grow this improved maize, built impressive monuments around the southern Gulf Coast (c. 1200–400 B.C.). While they have been described as the base culture for Mesoamerica, because their pyramids, plazas, and ball courts set architectural standards for succeeding civilizations, they cooked their corn by the relatively primitive methods of boiling or popping.¹²

It was probably in the central highlands that some unknown woman conceived the culinary soul of Mesoamerica, the tortilla. These corn griddle cakes, marvels of simplicity and economy, demonstrated the genius of the New World *campesino* kitchen. Cooks prepared them with just three simple utensils: a *cazuela* (earthenware pot), a *metate* (grinding stone), and a *comal* (griddle). The corn was first simmered briefly in the *cazuela* with mineral lime (CaO), which helped loosen the indigestible husks and also added valuable nutrients including calcium, riboflavin, and niacin. The cook then knelt down and laboriously ground the wet corn on a *metate*, a three-legged grinding stone, which has not appeared in Olmec archaeological sites. The smooth dough was then patted into thin disks and cooked briefly over the *comal*. The shape of the tortilla assured that it cooked in just over a minute, an important consideration given the scarcity of firewood. Moreover, it could be rolled tightly around meat or vegetable fillings to form a taco, which kept foods hot for the longest possible time. This technique allowed tortillas to be used as eating utensils and even plates, reducing material requirements to an absolute minimum. And although economical, tortillas also possessed an artistic aspect, for hot off the griddle they melted in the mouth, leaving a lingering taste of corn.¹³

While tortillas served as the staple of everyday meals, tamales provided the hallmark of festive banquets. Archaeologists have yet to locate the origins of these confections, but fossil corn husks indicate they may have been consumed around the pyramids of the Sun and the Moon at Teotihuacán in the central valley of Mexico (c. 250 B.C.–A.D. 750). Cooks made them by spreading corn dough inside a husk, adding chile sauce and perhaps some bits of meat or beans, folding the packages up, carefully sealing them

to prevent water from seeping in, and steaming them in an *olla*. For exclusive banquets in Tenochtitlán, wealthy hostesses passed around baskets of tamales along with handsome basalt *moltajetes* (mortars) full of chile sauce. But in the hectic market of Tlatelolco, as in simple village squares, women pulled tamales hot from the *olla* and sold them to eager customers.¹⁴

The Mesoamerican combination of maize, beans, squash, and chiles formed a balanced diet, notwithstanding the shortage of animal protein. The staple grain maize accounted for as much as 80 percent of calorie intake, and provided an excellent source of complex carbohydrates. Proteins essential for regenerating body tissue came largely from beans, which are more than one-fifth protein by weight. Modern scientists have shown that even a small portion of beans can assure adequate nutrition in a maize-based diet, because of a synergistic effect that multiplied the nutritional value provided by either food separately.¹⁵ Squash added trace minerals and water, important benefits in the arid climate. Rounding out the basic diet were the remarkably nutritious chile peppers. They supplied vitamins A and C as well as various forms of B, aided digestion, inhibited intestinal disease, and even helped lower body temperature by causing sweating, which cools by evaporation. Pre-Columbian peoples also recognized the chile's pharmacological uses; healers prescribed them for a wide range of ailments and lovers favored them as aphrodisiacs. Recent research indicates that chile eating stimulates the release of endorphins, the brain's natural opiates.¹⁶

A wide variety of regional produce supplemented these four basics of the Mesoamerican diet. Coastal dwellers ate large quantities of fish, while tropical areas yielded nuts and seeds. People in the arid highlands harvested the maguay cactus and fermented its sap to make *pulque*, a mildly alcoholic and highly nutritious drink. Within the central valley, an algae called *tecuitlatl* grew abundantly in the waters of Lake Texcoco. The Indians collected and dried it into cakes, then cooked it with tomatoes and chiles. This algae provided an invaluable source of protein, but in an ironic parallel with modern Mexico, it thrived on human wastes from the city of Tenochtitlán. Consequently, Moctezuma's subjects suffered from gastrointestinal diseases, which they might have called Quetzalcóatl's Revenge, after the Tolttec god exiled for trying to end the practice of human sacrifice.¹⁷

Although tortillas and tamales were consumed throughout Middle America, from the arid central highlands to the tropical rain forests of the coasts, climatic variation gave rise to diverse cooking styles. Within the mountainous terrain, frequent changes of altitude, climate, and soil gave

rise to countless individual microclimates, so that *campesinos* living in any given valley harvested foods that were distinct from those of their neighbors on the slopes. Chiles exemplified this diversity, for even modern botanists have not agreed on the classification of perhaps ninety different varieties. Sophie Coe, in her fascinating book *America's First Cuisines*, showed how distinct the Maya cuisine of the Yucatán peninsula was from that of central Mexico.¹⁸ Within the Aztec empire itself, along the Gulf Coast in the Huasteca (the land of plenty), Totonac Indians specialized in creating tamales, while to the south, around Oaxaca, the Mixtecs were known for the diversity of their dishes. The cuisines of both regions earned the Mexica's admiration.¹⁹

Aztec imperial policy ensured the availability of ample and diverse foods for the residents of Tenochtitlán. First, the construction of *chinampas* achieved a virtual agricultural revolution that assured ample supplies of staple foods. Although often referred to as "floating gardens," *chinampas* fields actually consisted of mounds of soil reclaimed from the freshwater swamps of Lake Chalco-Xochimilco. The builders alternated narrow strips of farmland with irrigation canals to water them. Large-scale drainage work began at the command of Itzcóatl (1426-1440) and culminated in the reign of Moctezuma the Elder (1440-1467), when almost one hundred square kilometers lay under intense cultivation. The use of aquatic plants for fertilizer and a complex rotation of maize, beans, and vegetables yielded high productivity with virtually no fallow.²⁰ In addition, Aztec tribute demands assembled an incredible range of regional produce in the capital. The Totonac town of Papantla, for example, sent bundles of chile peppers and vanilla pods.²¹

The subsistence diet of Mesoamerican *campesinos* would not have satisfied carnivorous European appetites. The diverse game available at the market of Tlatelolco was beyond the reach of commoners except on rare festive occasions. As a result, well-fed nobles often stood ten centimeters taller than the rest of the population.²² But height is not the sole measure of a meaningful existence. Scientists have shown that people can function normally even with dramatically reduced diets.²³ Relics of pre-Columbian pottery and weaving certainly testify to the artistic genius of the supposedly undernourished common folk. In some ways the vegetarian masses may have been more healthy than meat-loving European nobles with their recurring bouts of constipation and gout. To state the obvious, other patterns of life, not consistent with European expectations, can be equally valid for the people who follow them.

Reading the Aztec Menu

Tlaloc, the Lord of Rain and Thunder, gazed down through the clouds from his mountain home overlooking the Valley of Mexico. This serpent-faced god ruled humans capriciously; he sent both gentle showers to water their fields and ruthless hail to demolish their crops. Mortals climbed the slopes to his temple each spring to beg Tlaloc for mercy on their tender sprouts of corn. On the day of the Great Vigil, Uey Tezoztli (May 3), the lords of Tenochtitlán, Texcoco, Tlacopán, and other cities gathered at the summit to feed Tlaloc. They clothed the rain god with golden rings, jeweled necklaces, and feathered crowns, and offered him the blood of a sacrificial victim as well as tamales, stews, and chocolate. When the rites had ended, a guard of one hundred warriors stood watch until the food had rotted so that Tlaloc could eat his meal in peace. If the sentinels neglected their duty, the Mexica's sworn enemies from Tlaxcala could steal the offerings, with terrible consequences for farmers in the valley below. The Tlaxcalans reportedly slipped past the sleeping guard on one occasion to despoil the offerings, but once inside the temple they found themselves trapped. Mexica warriors sprang out from hiding places and slaughtered the intruders to the last man.²⁴

The Great Vigil of Uey Tezoztli illustrated the vital importance of food in pre-Columbian societies. Offerings of tamales, chocolate, and human blood provided the foundations for amicable relations with the gods. If not properly fed, these supernatural powers would destroy the offending mortals, ravaging their crops or devastating them with plagues. Gifts of food also served as the basis for human interrelations at all levels of society, ranging from the domestic to the imperial. Mothers preserved family bonds by feeding their husbands and children, neighbors reaffirmed communal ties when they gathered for banquets, and subject towns acknowledged Aztec supremacy by satisfying Tenochtitlán's appetite for staple grains and luxury goods. Festivals even became social battlegrounds, both covert, as when rival nobles competed to sponsor the most lavish banquets, and overt, such as the struggles over sacred foods fought by Mexica and Tlaxcalans. The close connection between cuisine and class survived long after the conquest and even influenced the development of Mexico's national cuisine.

The cultivation and preparation of food largely defined pre-Columbian domestic spaces. Anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has observed that maize fields and kitchen gardens determined the layout of household enclosures, while the dwellings themselves centered around spaces for storing, shucking, and cooking corn.²⁵ Women derived much of their self-

worth from skill at the *metate*, the ability to grind maize so they could feed tortillas and tamales to their husbands and children. A Mexica proverb defined a good housewife as one who fed her family well. Midwives warned newborn girls of their future burdens: "Thou wilt become fatigued, thou wilt become tired; thou art to provide water, to grind maize, to drudge."²⁶ Wedding ceremonies likewise emphasized the woman's role in feeding her family; the mother-in-law fed four mouthfuls of tamales to the bride who, in turn, fed tamales to her new husband.²⁷

Ritualized feeding also served to define a person's communal affiliations and social rank. The Mexica calendar abounded with religious and civic festivals, each having its own special foods and functions. For a summer feast of Tlaloc, neighbors exchanged pots of *etzalli*, a stew of corn and beans seasoned with chile sauce. Young warriors took advantage of this communal hospitality by playing a form of trick-or-treat, extorting bowls of stew with threats of housewrecking. Competitive banqueting rose to a high art among Mexica nobles, who achieved status by holding lavish feasts. These events proved enormously expensive, for an ambitious host presented feathers, cloaks, and jewels to each of his guests. He also had to provide an elaborate menu with several stews, delicate tortillas, and costly chocolate. The rewards for a successful feast included "recognition, fame, and distinction"; while failure left a person "shamed [and] belittled."²⁸

Cuisine gave the Mexica a ready way of asserting their ethnic identity and of distinguishing themselves from other societies. The Otomí, a northern tribe considered barbaric by the Mexica, supposedly picked their corn before it ripened, while the Toluca, a similarly marginalized group on the western slopes, did not eat chiles. The Tarascans, a people living farther to the west, reportedly cooked with neither skill nor sanitation. These imperial rivals, who regularly defeated Mexica warriors in battle, received the ultimate snub: in a land where fresh tortillas were the height of culinary excellence, the Tarascans ate leftovers. These chauvinistic descriptions resembled the ancient Chinese definition of a barbarian as someone who drank milk and the classical Greek scorn for people who cooked with animal fat instead of olive oil. The Mexica stereotypes did not account for the rich variety of regional cuisines. Modern travelers can find delicious tamales made of green corn, and day-old tortillas are essential for making *chilaquiles*. But the Mexica reports did demonstrate the importance of food as an identifying social trait. People who ate tortillas freshly made of golden corn and spiced with chile peppers could claim the Toltec mantle of civilization; all others still wandered the Chichimec wilderness of savagery.²⁹

Culinary rules reinforced class as well as ethnic divisions and helped

assure the legitimacy of the Mexica elite. Fernando Cortés noticed a rigid system of manners, which bolstered social distinctions in Tenochtitlán. Many of these rules might seem appropriate in a modern guide to proper behavior, including exhortations to "swallow at intervals, keep chewing, and don't stuff your mouths." Mexica mothers also admonished their children against slurping ("are you dogs?") and "making angry faces." These guidelines not only laid down correct procedures for everyday activities such as eating tortillas (using three fingers of the right hand); they also demanded that commoners show self-restraint in their behavior and respect for their social superiors.³⁰ Moreover, the Aztec state derived much of its legitimacy by feeding Tenochtitlán through the control of tribute and the maintenance of *chinampa* "floating" gardens. Ideally, Mexica nobles acted as patrons as well, supporting their clients with food.³¹ They played out this paternalistic role during the Great Feast of the Lords, an ostensible charity event held during summer months when corn bins lay empty. Poor recipients waited meekly in line for hours to collect a handful of tamales and a gourd of gruel dipped out of a canoe. Any hungry person who asked for seconds received, instead, a slap in the face. This bizarre and humiliating procession served as a symbolic reenactment of the great famine of One Rabbit (1454), when Moctezuma the Elder used canoes to distribute tamales and gruel to save his starving people.³²

The ritual feeding of gods demanded the most valuable sacrifices, for human blood alone could placate their supernatural appetites. And not just any human would suffice — only the blood of the strongest warriors would do. The gods rejected barbarians as unworthy, "like old and stale tortillas."³³ When nobles made their offerings during the Great Vigil, they knew that if they displeased Tlaloc, he would withhold life-giving rains. For the festival of the jaguar god Tezcatlipoca, priests took a handsome youth, opened his chest with an obsidian knife, and extracted the still-beating heart. The festival of the fertility god Xipe Totec featured gladiatorial sacrifices in which tethered warriors fought to the death. The bloodshed culminated every fifty-two years in the New Fire Ceremony, when priests fed the sun with human hearts.³⁴

Human sacrifice and the ritual cannibalism that accompanied it have been the most sensational aspects of Mexica culture both for Spanish conquistadors and modern readers. Explanations for these practices have been no less sensational, ranging from sixteenth-century claims of Satanic visitation to twentieth-century invocations of Thomas Malthus. The latter theory — that protein hunger caused by vegetarian diets forced the Mexica into

large-scale human sacrifice and cannibalism — was most recently advanced by Michael Harner and Marvin Harris. It represented an extreme example of the cultural ecology school popular among anthropologists in the 1970s, although their claim actually dates back more than a century to the conservative intellectual Lucas Alamán.³⁵ Virtually all scholars now reject this theory because only a small elite of priests and warriors actually ate human flesh. Moreover, as anthropologist Marshall Sahlins observed, if the efficient production of (human) protein was the ultimate goal of Mexica civilization, the costly and elaborate rituals surrounding the sacrifices defeated the purpose.³⁶

A more plausible explanation for these practices lies in the mutual obligations imposed by eating. The Mexica believed that women had the basic responsibility of feeding men, and men, in turn, took up the duty of feeding the gods.³⁷ Nothing was free in this world; before farmers could cultivate maize, priests had to fertilize the soil with sacrificial victims. The flesh of young warriors revitalized the fields and their free-flowing blood assured steady rains. The Mexica did not see this relationship in scientific terms of decomposing bodies providing nutrients to the soil, which, in turn, assured ample harvests. As Inga Clendinnen observed, their perception was much more direct: corn really was "our sustenance, our flesh." They called babies "maize blossoms," young girls were "tender green ears," and a warrior in his prime represented "Lord Corn Cob."

Pre-Columbian people respected maize and treated it with elaborate etiquette. Women carefully blew on kernels before placing them in the cooking pot to give them courage for confronting the fire. Once every eight years they "rested" the corn, cooking it plainly, "for we brought much torment to it—we ate it, we put chilli on it, we salted it . . . we added lime. And we tired it to death, so we revived it." They neglected maize at their peril; a person who saw a kernel lying on the ground and failed to pick it up might be stricken with hunger for the insult. Such beliefs continue to the present among Mexico City women, many of whom believe that burning a tortilla on the *comal* will cause bad luck. The reciprocity between humans and corn likewise survives in the words of a Náhuatl folk song: "We eat the earth then the earth eats us."³⁸

Cuisine clearly fulfilled an important role in the construction of Mesoamerican social hierarchies. Women naturally defined much of their identity around the foods they cooked, and even male warriors and priests showed a deep concern for feeding the gods as a means of maintaining the cosmic balance. Nevertheless, the place of food in such ritual situations

offers little indication of the pre-Columbian conception of taste. While the simple pleasure of eating is often overlooked, it constitutes an important aspect of human culture.

"Worse than the Epicureans"

Moctezuma dined with a grandeur befitting the *tlatoani*, "he who spoke" for the Mexica people. Each day servants prepared some three hundred dishes for his personal satisfaction, plus a thousand more for the royal household. The entrées, kept warm over small braziers, included spicy stews of turkey, duck, partridge, pheasant, quail, squab, fish, rabbit, and venison. The dining service likewise left no doubt about the prestige of Aztec royalty. Seated on a leather cushion, with a few select nobles in attendance, Moctezuma reviewed a seemingly endless parade of food. He took freshly made tortillas from female servants, deftly folded them into the shape of a spoon, and selected delicate morsels from the richly spiced stews. At times he honored the nobles by feeding them a few bites. Finally, to culminate this display of conspicuous consumption, the *tlatoani* literally drank money. Cacao beans circulated as currency among merchants, and when ground to a powder, steeped in boiling water, sweetened with honey, and whipped to a frothy head, chocolate became the drink of lords.³⁹

Tenochtitlán's banquet halls provided a level of pageantry unsurpassed by any Old World imperial capital, but that alone was no guarantee the Mexica assigned importance to taste. Court cooks of medieval Europe often sacrificed taste for grandeur, for example, sewing birds back into their plumage and plating foods with gold and silver.⁴⁰ Moreover, a powerful current in Mesoamerican philosophy urged moderation and simplicity in food and drink. Parents fed their children Spartan diets and cautioned them about the dangers of gluttony. A fable related that Moctezuma the Elder had once sent messengers to consult the goddess Coatlicue atop the sacred mountain of Coatepec, but the Mexica nobles had grown so fat that they sank in the sandy slopes. The moral was clear: Wealth had corrupted the warriors who once ate snakes from the marshes of Lake Texcoco.⁴¹

The ideal of simplicity was nevertheless compatible with the pleasures of the table. Pre-Columbian Indians found nothing wrong with the gratification of appetites, such as those for food or sex, so long as they were indulged in moderation.⁴² The Mexica drew a distinction between voracious gluttony and sublime satisfaction; they described a bad cook as "gluttonous,

stuffed, distended with food," while a good cook was "one who likes good food—an epicure, a taster [of food]."⁴³ Even Moctezuma's cooks followed the ideals of simplicity and moderation when preparing royal banquet foods. Although the Mexica left no cookbooks, the Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún compiled a vast list of foods along with their appropriate condiments. Indians made turkey with several different sauces, including yellow, green, and red chiles. Yellow chiles and tomatoes were used to flavor white fish and fowl, while dark fish went better with red *hermijo* chiles and ground squash seeds. Another red chile, the *chilitépitl*, formed the proper sauce for shrimp, and green chiles provided the natural spice for frogs.⁴⁴

The Mayan dish *papadzules* (food of the nobles) likewise illustrated the skillful simplicity of pre-Columbian cuisine. This variation of enchiladas, which can still be found in Yucatecan restaurants, combined two separate sauces. A woman began by grinding squash seeds on the *metate*, moistening them with *epazote* tea to make a thick sauce, and using it to coat freshly made tortillas. Over this went a tomato puree simmered with *habanero* peppers, kept whole to add flavor but not piquancy. In place of the cheese unavailable in pre-Columbian times, cooks added hard-boiled and diced bird eggs, while the use of freshly made tortillas obviated the need for frying in fat. The secret to the dish lay in the dark green oil, laboriously extracted by kneading the moistened seeds. Both Mayan and Aztec gourmets took great care in matching meats and vegetables with complementary sauces, an unpretentious approach reminiscent of the fresh simplicity of Italian peasant food rather than of the heavy sauces of classical French cuisine.

Pre-Columbian cooks also dedicated themselves to the artful presentation of food. Because of its supple nature, corn dough yielded a remarkable range of foods that in modern Mexico are known collectively as *antojitos* (little whimsies). The Mexica prepared tortillas in the shapes of butterflies and leaves as well as tamales imprinted with sea-shell designs or garnished with seeds and beans. Other common maize treats included oval-shaped *tlacoyos*, snake-headed *polkones*, and canoe-like *chulupias*. Religious rituals inspired some of the finest confectionery, including maize and amaranth breads resembling gods, animals, people, and mountains. Astrologers predicted that girls born on the most favorable day, Xochitl (flower), would become fine weavers of cloth and skilled at decorating tamales—female counterparts of painters and sculptors.⁴⁵ This may seem hard to believe for people who have only eaten Mexican food in the United States, where the plate is scarcely visible through sloppy piles of lettuce, cheese, rice, and

beans. But clearly native civilizations placed a premium on artistic design that unfortunately is seen only rarely in Mexican restaurants north of the Rio Grande.

These two characteristics of Aztec tamales, elaborate design and simple ingredients, challenge established theories of cuisine. Comparative studies based on European and Asian societies invariably attribute haute cuisine to an exclusive aristocracy or an urban bourgeoisie. Mesoamerican nobles likewise considered delicate food and drink to be their exclusive birthright. They warned their daughters to prepare such dishes only for lords, and they stereotyped a bad cook as "very much a commoner."⁴⁶ The Aztec state even enacted sumptuary laws, but their enforcement was problematical. Officials might prevent commoners from buying exotic fish and game, but the genius of pre-Columbian cooking lay in the artistic manipulation of corn dough, the twisting and pleating of tamales into delicate forms, and the spicing with herbs and chiles.⁴⁷

The centers of Mesoamerica's popular cuisine were village markets and public festivals. Tlatelolco, with sixty thousand daily visitors and whole streets devoted to prepared foods, provided a fertile environment for gastronomic innovation. And the Aztec capital was merely the central point in an elaborate network of markets operating throughout Mesoamerica. Although virtually any item could be found at Tlatelolco, many towns specialized in particular commodities. Connoisseurs of dog meat went to Acolman for the tastiest breeds, while the finest dinner wares were sold in the markets of Texcoco.⁴⁸ Smaller markets rotated on regular schedules, every five, nine, or twenty days, to allow traders time to reach the most remote villages. Many people visited markets simply for the spectacle, the delicious stews and the latest gossip. Indians enjoyed these fairs so much that after the conquest Spanish priests often berated them for visiting markets instead of attending Mass. Diego Durán described one such woman, who despite her advanced age attended every market in the region. She dropped dead one afternoon while carrying home a small bundle of corn, and was buried in the marketplace.⁴⁹ With this constant coming and going, even distant villages were exposed to diverse traditions that stimulated a popular cuisine.

Public festivals also provided opportunities for common people to enjoy elaborate food. The Mexica counterpart of Easter, *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, featured twisted chains of tortillas called *cocolli*, made from special bundles of maize that were hung from the ceiling. Even the poorest families joined in the celebration, although they might be unable to afford more than a few shriveled ears. Sahagún's elite informants ridiculed the attempts of common folk to participate: "perhaps only leftover, bitter sauces, and stale tamales

and tortillas were offered."⁵⁰ But we should be wary of such contemptuous phrases; these same nobles feasted each spring on the corn and bean *etzalli* stew cooked by commoners. Specially chosen lower-class cooks had the honor of preparing amaranth cake figures dedicated to Tlaloc in the winter-time Festival of Falling Water. And with the arrival of summer, *campesinos* flocked to Tenochtitlán to decorate the capital with flowers and to make tamales of turkey and dog. These people ate simply on a daily basis, mere gruel for breakfast and tortillas for dinner, but for festivals they splurged, and in the words of Diego Durán, behaved "worse than the Epicureans."⁵¹

An innovative popular cuisine developed in Mesoamerica on the modest foundations of corn and chiles. The versatility of maize helped make cooking an art among women who lacked access to more elaborate produce. Tamales assumed a great variety of forms and flavors with no ingredients beyond maize, herbs, and chiles. A cook could shape corn confections into ovals, canoes, animals, or stellar constellations; her fancy was limited only by her imagination and dexterity. Moreover, tortilla making constituted an art unto itself. Although often considered by modern nutritionists as merely a mass of carbohydrates, these maize griddle cakes possessed unquestionable aesthetic qualities. In a Michelin-rated restaurant one would expect the culinary delights of freshly cooked tortillas, the tantalizing, soft texture and incomparable, savory taste, but unexpectedly finding them in a humble village seems miraculous.

The spicy taste of chiles, like the deadening mass of maize, has often led to misinterpretations of pre-Columbian cuisine. Many authors, including some Mexicans, have drawn a connection between fiery chiles and dreary diets; impoverished peoples supposedly gnawed peppers to numb themselves to their hunger. This idea may seem reasonable in a country such as the United States, where biting into excruciatingly hot jalapeños fulfills a bizarre rite of passage. By contrast, people in Mexico and Thailand generally eat chiles for the taste, not the heat. Because the body develops a tolerance to acids in the capsicums, more potent chiles become necessary to attain the same flavors. And the flavors of various peppers blend in subtle ways to create some of the most remarkable dishes in any cuisine. The innovative California vintner Robert Mondavi compared the complexities of Cabernet Sauvignon wine to *ancho* and *mulato* chiles.⁵² If peppers merely deadened the taste buds, one would expect to find them consumed only by the most impoverished segments of society. Chiles, in fact, crowned the banquets of Mexica nobles and satisfied the tribute requirements of distant provinces.

Cooking techniques likewise helped heighten the flavor of common

dishes. Rather than simply leaving the foods to stew, women toasted their ingredients first on the *comal*. They used this method not just for tortillas, but also to cook chiles, tomatoes, nuts, and seeds, and on the streets of Mexico City, descendants of the Mexica still sell pumpkin seeds roasted on tiny braziers. Modern chemists have found this to be a highly sophisticated technique. A complex transformation known as the Maillard reaction takes place in foods at about 155°C, which can only be achieved with dry ingredients since water boils at 100°C. This browning process breaks down molecules and recombines them to form "sweet and bitter derivatives" as well as "fragrant volatile molecules," in the words of scientist Harold McGee. More than a hundred different chemical reactions enhanced the flavor of pre-Columbian foods.⁵³

The cooks of Mesoamerica developed a remarkable popular cuisine that could be shared by even the most humble *campesinos*. Difficult material conditions and animal protein shortages actually encouraged culinary experimentation by making the search for diverse ingredients an everyday necessity. This resulted in a variety of regional cuisines united by corn and chile peppers. The malleability of maize allowed women to indulge their gastronomic imaginations, creating superlative dishes from the everyday tortilla to the festive tamal. And the spicy chile made even the most mundane foods interesting, which is perhaps what makes a society interested in food. The existence of diverse regional cuisines, highlighted by elaborate festival dishes and seasoned by zesty chiles, ultimately became features of Mexico's national cuisine. But before this happened, pre-Columbian foods underwent profound changes as a result of the Spanish conquest.

A Market in Ruins

In the year One Reed (1519), the market of Tlatelolco clamored with gossip of strangers who had appeared from the eastern sea. Inside the royal palace, messengers told the *tlatoani* incredible stories of the Spanish conquistadors. Moctezuma listened in terror as they described the deafening roar of cannons, the metallic gleam of arms and armor, the towering figures of horses, and the enormous fangs of dogs. He was equally amazed to hear of their food, which was "like fasting food, very large, white, not heavy, like chaff, like dried maize stalks." Supernatural invasion seemed imminent; perhaps the exiled Toltec god Quetzalcóatl had returned to claim the Aztec throne. This news so tortured Moctezuma that his "heart seemed as though it had been washed in chile water."⁵⁴

The *tlatoani* tried vainly to ward off the Spanish invasion. He employed wizards and magicians, sent bribes and threats, but the conquistadors continued their relentless advance. In November, as *campesinos* brought in the corn harvest, Moctezuma came face to face with Fernando Cortés. The Mexica lords offered the newcomers gifts of gold and silver, while Tlatelolca cooks fed them turkey-hen stews and delicate white tortillas.⁵⁵ The unwashed foreigners, made doubly repulsive by their company of Tlaxcalan warriors, responded to the hospitality with a series of demands that the Mexica renounce their gods and bow down before the distant Spanish king. Eventually the Europeans seized Moctezuma as a hostage and massacred hundreds of unarmed nobles while they celebrated the feast of Huitzilopochtli. The enraged Mexica killed their former *tlatoani* and expelled the invaders from Tenochtitlán, inflicting heavy casualties, but failing to destroy them.

The Spaniards recovered from this setback and returned a year later with implacable force. By March 1521, when they laid siege to Tenochtitlán, they had recruited great numbers of Indian allies from disaffected subjects of the Aztec empire. The Mexica, meanwhile, had been weakened by exposure to European diseases, particularly smallpox, against which they had no immunities. Under the leadership of a new *tlatoani*, Cuauhtémoc (Descending Eagle), they fought desperately to defend their capital. The close-quarters battle for Tenochtitlán nullified the advantages of horse and cannon, and the Europeans set about systematically demolishing every temple, house, and wall. They took control of the lake with brigantines and cut off the Mexica's supply of food, reducing the island's defenders to starvation. The people of Tlatelolco captured the impact of this struggle in an epic poem lamenting the destruction of their city and its great market.

Broken spears lie in the roads;
we have torn our hair in our grief.

The houses are roofless now, and their walls
are red with blood.

Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas,
and the walls are splattered with gore.

The water has turned red, as if it were dyed,
and when we drink it,
it has the taste of brine.

We have pounded our hands in despair
against the adobe walls,

for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.
The shields of our warriors were its defense,
but they could not save it.

We have chewed dry twigs and salt grasses;
we have filled our mouths with dust and bits of adobe;
we have eaten lizards, rats and worms.⁵⁶

Weakened by starvation, the defenders could hold out no longer. On August 13, 1521, they succumbed to the European conquerors and their Indian confederates. Cuauhtémoc slipped away in a canoe, hoping to continue the struggle from the mainland, but he was captured and ultimately tortured and killed. The Aztec empire had fallen, leaving only songs of sorrow.

Weep, my people:
know that with these disasters
we have lost the Mexican nation.
The water has turned bitter,
our food is bitter!⁵⁷

The Spaniards leveled what remained of Tenochtitlán, and over the ruins they built a new capital in the image of Europe. Christian cathedrals rose from the foundations of ancient pyramids, and Old World crops sprang from fields that once nourished maize. The native empires were reduced to villages in which the people struggled to adapt to the new conditions. The old gods were denied the blood of human sacrifices, but their festivals continued with the trappings of the new religion. Never again would a Mexica *tlatoani* feast on tamales in the banquet halls of Tenochtitlán, but the cuisine of corn survived in markets and villages.

TWO

The Conquests of Wheat

Culinary Encounters in the Colonial Period

Sor Andrea de la Asunción gathered up the white sleeves and black habit of the order of St. Dominic and set out to fulfill her holy calling. Beneath the vaulted ceiling of a convent kitchen in Puebla de los Angeles, she began by choosing red and black chiles and toasting them on the *comal*. A beatific glow suffused her brow as she ground the peppers to a smooth paste on the *metate*. From the Native American grinding stone she turned to the Old World spice rack, selecting cloves, cinnamon, peppercorns, and coriander and sesame seeds, which she fried in a skillet. After grinding them into the chiles, along with boiled tomatoes, she simmered the mixture over a low flame in an earthenware *cazuela*, occasionally anointing it with turkey broth. Divine aromas bubbled from the deep brown sauce, but when she spooned a bit on her palm to taste, something was still missing. Andrea cast about the ceramic-tiled kitchen for inspiration, then alighted upon chocolate, the ancient drink of Aztec lords. The moment the bittersweet tablet melted into the sauce, she had created *mole poblano*, the Mexican national dish.¹

Or so goes the legend. Modern authors have used this colonial dish, combining spices from the Old World with chiles from the New, as a symbol of the mestizo Mexican nation. Alfonso Reyes, Carlos de Gante, Artemio del Valle Arizpe, Salvador Novo, Amando Farga, Paco Ignacio Taibo, Mayo Antonio Sánchez, and Alfredo Ramos Espinosa have produced a literary genre exploring the mysterious origins of this dish. About 1680 the nuns of Puebla supposedly created *mole* in honor of Viceroy Tomás Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón. Another version of the *mole* legend — with a satirical rather than divine view of the national identity — attributed the mixture to a certain Fray Pascual, who accidentally spilled the spice tray

into the dinner pot.² The authors of these tales, although relying on vivid imagination rather than historical research, correctly perceived the importance of *mole*, and of cuisine, in the blending of cultures that forged modern Mexico.

Unfortunately, little documentary evidence exists describing the evolution of Mexican cuisine. John Super conducted an exhaustive search and found not a single cookbook published in Latin America during the colonial period.³ The first printed recipes for *mole* appeared in the nineteenth century shortly after Mexican independence. José Luis Juárez and Rosalva Loreto López have uncovered manuscript cookbooks from the mid-eighteenth century, but before that the trail goes cold.⁴

Nevertheless, *mole poblano* has inspired a historiography of several competing interpretations. Judith Friedlander made an innovative attempt to trace the origins of *mole* through its ingredients. In her excellent anthropological study of Indian identity in a Morelos village, she pointed out that the majority of the components came from the Old World. Native products included only chiles, chocolate, the turkey, and the name, which derived from the Náhuatl word *mōlli* (sauce). The dish was traditionally served for religious celebrations when priests made their greatest efforts to convert the natives to European practices. Friedlander therefore concluded that Spanish missionaries introduced *mole* to Indian communities. This approach, while important to understanding colonial cuisine, assumed that Spanish conquistadors annihilated the local culture and did not give sufficient credit to native traditions.⁵

The search must therefore turn to the Indian influence on *mole*. Margaret Park Redfield, in an earlier anthropological study of another Morelos village, described the dish as an essentially pre-Columbian artifact. Indian women made their most obvious contribution through the expert blending of chiles to create subtle flavors, a skill that Spanish nuns obviously learned from their American sisters. Moreover, the *metate* remained the *mole*-making utensil of choice until the twentieth-century invention of electric blenders. These contributions notwithstanding, the indigenous cuisine placed primary emphasis on simplicity. Sahagún's descriptions revealed that Indian cooks selected a few chiles and condiments that complemented a particular dish, as opposed to the colonial habit of dumping the whole kitchen cabinet into the *cazuela*.⁶

The complexity of *mole* has inspired another interpretation, the baroque. Its proponents, including most modern Mexican commentators, have attempted to place cooking within the artistic milieu of seventeenth-century New Spain. Architects, musicians, painters, and poets of the age lavished

their work with ostentatious ornamentation. *Mole poblano*, with its elaborate ingredients, supposedly represented the gastronomic counterpart of the celestial ceiling fresco or the recursive musical fugue. Modern descriptions of *mole* resonate with the baroque aesthetic: a palate in constant motion between effervescent tastes of spices, each playing chords within a symphony of flavors. But while this image holds a certain poetic charm, it lacks heuristic value.⁷

In reality, all of these interpretations contain an element of the truth. The cooks of New Spain created an elaborate new cuisine combining ingredients and cooking techniques from both sides of the Atlantic. But the process of *metizaje* began at the margins of culinary systems, with the mixing of condiments such as chiles and meats. The staple grains corn and wheat remained for the most part mutually exclusive, with bread feeding a wealthy Creole society and tortillas becoming the province of poor and Indian communities. The hierarchical associations of food within New Spain helped delay the emergence of a self-conscious national cuisine, just as colonial social divisions slowed the unification of the Mexican nation itself.

The Spanish Grocer

"The grocer, not the conquistador, is the real Spanish father of Mexican society."⁸ These words of Justo Sierra, the great Porfirian educator and intellectual, aptly summarized the Spanish presence in the New World. Emperor Charles V, fearing that Cortés and his men would establish independent kingdoms, sent trusted administrators to rule the newly conquered territories. Henceforth government remained largely in the hands of peninsular bureaucrats, who had little attachment to their colonial subjects. These officials dreamed primarily of returning home to Spain as rich men and were discouraged from marrying provincial women. Shopkeepers and other settlers thus bore much of the responsibility for creating a European society on American soil. Grocers, in particular, contributed to New Spain's development by satisfying the colonists' hunger for familiar Iberian foods.

The introduction of European crops was a natural step in the conquest of America, for Spanish cuisine itself had resulted from a long series of invasions. A millennium before Christ, Iberian people had cultivated wheat and herded sheep using methods developed in Syria and Egypt. The first challenges to Iberian domination came from Celtic invaders who occupied the peninsula's northern areas between the ninth and sixth centuries. These blond, blue-eyed immigrants added physical variety to the rather dark-

skinned inhabitants, particularly in the central plateau where the two groups intermarried, and they may also have been the first to ferment grapes in the peninsula. Spain's wine industry nevertheless owed its origins to Phoenicians who settled along the Mediterranean coast at about the same time. Successive Greek and Carthaginian colonists also introduced olives and chickpeas.⁹

Spaniards thus acquired a culinary trilogy they valued as highly as the Indians esteemed corn, beans, and squash. The Mediterranean staples of wheat bread, olive oil, and vinifera wine were firmly established in the peninsula when Roman armies expelled the Carthaginians. Indeed, Hispania's olive oil soon commanded high prices within the empire, and its wines flooded Italian markets. Iberian fishermen, meanwhile, supplied the classical world with *garum*, a highly valued and highly pungent sauce made from decomposed anchovy intestines.¹⁰ Finally, Hispania shared the Roman preference for wheat over breads made of other grains, such as rye and barley. Diphilus of Siphonos described wheat as "more nourishing, more digestible, and in every way superior."¹¹ The Romans prized white bread so highly they reportedly added chalk to achieve "purity."¹²

The next great advance in Iberian agriculture following the collapse of the Roman empire came not with the fifth-century Visigothic invasions from the north; instead, medieval Spain drew its culinary inspiration from Muslims who overran the peninsula between 711 and 722. For a century after the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632, the soldiers of Islam had swept across Africa and Asia, conquering or converting all in their path. They also accumulated considerable scientific knowledge in their travels. The Moors revolutionized agriculture in Al-Andalus, as they called Spain, through the use of sophisticated fertilizers and irrigation works. In addition, they carried a wide range of crops from India to Europe. Heat-resistant grains such as rice and sorghum increased Iberian productivity by adding a summer growing season to the traditional winter wheat. The Arabs also introduced spinach, eggplant, artichokes, and watermelons, as well as sugar and saffron. Asian citrus fruits, especially limes, lemons, and bitter oranges, likewise found fertile soil in Spain. The Moors loved fruit so much that they continued to cultivate Iberian vineyards despite the Qur'an's prohibition on alcoholic beverages.¹³

Islamic agricultural interests reflected a sensual delight in food that differed sharply from the Christian ideal of abstinence. Muhammad promised endless pleasure gardens to the faithful, and many considered earthly gratification a legitimate prelude to Paradise. Moreover, with their access to the spices of the Indies, Muslims could satisfy their desires for heavenly foods.

Banquets from Baghdad to Granada featured dishes perfumed with pepper, ginger, cinnamon, clove, cardamom, mace, nutmeg, saffron, and sugar. A thirteenth-century Hispanic-Moorish cookbook explained that "the knowledgeable use of spices is the principal base of prepared dishes, because it is the cement of cooking, and upon it cooking is built."¹⁴ Muslim cooks were also skilled in using sugar to create pastries, nougats, syrups, and custards. These confections, often based on almonds, dates, honey, and cream, were likewise fragrant with cinnamon, citrus, and rosewater. But not all of the smells of Moorish cooking were sweet, as the Christians observed when they dubbed the Arabic stews *olla podrida* (rotten pottage).¹⁵

Muslim foods nevertheless became common in royal courts throughout medieval Christendom. The Normans brought Arabic cuisine to France and England from Sicily, which they conquered in the eleventh century, while Frederick Barbarosa spread it to Germany two hundred years later. But Islamic culture had its greatest influence among the Christian kingdoms of Spain. The Reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from the Moors extended over nearly eight centuries, culminating with the fall of Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. During this lengthy period of fighting, countless Christian knights were seduced by the sensual pleasures of Muslim cuisine.¹⁶

Yet the highly spiced dishes of classical Arabic cooking became accessible to only a small elite. Jaime Vicens Vives, the great Spanish economic historian, observed that the medieval Iberian economy depended "on two elements — wheat and sheep."¹⁷ Popular cuisine consisted largely of preservation techniques such as cheese making, which was a vital part of the shepherd's life. Old sheep eventually made it into the stewing pot, but on a daily basis peasants started their *ollas* with stale bread soaked in water. To this they added chickpeas for a steamy *puchero*, onions and cucumber for a cold *gazpacho*, or, if nothing else, garlic and olive oil for a simple *sopa de pan* (bread soup). Wheat bread held such a central place in Europeans' lives that it took on popular religious significance, particularly for women. An altarpiece from fifteenth-century Portinari, for example, showed Christ disguised as a sheaf of wheat ready to be milled for the Eucharist wafer. A shepherd living in the Pyrenees Mountains even risked heresy by suggesting that "the soul of man is bread."¹⁸

Wheat bread held particular importance for those Spaniards who migrated to the Americas. A series of disastrous grain harvests had struck the peninsula beginning in 1504, as a consequence of the agrarian policies of Ferdinand and Isabella. In an attempt to foment Iberian wool production, the Catholic monarchs had allowed shepherds to run their animals through

farmers' fields and to cut down whole forests to provide pasture. The resulting famines ravaged the Spanish countryside, and memories of hunger drove the conquistadors on their New World exploits. Moreover, the impoverished southwestern crescent of Extremadura and Andalucía provided the vast majority of colonists. Their voracious appetites for wheat and meat transformed the Americas.¹⁹

Creoles and the Columbian Exchange

New Spain's first recorded banquet took place in 1538, when Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza and Conquistador Fernando Cortés joined to celebrate a peace signed by Emperor Charles V and his French adversary King Francis I. Mendoza and Cortés put aside their own rivalry—a prelude to conflicts between peninsular-born Spaniards and their Creole cousins—to stage a lavish spectacle. The entertainment depicted a wide range of people, including Indians, Africans, and Turks, but the food was strictly European. Bernal Díaz del Castillo recalled tables loaded with salads, hams, roasted kid, marinated partridge, stuffed chickens, quail pies, *tortia real*, and for the servants, a whole roasted oxen stuffed with chicken, quail, and doves.²⁰ For such an extravagant feast, the cooks had access to imported Spanish wines, olive oil, vinegar, and spices. On a daily basis, however, colonists had to cultivate their own foods. Recipe changes became inevitable when Old World crops failed to grow in New World fields. Nevertheless, Creoles maintained a European cuisine whenever possible and incorporated native ingredients only at the periphery of their diets.

The introduction of livestock proved to be the greatest success story in the culinary conquest of America. As early as 1493 Columbus had brought horses, cattle, goats, sheep, chickens, and pigs to the New World. Within a decade after the conquest of New Spain, swine had become so numerous that stockmen lost interest, and the Mexico City council began enacting regulations to clear them off the streets. Sheep, which had fared poorly in the tropical lowlands, multiplied rapidly in the arid plains of central and northern New Spain. Horses, goats, and chickens likewise became established in the colony, but the most phenomenal growth in livestock was from cattle. Herds literally overran the countryside, driving Indians from their fields. Urban meat prices fell so low in the sixteenth century that ranchers slaughtered the animals for their hides and often left the carcasses to rot.²¹

Spanish immigrants ate more meat than ever before, but obtaining bread was difficult at first. Although cattle could be turned loose to graze, then

rounded up when needed, wheat required substantial investments, both agricultural and industrial. Iron plows were needed to till the soil properly, which, in turn, required expensive draft animals. The grain also demanded ample irrigation both for the December planting and March maturation. After harvest the crop had to be ground into flour, a costly process that gave rise to European stereotypes of millers as "shrewd, thieving, cheating, destined by definition for the fires of hell."²² The final step, baking, required brick ovens and abundant fuel. In the colony's early years, before Spaniards established sufficient mills and bakeries, native women prepared wheat in the only manner they knew—as tortillas.²³ Wheat tortillas, one of the first examples of Mexico's hybrid cuisine, persisted in remote northern areas, but Europeans living in cities demanded familiar crusty bread.

Wine and olive oil, two other essentials of Mediterranean cuisine, never became affordable in New Spain. Grapevines and olive trees simply refused to grow in the colony, although they flourished in the valleys of Peru. Mexico City's council heard constant complaints about shortages of these products, yet it could do little to lower the prices charged by Spanish grocers.²⁴ Economic reality thus forced Creole cooks to fry with pork fat instead of olive oil. Lard held an ambivalent status in the cuisines of early modern Europe; it was scorned by Spaniards and Italians, but was indispensable for most of the French.²⁵ The colonists of New Spain came to depend so heavily on pork fat that, in 1562, they received special Papal dispensation from fasting requirements.²⁶

For wine the Creoles developed no universally accepted substitute. The elite, who could afford the steep prices, continued to drink imported wines and sherries. Less fortunate settlers adopted the fermented native drink, *pulque*, or the distilled sugarcane liquor, *aguardiente*.²⁷ Perhaps the most popular beverage of New Spain was not alcohol at all, but rather chocolate. The once-bitter drink of pre-Columbian lords acquired a devoted following among Creoles, who added sugar and spices. Thomas Gage, an English priest who visited New Spain in the seventeenth century, described the women of Chiapas as being so addicted to chocolate that they drank it during Mass. When threats failed to stop this practice, the bishop excommunicated the offenders; to which the women responded ironically by poisoning his cup of chocolate.²⁸ Churchmen themselves were not immune to the frothy drink's lure. Fray Francisco Ortiz went before the Holy Office of the Inquisition, in 1650, on charges of consuming chocolate before Mass. He might have escaped detection except on one occasion, when he deserted the altar to drink with women for half an hour before returning to complete the Mass.²⁹

In most cases of American ingredients incorporated into Creole cuisine, European counterparts already existed. Turkey and other American game fit readily into Spanish recipes for stewed chickens or roasted partridges. Mexican rice likewise followed peninsular cooking techniques except for the use of tomatoes instead of saffron. And indigenous beans often replaced the traditional Iberian chickpeas, known because of their tough skin as "musket balls."³⁰ Learning to use chile peppers required more creativity, but the search for spices had motivated Columbus in the first place, and colonists experimented eagerly with these novel condiments. Red *ancho* peppers imparted a delicious new piquancy to *chorizo*, an already spicy smoked sausage from Extremadura. Unsmoked Creole *chorizo*, made with New Spain's "very sweet and savory" pork, particularly from the valley of Toluca west of Mexico City, rivaled the Old World's finest sausages.³¹

The European cuisines from which Creoles took much of their inspiration were likewise undergoing changes during the colonial period. About the turn of the eighteenth century, French chefs revolutionized continental kitchens by replacing the sugar and spices of medieval foods with the salt and herbs characteristic of modern cooking. This *nouvelle cuisine* gained enormous popularity in royal courts and in noble houses from England to Russia. French influences became particularly evident in Spain after 1700, when the Bourbon prince Philip V succeeded the last Habsburg monarch Charles II.³² Gallic cooking nevertheless proceeded slowly to the Americas, despite the efforts of viceroys such as Teodoro de la Croix and visitors including Jean Chappe D'auteroche. Historian José Luis Juárez has demonstrated that eighteenth-century colonial manuscript cookbooks held only a superficial resemblance to the new French style. A typical recipe for *sopa francesa* insisted on French bread, but also included many spices that had disappeared from continental cooking.³³

Italians had a much greater influence than the French on Hispanic cuisine. Northern Italian princes had dictated Renaissance fashions two centuries before Gallic chefs asserted their gastronomic hegemony over Europe. Diego Granado's *Libro del arte de cocina* (Book of the Art of Cooking), published in Madrid in 1599, included few French recipes but many Italian ones such as a Lombard vegetable torte, Venetian grilled chops, Milanese stuffed cabbage, and Roman macaroni and cheese.³⁴ Personal ties likewise bound the Castilian court to Italian cuisine. Giulio Alberoni exemplified this connection; a humble cook from Parma, he rose to become *de facto* prime minister of Spain. He entered the service of the Duke of Vendôme, and accompanied the French general to Madrid during the War of Spanish Succession (1700–1713). Through the judicious use of Parmesan cheese

and prosciutto, Alberoni ingratiated himself with the royal court of Philip V. By 1717 he had become a Catholic cardinal and government minister, but he proved a less successful statesman than chef, and two years later was exiled.³⁵

Italian dishes appeared prominently in the cuisine of New Spain. Spaghetti with tomato sauce became a common dry soup, *fideos*, which seems appropriate given that the tomatoes now ubiquitous in southern Italian cooking originated in America. Perhaps the most interesting twist given by Creole cooks to Italian cuisine was the creation of *chiles en nogada*, a green chile pepper stuffed with minced meat, covered with a pure white walnut sauce, and garnished with bright red pomegranate seeds. The green, white, and red of the Mexican flag have made this a modern national icon, but historical texts demonstrate its Italian roots. Mexico's first published cookbooks, dated 1831, contained recognizable versions of *chiles en nogada*. The stuffing added only mutton, eggs, and capers to modern recipes of shredded pork fried with garlic, onion, tomato, parsley, cinnamon, cloves, and candied fruit.³⁶ The primary difference lay in the walnut sauce, which, unlike cream-enriched modern versions, was originally an oil-based salad dressing. Cooks used it to season many New World vegetables such as squash, avocados, and of course stuffed chiles.³⁷ Diego Granado gave a comparable European recipe in 1599 for stuffed cabbage in "*una composicion llamada nogada*," but he had copied it from the cookbooks of Renaissance Italy.³⁸

Chiles en nogada exemplified the triumphs of New Spain's Creole cuisine. Colonial cooks, in attempting to re-create European foods, actually developed a highly innovative culinary repertoire. Forced to use native ingredients such as chiles and low-status European ones like pork fat, they improvised dishes that were both delicious and distinct from those eaten in the peninsula. Yet they tried valiantly to maintain ties to the homeland and, in particular, demanded the European staff of life, wheat bread. Native Americans reacted in a similar manner to the gastronomic encounter by incorporating Old World plants and animals into their diet whenever convenient, but clinging tenaciously to the foundation of their traditional cuisine, corn.

Culinary Blending in the Countryside

The people of Mesoamerica had been eating tortillas for two thousand years before Fernando Cortés stepped off the ship from Cuba. Their lives centered around maize; it provided the essence of their identity. The vast

majority of men, save for a few warriors and merchants, raised corn for subsistence, while women were cooks who derived much of their self-worth from skill at the *metate*. The efforts of Cortés and his followers to transform New Spain into a replica of the old therefore met with stubborn resistance from Native Americans reluctant to abandon their traditional cuisine. European settlers eventually satisfied their own demand for wheat through forced Indian labor, but the natives largely refused to eat this foreign grain. Like the Creoles, they adopted primarily those new foods that fit into their already established cuisine.

Spanish attempts to indoctrinate Native Americans to European culture and religion began with the *encomienda*, which assigned Indian communities to individual conquistadors. Although justified as a means for converting the pagans to Catholicism, these grants became a means for Spaniards to extort as much labor as possible, regardless of the suffering of those commended to their care.³⁹ The system rapidly proved self-defeating, and in 1549 labor tribute was abolished, because of the large numbers of natives who died from Spanish disease and abuse. Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah have estimated that in the century following the conquest, the pre-Columbian population of perhaps twenty-five million had fallen to less than one million.⁴⁰

Spanish officials sought to protect the natives by formally segregating the colony into two distinct societies, the *república de los españoles* and the *república de los indios*. Native Americans generally lived in agrarian villages and raised subsistence crops on lands held communally according to pre-Columbian customs. Although Mexico City contained several Indian neighborhoods, most indigenous communities lay south of the capital, a legacy of the nomadic Chichimec warriors who had limited the Aztec empire's northward expansion. Spanish society, meanwhile, concentrated in urban areas in the central highlands and in silver-mining communities in the north.

Supplying wheat to Creole markets placed onerous burdens on the Native American population. Even after the abolition of *encomienda* tribute labor, rotating *repartimiento* drafts assigned Indians to public works including flood control, silver mines, and wheat farms. Moreover, historian Charles Gibson has shown that wheat farms served as the foundation for Spanish usurpation of Indian lands in central Mexico. About the end of the sixteenth century, large haciendas came to dominate wheat production around Mexico City, drawing *repartimiento* workers from nearby villages such as Tacuba and Tacubaya. Other major wheat zones developed to the east, around Atlixco in the province of Puebla, and to the west, at Zamora

and Valladolid in Michoacán.⁴¹ A few entrepreneurial Indians also grew for European markets, to the irritation of Spanish competitors. The natives of Oaxaca, for example, supplied the limited urban wheat demand from their own lands and often ground flour in mills owned by *caciques* (native nobles) and *cofrades* (religious brotherhoods).⁴² These cases notwithstanding, commercial agriculture often provided a means of subjugating Indians. But Europeans did not propagate wheat only for pecuniary motives.

Spanish missionaries preached the goodness of wheat as part of their evangelical message to pagan Indians. Father Sahagún instructed them to eat "that which the Castilian people eat, because it is good food, that with which they are raised, they are strong and pure and wise. . . . You will become the same way if you eat their food."⁴³ Although Sahagún later questioned the wisdom of acculturating Indians, wheat remained a religious necessity because it was the only grain recognized by the Roman Catholic Church for the Holy Eucharist. Since the eleventh century, priests could substitute no other bread for the body of Christ. The unreliability of colonial pack trains, which often delivered spoiled flour, made wheat production essential to religious missions, and priests stationed in the desolate north frequently complained of their inability to say Mass for lack of altar breads.⁴⁴

The friars also launched campaigns against native festival foods that were identified with pagan practices. To facilitate the extirpation of idolatry, Diego Durán compiled a lengthy list of suspect pre-Columbian feasts and their associated dishes.⁴⁵ Amaranth stood out as anathema because the Indians shaped it into idols and ate it for communion. The friars issued a ban against its cultivation, but with little effect because this nutritious grain grew prolifically in the wild.⁴⁶ They could scarcely outlaw maize without precipitating widespread starvation, so instead they taught women to make the sign of the cross over the dough before forming it into tortillas.⁴⁷ Priests concentrated on introducing European foods at religious feasts; for example, in the pueblo of Tepoztlán, south of Mexico City, lentils were consumed only during Holy Week. This campaign succeeded in persuading even isolated communities to purchase wheat bread for the altars of patron saints. But these loaves often sat beside tamales, indicating the continued veneration of Young Lord Maize Cob.⁴⁸

Native Americans, when left to their own devices, almost invariably planted corn instead of wheat, in part because they disliked the taste of the foreign grain. The *Florentine Codex* records their initial reaction to bread as being "like famine food . . . like dried maize stalks."⁴⁹ Spaniards, accustomed to presenting bread as alms in their homeland, were shocked to find that they could not even give it away to beggars. Juan Suárez de Peralta

explained that "destitute natives would not think of accepting bread, and I don't mean crumbs, but a good pound-and-a-half loaf, they shove it back in your face."⁵⁰

Economic considerations also contributed to Indian rejection, for they found the foreign grain to be a poor subsistence crop. Unlike corn, which yielded well from the forests of Yucatán to the mountains of Toluca, wheat grew only under favorable conditions and was highly susceptible to disease. The summer showers that nurtured maize rusted wheat, making it generally suitable only for the arid winter season, which required ample irrigation. Additional capital outlays for producing wheat bread included plows, oxen, mills, and ovens. Moreover, the European grain proved disappointing at harvest time. In the words of Fernand Braudel, "Wheat's unpardonable fault was its low yield."⁵¹ Modern authorities have estimated wheat's yield to be only 80 percent of corn's when measured by seed, and 70 percent by area planted. Even after the expansion of European wheat farms, the grain sold for as much as ten times the price of maize.⁵² As a result, within the boundaries of Mexico City, common people cultivated corn in small *milpa* gardens to supplement their miserable wages. And fields planted in wheat often reverted to corn when Spanish attention lapsed. The villagers of Apasco in the Mixtec Alta, for example, abandoned the foreign grain immediately after the death of their *encomendero*. In the New Mexico revolt of 1680, Pueblo insurgents expelled the Spaniards from Santa Fe and, for good measure, destroyed their wheat fields.⁵³

European livestock met with mixed reactions from the indigenous people. Franciscan friars observed that the first appearance of cattle often sent astonished villagers fleeing into the mountains. Indians complained bitterly throughout the colonial period about the damage to corn fields caused by grazing herds. While eventually acquiring a taste for beef, they often preferred to buy it from Spaniards rather than raise the troublesome animals themselves.⁵⁴ Moreover, according to Spanish chroniclers, the natives' initial reaction to pork fat was absolute disgust.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, they later discovered that blending pork fat into the batter for tamales made them fluffier and more delicate. The Indians displayed greater enthusiasm for sheep, which were valued for both meat and wool. Their favorite animals, however, were chickens, smaller versions of the native turkey. Certainly, they had more affection for these birds than for the conquistadors; the Nahuatl word *Cartillan* meant "land of chickens."⁵⁶

Male farmers and herdsman did not alone determine which European plants and animals would enter the native cuisine. Women often mediated cultural change through their control of the domestic sphere. Vegetable

gardens were perhaps the most important place for incorporating new culinary influences. Such plots, fertilized by kitchen scraps and household pets, had long served as places for experimentation. In pre-Columbian times, these apparently haphazard gardens yielded a wide variety of herbs, fruits, and vegetables. After the conquest, women added cabbages, cucumbers, artichokes, lettuce, radishes, and European beans. The prestige attached to Spanish vegetables in some cases led to the neglect of native varieties such as *quelites*. Yet despite the constant encouragement by priests to consume wheat bread, the sight of women bent over *metates* remained a ubiquitous feature of the Mexican landscape well into the twentieth century.⁵⁷

The general preference for corn is confirmed by those exceptional Native Americans who adopted wheat bread, for they stood outside traditional village society. Mexico City market women sold wheat bread to Spaniards as early as 1550, and this proximity marked the first step toward acculturation. Likewise, when Oaxaca's growing capital, Antequera, engulfed the community of Jalatlaco, the village men, deprived of their corn fields, went to work as city bakers.⁵⁸ But Indians typically entered the baking trade only by force, and the "public service" industries supplied by *repartimiento* labor drafts included bakeries. Moreover, criminals commonly served eight-to-ten-year sentences kneading dough. Unfree labor was essential because of the slavlike conditions and frequent beatings in these establishments. Despite the harsh conditions, Indian workers did begin to eat bread because their meager pay often included a few loaves.⁵⁹

Colonial bakers acquired a reputation for deviant behavior that continues to the present day. Their antics provided material for an entire genre of lewd songs and dances composed by eighteenth-century street musicians. One of these bawdy tunes, "The Dance of the Bakers," began as a duet:

He is really a baker
who doesn't indulge himself;
and if you give him a tiny
kiss, he'll start to work

She is really a baker
who doesn't indulge herself;
take off your underpants
because I want to party.⁶⁰

Bakers often named their creations "kisses" and "underpants," and engaged in flirtatious wordplay with maids who came to buy bread. Even when freed

from forced labor after independence, Mexican bakers retained unusual habits — working nights to have bread ready in the morning — and also kept the picaresque stereotype of being humorous but drunken flirts.⁶¹

The grain map that ultimately emerged in New Spain corresponded to settlement patterns. Spaniards made their greatest impact in the northern half of the colony. Silver mines and cattle ranches developed in this arid country formerly inhabited only by nomadic Chichimec Indians. The dry climate also proved most suitable to wheat growing, at least in irrigated fields along rivers. Native Americans, meanwhile, retained their cultural and political autonomy best in the area south of Mexico City. The lack of mineral wealth and the difficulty of transporting agricultural goods to markets kept European settlers to a minimum. Those who came planted wheat in areas around Antequera, Chilpancingo, and the Mixtec Alta, but the slight demand for European crops enabled Indians to retain their ancestral lands and eating habits.⁶²

At the village level, a comprehensive model for wheat acculturation remains elusive. Climate and markets determined the large outline of the grain map, but a detailed examination reveals an unsystematic patchwork of wheat and corn fields. The residents of one community in Oaxaca rejected European agricultural techniques because the metal plow "injured the land," while a neighboring town had its own forge to make such implements.⁶³ The sixteenth-century *Relaciones geográficas* listed villagers who refused to grow any European crops at all, others who raised fruits and vegetables, and a few who planted wheat fields. Perhaps the people of Teotitlán del Valle and Macuilxóchitl who grew wheat simply had a more persuasive Dominican friar than nearby towns that continued with the traditional corn. Social relationships, rather than purely economic ones, hold the key to understanding the historical development of Mexican cuisine.⁶⁴

They Were What They Are

Thomas Gage observed an unusual ritual in seventeenth-century Chiapas, where gentlemen would drape themselves casually in their doorways each afternoon "to see and to be seen, and there for half an hour will they stand shaking off the crumbs of bread from their clothes."⁶⁵ The Englishman ridiculed these "presumptuous and arrogant" Creoles who claimed to pick partridge bones from their teeth when they could only afford to eat beans. Yet his preening dandies, like the impoverished but proud hidalgos of the novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*, said much about early modern Hispanic society.

Proper appearances were essential to maintaining status within this hierarchical world. Processions held on holy days, for example, gave rise to arguments over the marching order of various guilds and confraternities. The relation between parade position and social rank was so intimate that these disputes often degenerated into fist fights. Creole gentlemen likewise paraded their status within New Spain's racial hierarchy by wearing ruffled collars and eating wheat bread.⁶⁶

European colonists throughout the New World concerned themselves greatly with outward displays of status. English sugar planters in the Caribbean, for example, spent enormous amounts of money importing food, clothes, and furniture to maintain a lifestyle appropriate to their social position. They followed European standards regardless of the discomforts involved in eating meat-laden banquets on humid afternoons or in wearing woolen coats and trousers under the tropical sun. Historian Richard Dunn attributed this rather unhealthy esteem for European customs to the hierarchical connotations of food and dress in early modern society: "Each rank in the social order, from aristocrats at the top to beggars at the bottom, had its own distinct style of dress, diet, and habitation. . . . So the masters dressed and ate like the gentry in England, while the slaves . . . went semi-naked and ate tropical produce."⁶⁷

Status symbols assumed even greater significance in New Spain because of the complexity of racial boundaries. Unlike the European-African dichotomy of the sugar islands, the people of colonial Mexico filled an entire spectrum. Every major race of humanity was represented, including Native Americans, European settlers, African slaves, and even a few Asian immigrants from the Spanish-dominated Philippine Islands. Africans made important contributions to the colony; for example, Juan Garrido or Hand-some John, a former slave who fought with Cortés during the conquest, was the first wheat farmer in New Spain. Nevertheless, Africans were consigned to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Spaniards occupied the summit and attached great importance to racial purity. Their concern dated back to the Reconquest and the medieval concept of honor, for purity of Spanish blood indicated both a family's trustworthiness as loyal Christians and its control over the chastity of its women.⁶⁸

This ideal notwithstanding, a scarcity of European women in the colony made race mixture inevitable, which led in turn to the development of the system of castes. Peninsular Spaniards claimed a racial superiority over Creoles, in addition to their political advantages arising from the crown's distrust of colonial loyalty. The Creole population indeed included substantial numbers of mestizo children who adopted the racial identity of

their European parent. Other mestizos, scorned by Spanish fathers, were raised as Indians in their mothers' native community. But not all people of mixed blood gained acceptance in either of the two societies. An urban underclass appeared of mestizos who had adopted European culture, but lacking a Spanish patron, had little hope of economic advancement. They, along with Africans and mulattoes, could find only menial labor, and were referred to contemptuously by elites as *léperos* (street people).⁶⁹

Over time, racial status became a function of culture and wealth rather than of birth, to the consternation of established Creole families. No discernible genetic differences existed between the "Indian" and "mestizo" categories, and villagers could fit into urban society simply by changing their patterns of dress, hair, and speech. More threateningly still, the boundaries between Europeans and mestizos began to erode as lower-class Spaniards lived among the *léperos*.⁷⁰ In an effort to shore up the racial hierarchy, Creoles developed an "almost pathological interest in genealogy," reflected in the *casta* paintings.⁷¹ These works constituted a graphic record of elite views of colonial society. Each series contained a number of idealized family portraits cataloging the racially mixed castes, with labels such as "Spaniard and Indian beget mestizo" along with more bizarre combinations that included "coyote mestizo and mulatto woman beget *abí te estás*" (there you remain). Foods composed an important part of this categorization scheme, as darker-skinned subjects appeared with native foods. The artists of two such series depicted tamales in scenes labeled "from *lobo* and Indian woman comes *cambujo*," and "from Indian and *barsino* woman: *zambujiga*." The most famous *casta* collection, executed in 1763 by Miguel Cabrera, included as the final panel a woman beating her husband—the ultimate social inversion stigmatizing these "unnatural" racial combinations.⁷²

Colonial literature offers further evidence of Spaniards' scorn for native foods and mestizos in general. Most authors avoided all reference to the castes in their works. One notable exception, Mateo Rosas de Oquendo, provides a glimpse of mestizos through the eyes of colonial elites. This seventeenth-century poet mockingly related the amorous declarations of Juan de Diego:

Oh, my Juanita,
vision of beauty!
Aren't you just dying
for this "coyote"?

Although a poor coyote mestizo, Diego fancied himself an hidalgo of noble lineage, the grandson of conquistadors. His appetites nevertheless betrayed his lower-class origins.

He carries tamales,
and a few maize ears,
passing like a grigolo
through a sea of lovers.
And out in the pond,
there is no salamander,
nor frog nor fish
he would not devour.

He enters the market
with a dozen green chiles
and ten avocados, to eat
a hundred sweet potatoes.⁷³

After this prodigious display of dining, no doubt could remain of his Indian heritage. Juan de Diego, with his two first names, his sexual promiscuity, and his taste for *animálitos*, exactly matched Spanish stereotypes of mestizo degeneracy.

Ruling over a multiracial society, Spaniards lived in mortal fear of losing the respect of the lower classes, for any appearance of going native could undermine the legitimacy of their privileged status. Even Indian *caíques* emulated European habits of riding horses, carrying swords, wearing wool clothes, and at times eating wheat bread.⁷⁴ Scattered archival records of food consumption confirm the vital importance of European cuisine as a status symbol. Mexico City restaurant owner Carlo Monti, in a lawsuit brought against Francisco Zapari in 1805, itemized a series of unpaid meals. The menus comprised exclusively Spanish foods such as *pucheros*, salads, and wines, and for Christmas Eve, the traditional Iberian dried cod.⁷⁵ A century earlier, the archbishop of Mexico City had recorded that a catastrophic wheat plague in 1692 reduced to eating tortillas more than forty thousand residents "who had not used this food before."⁷⁶

The archbishop's assertion notwithstanding, large numbers of *blancos* (whites) subsisted on corn. This indicated not the abandonment of European prejudices, but rather the colony's ever-present downward mobility. In tropical Yucatán, where wheat refused to grow and even imported communion wafers "did bend like to wet paper, by reason of the extreme humidity

and heat," settlers acquired a taste for corn out of necessity.⁷⁷ Even in Mexico City, immigrants who failed to strike it rich found themselves reduced to eating cheap tortillas, just as they were obliged to accept Indian or mestiza marriage partners, despite their preferences for wheat bread and Spanish women. So when the gentlemen of Chiapas went out on their doorsteps to brush bread crumbs from their ruffled collars, they affirmed both social status and Creole identity.

For *mole poblano* to have gained social status in colonial Mexico, therefore, it would have been seen as a Creole rather than mestizo dish. And notwithstanding the New World chiles lurking inside, *mole* would have seemed completely appropriate for any medieval banquet. Cookbooks preserved from European courts include fantastic but nevertheless familiar dishes. Their lavish use of expensive Asian spices served as a mark of conspicuous wealth, and a single recipe would include combinations of ingredients such as cinnamon, cloves, peppercorns, garlic, and sugar. Cooks based their sauces on meat broths, often mixed with wine, and added ground almonds for taste and texture. In short, these court recipes bore a striking resemblance to the foods of New Spain. To Creole tastes, *mole poblano* represented a New World version of medieval cooking.⁷⁸

Cortés and his lieutenants, having gained noble status through their conquests, naturally wished to display all the trappings of Spanish lords, including their foods. Expensively spiced dishes, such as cardamom chicken and rosewater partridge, were introduced to the New World as rapidly as the conquistadors could import the ingredients. Spanish friars, in turn, disseminated these new spices among their Indian parishioners, as Friedlander hypothesized, adding new complexity to native festival foods. Colonial *moles* may well have grown more elaborate in the baroque seventeenth century as the expansion of Oriental trade brought additional spices to Mexican grocers.⁷⁹

But the culinary exchange went both ways, for native cooks taught Creoles to incorporate chile peppers into European stews, and by the eighteenth century capsicums had become the defining characteristic of Creole cuisine. While New World elites fed their additions to the fiery peppers in a wide range of *moles*, *chorizos*, *adobos*, and *chiles en nogada*, the French Enlightenment turned Europeans away from their medieval heritage of spicy tastes in favor of bland foods they considered more "natural" and "healthful." Indeed, the universal Mexican taste for chile peppers marked the first step in forging a distinctive national cuisine.

Nevertheless, the twentieth-century authors who glorified colonial *moles*

as "mestizo" cuisine displayed the nationalist ideology of modern Mexico rather than the hierarchical mentality of the colonial period. The elites of New Spain viewed people of mixed blood as outcasts, economically necessary perhaps, but hardly human. Writers ignored the castes in their works, and painters depicted them in the same way they categorized flora and fauna. Foods gained acceptance only when they appeared to be Creole adaptations of Spanish dishes, for wealthy people scorned the Indian cuisine of corn, a snobbish attitude that persisted long after Mexico gained independence.

THREE

Many Chefs in the National Kitchen

The Nineteenth Century



El cocinero mexicano (The Mexican Chef), published in 1831, a decade after independence, set the tone for Mexico's national cuisine. Possibly the country's first printed cookbook and certainly the most influential, it passed through a dozen editions and served as a model for cooking manuals throughout the nineteenth century. The anonymous author adopted a sharp nationalist voice in both linguistic and culinary matters. He denounced the Spanish Academy of the Language and insisted on using words of Mexican origins, even as he praised "truly national" spicy dishes and derided the delicate European palates unaccustomed to chile peppers.¹ The publisher, Mariano Galván Rivera, edited out the most chauvinistic phrases from future editions; nevertheless, the insistence on a distinctive national taste continued to flavor the work. The 1868 edition, for example, stated that foreign dishes appeared in the text, but only after they had been "Mexicanized," in other words adapted to Mexican tastes.²

Deciding what constituted the authentic national cuisine remained a source of ongoing concern. A few years after *The Mexican Chef* appeared, the *Nuevo y sencillo arte de cocina* (New and Simple Art of Cooking) advertised recipes specifically "accommodated to the Mexican palate," which supposedly had no use for "European stimulants."³ Nevertheless, Narciso Bassols began his two-volume *La cocinera pobлана* (The Puebla Cook) with the pessimistic claim that cookbooks contained an abundance of useless foreign recipes.⁴ Vicenta Torres de Rubio reiterated this attack on irrelevant cookbooks, observing that Mexicans neither season nor condiment their food according to European practices.⁵ A group of women from Gua-

inherited from Mediterranean culture sought to keep women and children locked safely behind heavy wooden doors and grated iron windows. Men alone supposedly possessed the physical strength necessary to provide the family with sustenance, which entitled the patriarch to unquestioned authority at home.¹³ Nineteenth-century cookbook authors explicitly supported this subservient female role. In the introduction to one family manual, María Antonia Gutiérrez cautioned that a woman must "maintain a pleasant and agreeable home so that her husband would not abandon her."¹⁴ Jacinto Anduiza elaborated this theme in a cookbook that attributed many of the worst domestic calamities to failures in the kitchen. He warned that men dissatisfied with their wives' cooking would seek their pleasures in taverns and bordellos.¹⁵

The choice of appropriate foods for family meals not only helped assure a stable domestic environment, it also served to foment patriotism within the home. Cookbook authors often resorted to quite blatant nationalist language, preparing everything from stuffed onions to barbecued meat *a la mexicana*, and dedicating dishes to national heroes, such as Moctezuma's dessert, insurgents' soup, and Donato Guerra's cod.¹⁶ They explored the national taste for foods such as "patriotic" frijoles, and an 1886 banquet attended by the minister of government and foreign dignitaries featured *mole poblano*, identified as the "national dish."¹⁷ Writers also celebrated the recognition of their food in foreign countries. Newspapers announced proudly that New York restaurants served *mole* and other Mexican dishes.¹⁸

The authors of this national cuisine came primarily from the liberal intelligentsia. The anonymous author of *The Mexican Chef* employed many themes of the Enlightenment and denounced Spanish conservatism. His publisher, Mariano Galván, was a political moderate who produced Mexico's first almanac as well as countless editions of women's calendars, travel guides, and textbooks. Although later jailed for supporting the French intervention, Galván had employed liberal ideologue José María Luis Mora in the 1830s to manage his journals. Leading liberal newspaper editors including Vicente García Torres and Ireneo Paz also entered the cookbook trade. Vicenta Torres de Rubio, the first woman to publish a cookbook, moved in liberal circles and even included menus from political banquets in her work. Manuel Murguía dedicated a cooking manual to Mexican *señoritas* in 1856, two years after he printed the first edition of the Mexican national anthem.¹⁹

Over the course of the nineteenth century, about fifteen separate cookbooks were published in Mexico. Multiple editions of these works bring the number up to nearly forty, with perhaps a few thousand copies for each run,

for a total of between fifty and a hundred thousand cookbooks. Several of these works listed dual publication in Mexico City and abroad, principally Paris, which must have delighted Mexican patriots desiring foreign approval of their national cuisine. About four or five volumes, both new works and reprints of old ones, appeared each decade from 1831 until 1890, and at least eight cookbooks were published in each of the last two decades of the Porfiriato. Additional recipes printed in domestic manuals, calendars, and newspapers assured that cooking instructors reached a broad audience, at least among the middle and upper classes.²⁰

Yet published recipes did not exhaust Mexican culinary literature; many women wrote their own manuscript volumes, particularly as educational opportunities increased toward the end of the nineteenth century. Fanny Gooch observed in the 1880s that affluent Mexican ladies took great pride in their handwritten volumes, although she noted that a hired cook often followed her own recipes and ignored her mistress's instructions.²¹ Women likewise took ideas from published works, transforming them to fit their personal tastes.²² One housewife copied a number of recipes from a published volume into her kitchen notebook. In the process she simplified techniques, removed extraneous ingredients, and on one occasion found it necessary to change "stirring frequently" to "stirring continuously," a lesson perhaps learned at the expense of a ruined dinner.²³ Moreover, women passed over impractical dishes such as Manuel Murguía's absurd recipe for stuffed *frijoles*, which involved cooking beans — "but not too soft" — slicing them in half, inserting a bit of cheese, dipping them in egg batter, and frying them in oil.²⁴ One cannot simply assume women adopted liberal ideals of a national culture, given the creative way they read these books and the diversity of regional cuisines across the republic.

Many Mexicos, Many Cuisines

The liberal poet and politician Guillermo Prieto had few kind things to say about Antonio López de Santa Anna, but he did have to admit that the caudillo was, "like most *veracruzanos*, fond of a fine table."²⁵ The inhabitants of this Gulf Coast state, renowned for its fresh seafood, spoke endlessly about local delicacies such as fried *robalo* (snook), dogshark turnovers, and octopus stewed in ink. Other regions inherited their own distinctive culinary traditions from the colonial period. Puebla was known for its *mole* with turkey, while Oaxaca possessed its own special black *mole* sauce. Spatial divisions existed even within the boundaries of Mexico City between the

popular cuisine of the streets and the elite foods consumed within private homes and exclusive restaurants. The enormous diversity of local dishes made it difficult to imagine a single national cuisine, just as devotion to *patrias chicas* (little fatherlands) confounded the search for national unity.

The strong sense of loyalty felt by Mexicans for their place of birth encouraged all sorts of regional rivalries, particularly between provincials and residents of the capital. A cookbook published in Mexico City and Paris asserted that lower-class Indian foods appeared on even the most affluent provincial tables. Vicenta Torres de Rubio refuted this slander in her book of Michoacán cooking by demonstrating the prowess of Morelia women in preparing French delicacies.²⁶ Another example of culinary chauvinism appeared among *jarocho*s, who considered the tiny black *frijoles* of Veracruz, with their smooth texture and fragrant oils, to be the finest in the country. When forced to live in the capital, they willingly paid thirty to forty pesos per mule load to import them. *The Mexican Chef*, trying to overcome this regionalism, insisted that the black beans of central Mexico compared favorably to those of Veracruz.²⁷ And as late as 1916, Manuel Gamio asked for an imported beer in Mérida, and received a Dos Equis from Orizaba. When the anthropologist repeated his request, the waiter replied: "That's the only foreign beer we have; if you want a domestic, I'll bring you a Yucatecan brand."²⁸

Nevertheless, many Mexicans also recognized the wealth of the country's diverse regional cooking styles. Nineteenth-century cookbooks included many local specialties, from the seafoods of Veracruz and Campeche, to the *moles* of Puebla and Oaxaca, and the roasted meats of Monterrey and Guadalajara. But by comparison with modern works, these books acknowledged only a handful of regional cuisines, in particular the centers of Spanish settlement. The virtual monopoly of Creole kitchens becomes apparent in the comparative treatment of *mole*. Puebla's chief rival in producing this dish, the southern state of Oaxaca, is known today as "the land of seven *moles*." Yet nineteenth-century cookbooks ignored the more indigenous versions of Oaxacan *mole* such as *verde*, a green stew perfumed with the incomparable aniselike fragrance of *hoja santa*. They focused instead on the black *mole* similar to Puebla's fabled dish. An 1834 volume explained that the *moles* of Puebla and Oaxaca "owe their particular good taste to the types of chiles employed; the first making use of a sweet chile called the *mulato*, and the second from a Oaxacan chile called the *chilobotle*."²⁹

By defining even chile peppers in Creole terms, the nineteenth-century national cuisine ignored a gastronomic geography dating back to pre-Columbian times. Native culinary traditions centered around civiliza-

tions such as the Maya, Mexico, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and Totonacs — ethnic groups that rarely corresponded to Mexican political boundaries. The Huasteca, for example, split between the states of San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz, seldom appeared on national maps. This heavily forested region contained only a small Hispanic population of *rancheros* with little political prominence. Nevertheless, large numbers of native communities thrived in the area and developed an enormously sophisticated cuisine. Modern ethnographers have counted forty-two distinct varieties of tamales, including the fabled *zacahuil*, a meter-long monster that required most of a tree of banana leaves for wrapping.³⁰

Other culinary regions received little notice because of their native origins and local character. Culhuacán maintained two distinct gastronomic traditions in an obscure corner of the Valley of Mexico, southeast of the capital. The cuisine of the Chalco lakefront featured vegetables, fish, and ducks, while people living on nearby foothills dined on cactus, pork, and rabbits.³¹ Along the Pacific Coast, the hominy stew *pozole* assumed countless forms among different native ethnic groups. Yet because of its indigenous associations, *pozole* was also ignored by elite cooking manuals.

Spatial divisions based on class and ethnicity existed even within the boundaries of Mexico City. An economic boom of the late eighteenth century attracted large numbers of immigrants from the countryside to the nation's capital. With housing deplorable or nonexistent, common people took their meals in the streets. The pre-Columbian kitchen of *metate* and *comal*, largely unchanged since the conquest, provided cheap and delicious food to help relieve the burdens of urban existence. A woman could set up a brazier on any street corner, and as soon as the coals began glowing, do a brisk business selling enchiladas to pedestrians. Expanding the operation required no more than a few stones to hold a *cazuela* of beans over the charcoal. These curbside kitchens were so pervasive that a government official complained that virtually every street and plaza in Mexico City had its own resident cook.³² The upper classes objected to the spectacle of dirty, half-naked people crowded around pots of bubbling stews and beans. Nevertheless, in many places such as the Street of San Juan and the Plaza of San Pablo, improvised cafés became known for their superb dishes.³³

Popular sector chefs also set up shop in drinking houses known as *pulquerías*. Decried by moral reformers as a social blight, these shops opened early in the morning and quickly filled to capacity, which might be more than five hundred occupants. Customers drank *pulque* from small clay bowls, then smashed the empties on the floor. They amused themselves by gambling, eating pickled chile appetizers, and dancing with waitresses to

rowdy tunes. More substantial food was available, not from the management, but from women who set up small braziers at the back of the houses, filling the unventilated buildings with smoke. Once they started cooking, other aromas permeated the room, attracting numerous customers for foods such as *carnitas*, tasty bits of fried meat served with hot sauce.³⁴ Many *pulquerías* owed their reputations more to the delicious food than to the quality of their drinks, and despite their lower-class associations they often attracted an affluent clientele. Discriminating diners such as Guillermo Prieto and Mariano Otero favored the enchiladas served at the *pulque* houses of "Uncle Juan Aguirre" and "The Granny."³⁵

Fiestas provided another focus for Mexico's popular cuisine, as they had since the days of Moctezuma. In the week before Christmas, people exchanged food and drinks in *posadas*, festive reenactments of the holy family's search for shelter in Bethlehem. All Souls' Day, or the Day of the Dead, was another popular holiday in which adults offered ritual foods to departed relatives while children devoured candy skeletons.³⁶ The most spectacular celebration of the year came during Holy Week, when great crowds converged on the capital from distant villages and ranches. From Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday throngs of people danced through the streets, in a movable feast of popular cuisine. Thirsty revelers guzzled *aguas frescas*, refreshing waters flavored with pineapple, melon, tamarindo, and *chía* seeds, dispensed by women from palm-frond and flower-decorated stands. Holy Week also marked the traditional start of Mexico City's ice-cream season, these frozen treats made with ice carried down from the slopes of Popocatepétl.³⁷

In the early years of the republic, Mexicans of all classes participated in these festivals. But the process of modernization brought increasing attempts to remove disorderly people from the streets. By the 1880s, many fashionable residents left the capital to celebrate Holy Week in Tlalpan, where they dined in outlandishly expensive restaurants. Coffee houses also proliferated as an alternative to the undignified *pulquerías*. And street-corner enchilada women lost customers to restaurants such as "The Archbishop," managed by the redoubtable "Don Frijoles" (Mr. Beans). Spatial lines of class therefore became ever more apparent in the nineteenth century.³⁸

Etiquette and Transgression

Mexican cuisine varied not only between regions, but also over time, as different occasions demanded appropriate foods. Rules of etiquette served

as temporal maps guiding interpersonal relations across the often tortuous social terrain of class, gender, and kinship. Appropriate behavior both depended on and determined an individual's status, making it difficult yet essential to situate oneself correctly within any given context. The etiquette of eating also helped to resolve social contradictions by affording members of the *gente decente* spaces in which to consume unfashionable yet desirable popular foods. Nevertheless, transgressing the boundaries between house and street posed grave dangers to polite society.

The memoirs of Guillermo Prieto fondly recalled the meals of his youth, illustrating the rich variety of Mexican meals in the nineteenth century. He had awakened each morning at boarding school anticipating a cup of succulent chocolate in bed. This essential stimulant, made with either milk or water and served with a roll or some candied fruit, composed the *desayuno* (breakfast). Serious eating did not begin until the *almuerzo* (brunch) served about ten in the morning. Still too early for visitors, this family meal proved substantial nevertheless, with grilled meat or chicken, stews, *moles*, or perhaps an omelet. And regardless of the main course, beans served as the regular accompaniment. Wealthy families drank imported red wine and the middle classes consumed native *pulque*.

The principal meal, *comida*, began around one or two in the afternoon, and Mexico City unfailingly observed its ritual. Offices closed early so that men could go home to eat with their families—they might return to work for a few hours after a siesta. The meal followed an invariable format, and each course arrived at the table separately. First came a broth of chicken or beef with limes for squeezing and chiles for garnishing. The next course consisted of a dry soup of pasta or rice, with tomato sauce either tossed over the former or cooked into the latter. Main courses had more variety, a typical choice being *puchero* stew, made with cabbage, turnips, garbanzos, ham, and assorted other ingredients. After *frijoles* and dessert, the family drifted into a siesta that lasted until the late afternoon.

Between four and five, another cup of chocolate stimulated appetites for the *merienda*, a late afternoon snack of rolls and sweets. Often served to visiting members of the extended family and other friends, it would tide them over until the *cena* (supper) was ready about ten at night. This meal, whether taken in the home or at a modest *fonda* (restaurant), might consist of stewed meat with salad or chicken covered in *mole*. Well-to-do Mexicans did not usually retire until quite late, having consumed remarkable quantities of food throughout the day.³⁹

A skeptic might question whether this represented a typical diet, even for the wealthy. Prieto was, after all, a gourmand of unusual dimensions. His

appetite shocked the boarding-school mistress, who exclaimed, "he eats like ten tigers."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, similar meals greeted foreign travelers from the beaches of Veracruz to the deserts of Sonora. Edward Taylor characterized his first dinner in Mexico as "an incessant volley of dishes." Olive Percival recounted suppers in Mexico City that included twelve meats, eight sweets, and countless wines.⁴¹

These abundant meals not only sustained life, they also helped structure it. Keeping the family well fed occupied a great deal of a woman's time, regardless of whether servants did the actual work. Conscientious housewives went through a daily cycle of budgeting the groceries, planning the meals, overseeing the cooking, gathering the children, controlling the children, and organizing the leftovers.⁴² Meals also regulated the city's life, closing businesses in the afternoon so that men could return home and share the *comida* with their families. Meanwhile, the *cena*, called the *mesa del amor* (table of love) and often taken in open-air *fondas*, formed part of the evening social life along with promenades through the Zócalo, the central plaza.⁴³

The dinner table served as calendar as well as clock, changing over the year to reflect religious rituals and seasonal produce. Catholic dietary laws restricting the consumption of meat on Fridays and throughout Lent required the greatest adjustment. Guillermo Prieto reminisced that preparations for Good Friday dinners during his youth had called for a "genuine culinary congress" whose deliberations produced a lavish menu with several varieties of fish, lentils with pineapple and bananas, *romeritos* (dried shrimp fritters with greens) and *capirotada* (bread pudding). The feast of San Agustín, on August 28, demanded *chiles en nogada*, and for family celebrations such as baptisms and weddings, *mole* was essential.⁴⁴

Social divisions revealed themselves in the foods chosen for such occasions; for the popular sectors important celebrations meant tamales. The villagers of Tepoztlán, Morelos, consumed these native treats on Christmas Eve after "putting the child to bed," ceremoniously placing a figure of the infant Jesus in a manger of hay. On June 24, the Day of San Juan, residents of Chavinda, Michoacán, ate *tamales tintos* (silly tamales) made of uncooked corn with only a little added pork fat. The people of Huejotzingo, Puebla, offered plain white tamales with *mole* to deceased relatives on All Saints Day. And in Acolmán, México, it was traditional to eat Judas tamales on the Saturday of Holy Week during the festivities in which crowds burned papier-mâché effigies of the traitor Iscariot.⁴⁵

For the *gente decente*, Christmas Eve supper, the most formal meal of the year, demonstrated the superior social status of European foods. The menu

followed strict conventions in comfortable homes, with virtually nothing of domestic origin. First came the fabled *ensalada de la noche buena*, "the most pompous and magnificent of all salads," according to *The Mexican Chef*. He called it a miniature Plaza del Volador, and the riotous mixture of lettuce, carrots, beets, potatoes, raisins, almonds, peanuts, bananas, *jicamas*, oranges, limes, and pears did resemble the colorful market formerly adjacent to the Mexico City Zócalo.⁴⁶ Next came dried cod, a tradition dating back at least to 1804, when restaurateur Carlo Monti served this dish to his nonpaying customer Francisco Zapari on Christmas Eve. Cooks selected the whitest and fleshiest cuts, soaked them overnight, then cooked them in olive oil with finely chopped tomatoes, onions, garlic, and red bell peppers, as well as olives, capers, and pickled yellow chiles. The dish was always served with wheat bread rolls and wine. Indeed, much of its attraction lay in the conspicuous indication of wealth, for after spending outrageous amounts on the fish, housewives also had to buy imported wines, oils, and condiments.⁴⁷

European food likewise dominated the most important meal of the day, the afternoon *comida*, pushing national dishes to the periphery. *The Mexican Chef* organized popular-sector dishes such as enchiladas and tamales into a chapter of *almuerzos ligeros* (light brunches), to be eaten privately in the morning.⁴⁸ A later edition of the cookbook explicitly distinguished between the situations for elite and common foods. Among family members and intimate friends, it explained, one could safely eat stuffed chiles, *mole poblano*, or even enchiladas and tamales. But for formal brunches, and always at dinner, one should adhere to European customs.⁴⁹ These rules were not limited to stuffy etiquette manuals. Guillermo Prieto, no stranger to lower-class enchilada makers, described *mole* as excellent for intimate family gatherings, but preferred the Spanish *olla podrida* for banquets.⁵⁰

Location as well as time determined the appropriateness of certain foods; México City required more formality than the countryside, where the affluent could relax and enjoy popular cuisine. The *tamalada*, a picnic expressly for eating tamales, was a regular feature of nineteenth-century social life. Families traveled to the suburbs of Tacubaya and San Ángel to spend the afternoon in a quiet wood or beautiful garden, dancing, playing ball or croquet, or fighting *guerras de manzanas* (mock apple wars). In addition to tamales, refreshments included *atole de leche*, a sort of milkshake made with ground corn, and *chongos*, French toast with brown-sugar syrup and grated cheese.⁵¹

Travel provided another excuse for wealthy Mexicans to indulge in otherwise forbidden fruits, as it had since the colonial period. In 1695 an

able young wife of Don Miguel Bringas. Her temptation took place in the streets of San Juan del Río, north of Mexico City. The couple's journey by train, the symbol of modern life, sharpened the contrast with the filthy market and the street vendors. Miguel asked his wife if she wanted to taste them, but Sofía declined, fearing that somebody would see her in the undignified act of eating tamales. Miguel then goaded his wife across this line of propriety. She refused to buy the tamales herself, so he plunged into the market and came back with the popular confections wrapped in greasy paper. Sofía continued her protests, but when she finally accepted, her eager manner betrayed the feigned reluctance. A convenient case of dyspepsia prevented Miguel from sharing the forbidden fruit. Instead he watched, a voyeur, as his wife "dispatched, with gluttonous face and lingering bites, the tamales of San Juan del Río. Chewing with satisfaction, her lips glossy with grease, she was filled with secret vanity knowing that her husband had solicited this caprice."⁵⁶

González Peña wrote in the modernist style, which sought to portray the promiscuity of Latin American urban life. His association of the lower classes with dirt and sexuality corresponded to the middle-class morality of his time. Greasy lips, capricious indulgences, the ever-present threat of contamination through gastrointestinal disease, all appeared to the elite as natural elements of the streets. González Peña used Sofía's flirtation with tamales as a prelude to an adulterous affair and a tragic death. Purging Mexican cities of such dangerous forms of corruption, both culinary and sexual, became an important focus of nineteenth-century social reform.

Cooking Classes as Social Reform

Laura Esquivel's best-selling novel *Like Water for Chocolate* dramatized the connection between cuisine and morality in Mexico. The heroine Tita was forbidden by custom to marry because as the youngest daughter she must care for her widowed mother. Worse still, her beloved Pedro, in order to be near Tita, agreed to marry her older sister. Unwilling to trade romance for respectability, Tita carried on an illicit affair through the medium of her cooking. Her dishes expressed her emotions: her sorrow brought people to tears, and her passion literally burned down the house. One of the most provocative scenes in the sensual screen adaptation depicted Tita grinding *mole* on the *metate*, the rhythmic swaying of her body nearly giving Pedro a heart attack. Such sexual electricity shocked Mexican elites as well, but for entirely different reasons. The lustful excesses they attributed to lower-

innkeeper, José de Rueda Montezuma, had complained that one María de Alsibar was selling tamales and chocolate from a crude hut on the roadside without a license, thus depriving him of business.⁵² In 1910, an Englishwoman observed similar foods being sold in train stations on the route from Veracruz to the capital: "To my horror I saw these educated people lapping up dreadful little mixtures offered them on leaves, made with Heaven knows what ingredients."⁵³ The women of Tepoztlán, Morelos, climbed two hours to the nearest railroad station to sell their tamales. Tourists could achieve the ultimate pre-Columbian experience by eating tamales while exploring the newly uncovered pyramids of Teotihuacán.⁵⁴

Thus, at times the elite shared in the culture of the popular classes, but only from a distance, secluded in remote picnic spots or disguised by the anonymity of travel. Another example of this reserve was the *jamaica*, a party in which upper-class girls dressed in peasant costume and went around selling each other candy, fruit, and lemonade. This playful imitation of street life took its name from a popular festival of the colonial period. Nevertheless, the "scandalous, profane" dances that provoked the outrage of eighteenth-century moralists had vanished from these elite affairs. Instead, the festival was trivialized to the level of a child's game, with play money from a "bank" and brightly decorated stands like those in the streets during Holy Week. A few girls dressed as ambulant vendors added further authenticity, and for a special touch, a boy with a burro carrying tropical fruits imitated the *fruteros* from the steamy lowlands.⁵⁵

Mexican elites may have brought these street festivals into their homes to sublimate dangerous elements in society. Rather than allowing them free reign outside, they were kept under careful watch by family authorities. A painting by Agustín Arrieta of one such *jamaica* illustrated the nineteenth-century ideals of domesticity. The scene centered around a pretty young girl selling fruit drinks from a stand decorated with flowers and grasses. While she served a drink to her mother, maids worked at the *metate*, grinding and straining pineapple juice, and mixing it with water carried by another servant. Unlike the rowdy setting of Holy Week, solid walls protected this party from the dangers of the street, and the only scenery lay in a few landscape paintings. Finally, the patriarch stood by in a European top hat as guardian of family morality.

Constant vigilance was necessary because both tamales and the unwashed street people who ate them held a promiscuous allure for Mexico's *gente decente*. Carlos González Peña, in his 1915 novel *La fuga de la quimera* (The Flight of the Chimera), explored the forbidden delights of gastronomic transgressions. The dilemma centered around Sofía, the fashion-

class women seemed to threaten the nation's morality. Health authorities, meanwhile, began drawing connections between street foods and disease. Over the course of the nineteenth century, these two discourses of health and morality gradually intermingled, conflating legitimate concerns about public hygiene with a desire to instill middle-class values of domesticity among the urban poor. By the Porfirian period, elite fears of popular cuisine in the streets had escalated to the point that cooking classes became a national priority.

Mexicans have long associated the act of grinding corn on the *metate* with female sexuality. Pre-Columbian artists carved fertility symbols in the shape of lavish earth mothers bent over their grinding stones. Native women of the Huasteca still proposition men with suggestive claims that "my water is fresher, my *metate* tastier, and my sleeping mat hotter" than those of other women, and by urging potential lovers to "come taste my *cazuela*."⁵⁷ The kneeling exertions of tortilla makers certainly caught the eyes of nineteenth-century men, who paid particular attention to the blouses "that failed to cover their breasts." *Costumbrista* painters likewise lingered over this provocative subject of poorly clad yet graceful women.⁵⁸

The popular press further aroused elite anxiety by using culinary metaphors in broadsheets attacking its genteel pretensions. José Guadalupe Posada, the woodcut artist best known for his satiric *calavera* skeletons, illustrated many of these works toward the end of the nineteenth century. In one scene he depicted two men sitting in the rain, protected only by the broad sombreros that marked them as commoners. As they watched, a well-dressed young woman crossed the flooded cobblestone street, her skirt pulled up to her knees. "Who could keep Lent?" asked one of the men, "and not trade the most delicious red snapper for those legs of pure *carne maciza* (chopped loin)."⁵⁹ Another broadside, entitled *El Pinche* (literally the scullery, but also an impolite word in Spanish), explicitly threatened bourgeois society. Posada drew the unshaven *pinche* waving a large knife over a string of *chorizones* (big sausages, with predictably rude connotations): a general, a banker, an industrialist, a foreigner, a priest, and an old woman symbolizing alcoholism. But the people feasting on elites remained largely a dream during the Porfirian period, when the reverse was more common. Posada once caricatured the governor of Puebla in the dress of a street-corner cook, grinding up *masa*, both corn dough and the common people, to make enchiladas for President Díaz, dressed as a peon. The *cocinera* also held a bundle of tamales, representing the municipalities of Puebla, waiting to be gobbled down by the dictator.⁶⁰ Cooking, the very

hallmark of domesticity, therefore posed a menace to society when practiced in streets.

Popular cuisine even threatened to subvert the patriarchal order, as women resorted to kitchen secrets to defend themselves against their husbands. This tradition dated back to pre-Columbian and colonial times, when food served as a medium for witchcraft. For instance, José de Ugalde complained to the Mexican Inquisition in 1774 that his wife had bewitched him by putting herbs in his food and drink. She allegedly fed him such concoctions throughout their seventeen-year marriage, but he reported the case only when she used supernatural powers to prevent him from exercising his right to beat her.⁶¹ Another common display of machismo involved the practice of maintaining a mistress, usually in a separate location, but at times actually bringing her into the home. A disgruntled wife could negate her husband's power to define the family in this way by refusing to feed the other woman. And as a last resort, a woman could leave an abusive husband and support herself, however precariously, by cooking on the street.⁶²

Enlightened Mexicans of the nineteenth century may have scoffed at stories of witchcraft or domestic insurrection, but they found other reasons to fear street foods and the women who prepared them. Colonial authorities had long regulated municipal markets, but the first formal institution dedicated to improving public sanitation, the Mexico City Board of Health (Consejo Superior de Salubridad), was founded in 1841. One year later the physicians and chemists of the Board issued their first ruling against unscrupulous vendors who adulterated chocolate with iron filings. When merchants took advantage of a flood of dead trout in June 1856, the scientists called for a ban on the rotting fish as a public health hazard. The Board also lobbied successfully for a regulation requiring poultry vendors to slaughter chickens in the market, to prevent the sale of decaying carcasses.⁶³ Other health hazards lurked in the candies sold to children throughout the country. Mexicans used sugar to crystallize virtually every imaginable fruit, vegetable, nut, and seed, with the ironic exception of chocolate. They particularly delighted in coloring these candies, and therein lay the problem. To obtain brilliant hues of red, blue, and yellow, the vendors added mercury bisulfate, powdered chromoxide, and aniline compounds, all toxic to humans. The Health Board recommended an immediate ban on such substances and provided a list of safe alternative dyes.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, legitimate concerns about sanitation became conflated with a general disdain for the lower classes and their foods. Guillermo Prieto described a short-lived 1833 proclamation by the Federal District's

governor as filled with "tremendous prohibitions against fruits and other foods," banning even stuffed chile peppers.⁶⁵ In 1854 the Health Board again used the lack of hygienic practices among small-scale vendors as an excuse to outlaw the sale of fruits and vegetables in Mexico City. Public outcry against such outrageous restrictions quickly forced the district government to reverse the decree.⁶⁶ In 1870 the Board launched a more limited offensive, this time against mushrooms. Allegations of frequent poisonings persuaded the *ayuntamiento* to ban the sale of mushrooms until scientists could prepare a guide identifying toxic species. Calls for such regulations dated back to 1831, when *The Mexican Chef* pointed with approval to Paris, where police vigilance allowed the public to eat mushrooms without fear. The prohibition also received the endorsement of Mexico City newspapers. Yet its implementation revealed the sanitary reformers' lack of regard for popular custom.⁶⁷

By banning mushrooms completely, the Board provoked widespread opposition from the people of Mexico City. The city council therefore requested a list distinguishing safe and toxic mushrooms, but the scientists could not provide this and asked for a delay on the pretext that mushrooms were out of season. The police commissioner, besieged by disruptions in city markets, demanded immediate action: either list the acceptable spores or repeal the decree. Pressure continued to mount in city markets, and within two weeks the commissioner denounced the ban as completely unworkable, declaring that it was better to run "the remote and improbable risk" of a bad mushroom entering the market than to cut off the trade entirely. But two prominent Board physicians, Gumercindo Mendoza and Manuel Urbina, when called before the city council, scorned the demand for a quick answer. In a lofty discourse citing obscure German experts, they described the complexity of fungi and the difficulty of distinguishing between toxic and safe varieties. They then appealed for a grant to purchase several European monographs and for time to conduct a thorough study of regional specimens.⁶⁸ The scientists, if not so enamored of German texts, had local experts they could have consulted. Mexican folk healers had harvested mushrooms for thousands of years and knew an immense variety of specimens. But the thought of consulting such people, however efficacious, never occurred to the scientists, perhaps because the *curanderos* referred to the plants with Náhuatl rather than Latin names.⁶⁹

Mexican leaders believed the solution to concerns about both public health and popular morality lay in the schooling of women; indeed, some considered a national campaign of domestic education as the only method of civilizing the masses, particularly the Native Americans.⁷⁰ The gov-

ernment of Benito Juárez took a step in this direction in 1871 by founding the Escuela de Artes y Oficios, an industrial school for women. Officials hailed the new school as a "powerful means of moralizing the people, inspiring love of work, and opening wider opportunities to *clases desvalidas* (helpless ones)." The goal was to "lift women from their current poor condition without arriving at the exaggeration of making them equal to men."⁷¹ Similar institutions dedicated to working-class women opened in towns throughout the republic, often with the assistance of philanthropic donations from local elites.⁷²

Behind the lofty rhetoric of moral improvement lay an attempt to ameliorate social tensions by transforming the working classes into replicas of the bourgeoisie. Historian William French has shown that Porfirian reformers sought to transform proletarian homes into cradles of the capitalist work ethic. Eliminating vice from the domestic sphere would encourage orderly behavior on the factory floor. Laborers who accepted middle-class values of progress through hard work would in turn be less likely to resort to violence. The stakes in this campaign were high for Mexican leaders, who hoped thereby to avoid the social upheavals that had erupted in Europe during the early stages of industrialization.⁷³ Teachers at the Escuela de Artes y Oficios praised their young students as "aristocratic plebeians," and encouraged them to participate in "spiritual fiestas" such as the *ker-messe*, a ritual of respectable culture. Cookbook author Jacinto Anduiza summed up the belief that culinary techniques would contribute to the process of education that would level society.⁷⁴

This social leveling did not seek to achieve genuine equality; instead, the goal was to eradicate practices seen as immoral by elites. Sociologists cited by *El Imparcial*, who "proposed the teaching of culinary arts as the obligatory base of female education," recognized that income differences would remain. Cooks in wealthy homes had to learn the art of truffling a turkey, while those in poor ones contented themselves with frying modest *fríjoles*. Yet all were responsible for maintaining the good health of the family they served.⁷⁵ The founders of the Escuela de Artes y Oficios expressly rejected the concept of a liberal arts education for the masses, predicting that if workers gained a broad knowledge they would become insubordinate. This fear may also have motivated the people who took out newspaper classified ads for a cook "who knows her obligations."⁷⁶

Efforts to change the attitudes of lower-class women focused heavily on their cooking techniques. The editors of *El Imparcial* proposed the establishment of worker kitchens, following a European model, to replace popular foods.⁷⁷ The Escuela de Artes y Oficios held special cooking classes as a

method of attracting students. Police inspectors led in the recruiting campaign, an indication of its perceived importance to the Porfirian order. Instructors emphasized European styles such as modest French family cooking and inveighed against the "disgraceful habit" of eating spicy foods. They even advised the lower classes to eschew popular Mexican dishes in favor of simple English cooking — a drastic measure indeed.⁷⁸ These campaigns attained the status of official policy in a 1908 education law that held it "indispensable to modify the diet to which [the lower classes] are accustomed."⁷⁹ In this way the Mexican elite hoped the lower classes would follow them down a path to European civilization.

European Fashions, Mexican Tastes

Fanny Calderón de la Barca, the Scottish wife of Spain's first minister to Mexico, wrote scornfully of the elite's clumsy attempts to imitate European cuisine. She described one of her first meals after arriving in port as "the worst of Spanish, Vera-Cruzified." Parisian chefs employed in the capital's wealthiest homes produced no better results; she likened one dish to mincing slag. Mexican culinary skills, whether in carving meat, seasoning stews, or dressing tables, invariably fell short of her exacting standards. Yet eventually she stopped drawing comparisons with Europe, accepted Mexican cooking on its own merits, and on her departure in 1842 wrote that "Vera-cruz cookery, which two years ago I thought detestable, now appears to me delicious."⁸⁰ Fanny's experience revealed that even the most dedicated followers of European fashion imparted a uniquely Mexican flavor to their cooking.

Like the upper crust from New York to St. Petersburg, wealthy Mexicans cultivated a taste for French haute cuisine. France had begun to assert a gastronomic hegemony over Europe at the dawn of the eighteenth century, when the Sun King Louis XIV's absolutist policies had emasculated nobles of their political power. With few social functions beyond dueling and the salons, bored patricians turned for diversion to the arts, including music, painting, and cooking. This aristocracy of the spoon inspired a *nouvelle cuisine* based on the Enlightenment ideal that cooks should reveal rather than distort the true nature of foods. Following the rise of the restaurant industry in the decades around 1789, Chef Antonin Carême perfected the laborious and expensive techniques of classical French cuisine. Beginning with *fonds*, deeply flavored broths, he performed a complex alchemy of concentrating and reducing, adding and extracting, garnishing and gilding,

to return in the end to a simple and unified whole. Although Carême worked for only the wealthiest aristocrats, his successors, such as Jules Gouffé, extended *la grande cuisine* to an international bourgeois audience, a process that culminated under Auguste Escoffier in the *fin de siècle* Age of Great Hotels.⁸¹

It is difficult to periodize French culinary influence in Mexico with precision. Many writers date the arrival of continental cuisine to the Second Empire of Maximilian, but this is too late by at least a decade. Eighteenth-century manuscripts displayed an affinity for French titles, but no mastery of the new techniques. The first published cookbooks of the Early Republic demonstrated much greater command of this difficult art, but Hispanic recipes still dominated the texts. Gallic styles seem to have gradually displaced colonial dishes of Iberian descent over the course of the nineteenth century, even as Spain itself declined in political and cultural influence. Indeed, the disastrous war with the United States that terminated Spain's empire in America coincided with the 1898 opening by Escoffier and César Ritz of the Carlton, Europe's most lavish hotel.⁸²

The Mexican Chef, the anonymous author of the first published cookbook, had helped launch this penchant for Parisian cuisine as early as 1831. He began his work, in the tradition of classically trained French cooks, with a discussion of stocks, noting that these served as the foundation for all other preparations. Moreover, he admitted with rare humility that the most famous chefs' *fonds* were scarcely different from the broths of a common housewife. His allusions to French gastronomic culture included the saying that "man does not live on what he eats but on what he digests" — the same aphorism used by Alexandre Dumas in 1870 to begin his renowned *Dictionary of Cuisine*. The Mexican author likewise gave a recipe for "epigrams" of lamb, a dish invented in Paris early in the nineteenth century.⁸³

French influences came to permeate nineteenth-century Mexican cooking literature. Kitchen manuals contained recipes for the basic sauces *espagnole*, *velouté*, *béchamel*, *tomatée*, and *hollandaise*; stylish appetizers such as quenelle soup and salmon genovese; classical entrees including veal blanquette and quail *en papillote*; and luscious desserts like mocha eclairs and the Gateau Saint Honore.⁸⁴ The women's pages of newspapers were filled with instructions for Parisian soup, truffled pheasant, duchess potatoes, vol-au-vent *à la financière*, and *biftec à la Chateaubriand*.⁸⁵ Mexicans could also enjoy the pleasures of Parisian dining vicariously through translations of French writings. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology of Taste*, one of the masterpieces of culinary literature, appeared in its first Mexican edition in 1852, a few decades after its publication in French. In 1893 a Mexican

press issued a special edition of the celebrated cookbook by Jules Gouffé, former chef of the Paris Jockey Club.⁸⁶

Sophisticated women prided themselves on their ability to reproduce French haute cuisine when the occasion demanded. Vicenta Torres named as one of the most beloved foods of provincial Michoacán the *galatine*, a French dish prepared by boning poultry yet leaving the skin intact, then stuffing it with forcemeat and poaching it in broth. She recalled glowingly that in 1875 this dish had graced a banquet in honor of Governor Rafael Carrillo.⁸⁷ For women unwilling to invest hours in preparing such a dish and unable to employ a chef to do it for them, specialty shops sold gourmet pâté and pastry. Wine merchants imported hams, cheese, olive oil, and salted fish, in addition to barrels of Bordeaux wine and Jerez sherry.⁸⁸

Aspiring gourmets also indulged their appetites for continental cuisine in Mexico City restaurants and social clubs. In the 1850s the Tivoli of San Cosme began offering fine dining in an idyllic setting. Tuxedo-clad waiters moved smoothly through the tree-lined courtyard with platters of *noix de veau diplomate* and *becassines à la cavalière*. Chapultepec Castle, illuminated in the distance by moonlight, lent a romantic air unsurpassed even by the view of the Notre Dame Cathedral from La Tour d'Argent. In 1870 another Tivoli opened in Tlalpan and catered to wealthy people fleeing the urban hustle of Mexican City, particularly during the riotous celebrations of Holy Week.⁸⁹ By the end of the century, fine restaurants such as the Maison Dorée, Café Colon, Prendés, and San Angel Inn competed for the services of Paul Laville, V. Barattes, and other French chefs. Excellent kitchens also graced the numerous social clubs of the Spanish, British, American, and German colonies, as well as the capital's elite Jockey Club located in the fabulous House of Tiles.⁹⁰ Mexico's greatest coup in international dining came in 1891, when Don Ignacio de la Torre y Mier persuaded the celebrated Parisian chef Sylvain Daumont to come to Mexico City. The Frenchman caused such a sensation that within a year he left the Mexican millionaire to open his own restaurant.⁹¹

Banquet menus from these establishments testify to the cosmopolitan tastes of the country's leaders. An anonymous mid-nineteenth-century painting portraying a feast for a General León of Oaxaca reveals the symmetrical place settings, the multiple dishes, and the innumerable wine bottles of classical continental cuisine. A dinner for five hundred held in the National Theater to celebrate President Porfirio Díaz's birthday, in 1891, featured French food, wines, and cognac. Only men were seated for this banquet; their wives had to view the proceedings from a balcony, a significant indication of their exclusion from full citizenship in this patriarchal

nation. Provincial elites paid lavish sums to rent French chefs from Mexico City restaurants for important events such as a 1903 Monterrey banquet for Governor Bernardo Reyes. The quest for imported civility reached its pinnacle in 1910, at the centennial of independence, in a series of banquets honoring President Díaz, cabinet members, and foreign dignitaries. Not a single Mexican dish appeared at any of the score of dinners dedicated to this patriotic occasion. Sylvain Daumont served most of the food, and G. H. Mumm provided all of the champagne. Even the Mexican colony in New York commemorated the centennial with French food.⁹²

Notwithstanding this desire to appear cosmopolitan, Mexicans demanded a uniquely national flavor in their haute cuisine. Foreigners such as Fanny Calderón often made scathing comments about their inability to execute properly European culinary techniques. Critical Mexicans recognized that continental dishes underwent a process of creolization. Antonio García Cubas lampooned the pretentious Tivoli restaurant, wondering who had granted diplomatic credentials to a piece of veal and predicting that anyone who ate the horseman's snipe would receive spurs to the stomach. He noted that many dishes parading as French bore little resemblance to Parisian preparations.⁹³ These differences, while appearing outlandish to contemporaries, provide modern readers with valuable clues about the nature of Mexico's national cuisine.

Chile peppers constituted the greatest shock to foreign palates. Mexican *adobos*, for example, differed from the marinades used to preserve meat in Europe principally because they included chiles. The eighteenth-century French culinary revolution had banished such sharply spiced foods common to medieval and early modern Europe. The Enlightenment ideal of flavors — "exquisite but not strong" — left Mexican cuisine as a self-conscious anachronism. Patriotic authors bitterly refuted the European opinion of peppers as poisonous, and condemned the continental "war against stimulants, principally chiles."⁹⁴ The love of chiles had become a significant distinction between Mexicans and foreigners and thus formed part of the national identity.

Another characteristic of Mexican cuisine, at least among the elite, was the profusion of meat. A quick glance at any nineteenth-century cookbook reveals an enormous variety of seasonings and dressings for meat.⁹⁵ Nor was this creativity limited to cookbooks; women prepared these diverse recipes on a daily basis. One foreign traveler observed that wealthy families ate the same meats prepared in different styles several times a week.⁹⁶ Fanny Calderón de la Barca described plates filled with meat, fish, and fowl served indiscriminately at every meal. She recorded that the wealthy ate meat for

virtually every meal and in astonishing quantities, more than in any other country in the world.⁹⁷ But visitors from Europe and the United States almost invariably criticized Mexican meat dishes as overcooked. An Englishman, lamenting the lack of juicy roast beef, blamed local butchers for cutting meat in a "slovenly and injudicious manner."⁹⁸ In fact, tradesmen carved beef to suit their customers' preference for well-done steaks. Mexicans abhorred the dripping, rare fillets served in Europe and cut their meat in thin strips, pounding and marinating to tenderize them. Such techniques often constituted the "Mexicanization" of European dishes: a recipe for *biftec à la Chateaubriand* appears to foreigners like fajitas with French fries.⁹⁹

National tastes therefore showed through even in the midst of foreign cuisine. The unique flavor that Mexicans imparted to their foods served as one way of forming a distinctive national identity. Yet patriotism ultimately derives as much from the devotion to one's own community as the distrust of outsiders. And the love of childhood food provides one of the means of acquiring this nationalist affiliation.

Culinary Patriotism

A sense of national identity and patriotic loyalty ultimately derives from participation in the national community. The patriarchal Mexican nation based on Western European models envisioned by most domestic manuals may have held little attraction for women and the popular sectors, who were largely excluded from citizenship. After all, French cuisine never reached beyond a small elite, notwithstanding cooking teachers' attempts to make it accessible at least to middle-class families. Mexican women began to write their own manuscript and community cookbooks in the late nineteenth century, and in so doing they created their own visions of the Mexican nation. For them, domestic culture offered as valid a means for building communities as did politics. Yet the competition between European and Mexican models instilled a deep sense of ambivalence about the national culture.

The formation of a national community in the kitchen grew out of the basic sociability of Mexican women, for housewives carried on a brisk market in recipes as well as gossip. María Luisa Soto de Cossio, for example, a rancher's wife in Hidalgo, included in her personal cookbook dishes from her grandmother, Aunt Gabriela, and a neighbor Virginia. She also copied out recipes from the published *Recetas prácticas*, a volume she may have borrowed from a friend.¹⁰⁰ By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the

exchange of cooking tips had reached beyond the extended family to become the focus for Catholic charities, one of the few legitimate female activities outside the home. A group of matrons in Guadalupe prepared a recipe manual to support the local orphanage, and several community cookbooks from Mexico City were dedicated to works such as cathedrals for Saint Rafael and Saint Vincent DePaul.¹⁰¹

In 1896, Vicenta Torres extended this community of cooks throughout the republic in her *Cocina michoacana*, a serialized guide to the cuisine of Michoacán. Printed in the provincial town of Zamora and sold by subscription, it began with local recipes submitted by women within the state. Nevertheless, she soon expanded her audience to reach cooks from all over the country. A woman from Celaya sent her recipe for "Heroic Nopales," from Guadalupe came a green chile lamb stew, a Mexico City matron offered her favorite meat glaze, and a reader in the border town of Nuevo Laredo even sent her "Hens from the Gastronomic Frontier."¹⁰²

Torres and her collaborators conceived of their work as a community cookbook, first for the state of Michoacán and later embracing the entire nation. Members of this extended community shared the common oral culture of the kitchen despite the distances separating them. Confident that readers were familiar with the basic techniques of cooking, they provided correspondingly vague instructions. One woman wrote simply to fry pork chops in "sufficient quantities of pork fat" until well done and to serve with "hot sauce to taste." A contributor to another community cookbook listed among the ingredients for *mole poblano*: "of all spices, a little bit." A recipe for stuffed chiles read: "having roasted and cleaned [chiles], fill with cooked zucchini squash, onion, oregano, etc." It went without saying that cooks would adjust their seasonings to taste, for recipes served merely as written keys to a much fuller language of the kitchen.¹⁰³

By printing recipes from throughout Mexico, Torres provided the first genuine forum for uniting regional cuisines into a national repertoire. Contributors exchanged recipes with middle-class counterparts they had never met, and began to experiment with regional dishes, combining them in new ways that transcended local traditions. In this way women began to imagine their own national community in the familiar terms of the kitchen, rather than as an alien political entity formulated by men and served up to them in didactic literature.

Women used cuisine as a means of defining a uniquely religious version of the national identity. Torres and her correspondents, while not afraid to experiment with the techniques of foreign haute cuisine, emphasized national dishes that often held religious significance. Most prominent were

the colonial *mole*s, "those essentially American dishes," which they considered indispensable for festivals such as the Day of the Dead. Another culinary tradition with patriotic affiliations developed around the Virgin of Guadalupe. Having first appeared to an Indian in 1531, the saint gained a universal appeal in Mexico that was even recognized by anticlerical liberals such as Ignacio M. Altamirano. The Porfirian regime acknowledged the Virgin's power as a national symbol in 1895 by formally crowning her the patron saint of Mexico. Vicenta Torres paid homage a year later by publishing a recipe for *gorditas* (small corn griddle cakes) from Guadalupe Hidalgo, the location of her shrine.¹⁰⁴

The Virgin's incorporation into the national cuisine illustrated not only the religious character of female patriotism, but also the peculiar selection process that transformed local dishes into national symbols. Residents of Guadalupe Hidalgo made a living by selling the plump, sweet, silver-dollar-sized corn griddle cakes to visiting pilgrims. Among their own families they celebrated December 12, the Virgin's day, by eating barbecued goat with *salsa borracha* (drunken sauce). Nevertheless, the plaza *gorditas* ultimately gained recognition as the food of the Virgin, so that by 1926 a newspaper ran a cartoon showing a man refusing to accompany his plump wife (in Spanish, also a *gordita*) on a trip to the Virgin's shrine with the excuse: "Why take a *gordita* to la villa?"¹⁰⁵

This exchange of recipes even began to cross established class and ethnic lines to create a genuinely national cuisine. Unlike the usual practice of segregating enchiladas into a ghetto labeled "light brunches," the *Recetas prácticas* integrated these foods among other recipes for meats and vegetables. Another cookbook prepared by a charitable women's organization in Mexico City gave more recipes for enchiladas than for any other type of food.¹⁰⁶ Vicenta Torres made a virtue of including recipes of explicitly Indian origin, assuring readers that these "secrets of the indigenous classes" would be appropriate at any party. Along with tamales, she included *gorditas* cordials, *pozole de Quiroga*, and *carnero al pastor* (Shepherd's mutton), but out of deference to her Porfirian audience, she carefully set them apart with the label "*indigenista*."¹⁰⁷

Ambivalence thus remained about the acceptability of the national cuisine. An 1897 editorial entitled "The influence of *mole*," signed by the anonymous Guajolote (Turkey), likewise wavered between nostalgic love and bourgeois scorn. "Baptisms, confirmations, birthdays, weddings, even last rites and funerals, to merit the name, have to be accompanied by the national dish, be it green like hope, yellow like rancor, black like jealousy, or red like homicide, but in abundance, in a broad *cazuela*, thick, pungent, with

metallic reflections, speckled with sesame seeds, a magical surface." Guajolote attributed both the genius and the defects of the national character to the influence of chile peppers, then concluded with a warning. "Doctors counsel parsimonious use, even if it be *en nogada*, of this other enemy of the heart, that combined with *pulque* and tortillas, serves as fuel for the untiring machine of the proletarians and even of some who are not."¹⁰⁸

Fanny Calderón de la Barca, always the trenchant observer, wrote simply, "all national dishes [are] unfashionable, but in reality much liked by the natives."¹⁰⁹ Foreigners and exiles therefore became, by default, the leading advocates of nineteenth-century Mexican cuisine. Manuel Payno wrote his nationalistic novel *Los bandidos de Río Frío* in Europe, just as a century earlier the Jesuit priest Francisco Clavijero had penned a nostalgic account of Aztec foods after his expulsion from New Spain. Payno denounced the etiquette that forbade the consumption of corn tortillas and stuffed chiles because of their plebeian image, obliging fashionable Mexicans to eat English *rosbif*. Moreover, the nineteenth-century's finest collection of *mole* sauces, *La cocina poblana*, was assembled by a Spanish immigrant, Narciso Bassols.¹¹⁰

The Mexican Chef likewise illustrated the interest in indigenous foods shown by outsiders. Although his devotion to Mexican nationalism was beyond reproach, he betrayed an unmistakable European attitude toward Indians. Not only did he give recipes for tamales, he positively exalted the primitive delicacy of Native American cooking. Steamed tamales, like the barbecued elephant of African Hottentots and the grilled fruits of Tahitian islanders, reflected the "simplicity and lack of artifice" common to all "savage nations." He lamented that "civilization, in trying to purify good taste, had deprived it in some things."¹¹¹ In contrast to such liberal authors as José María Luis Mora, who saw the rural masses as vicious brutes, the Mexican Chef viewed them through the Enlightenment lens of the noble savage. His language indicates a certain distance from Mexican society that may have resulted from prolonged exile. Perhaps the anonymous chef resembled another New World patriot, Francisco de Miranda. The Venezuelan freedom fighter had traveled widely in Europe, winning the favors of the Russian Queen Catherine the Great and becoming a general in the French revolutionary army, before returning to fight with Simón Bolívar in the liberation of Spanish America.

This gastronomic Miranda's vision of the Mexican national cuisine proved far too radical for his publisher, Mariano Galván Rivera. In 1834, when the first edition had sold out, the moderate Galván revised the work drastically. He deleted the nationalistic language, adopted the Castilian

spelling of "Méjico," and wrote a new introduction apologizing for defects in the previous edition.¹¹² Subsequent versions incorporated other changes; by 1841 it had become the *Nuevo cocinero mejicano* and four years later it was reorganized in dictionary form. This 1845 edition wrote tamales completely out of the national cuisine. Corn confections gradually returned to the work over the decades, but a lower-class stigma continued to mark pre-Columbian foods.¹¹³

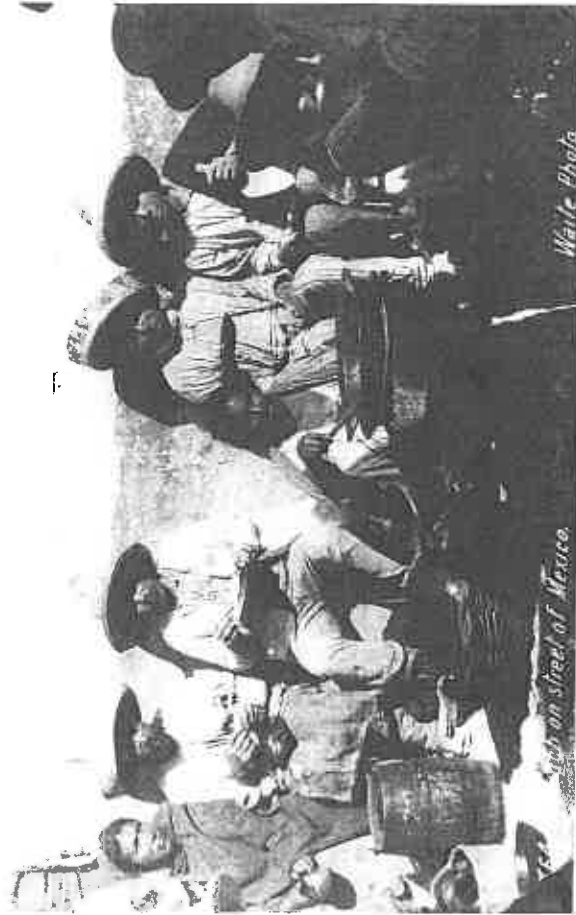
One last foreign salute to Mexican cuisine came from the Austrian Archduke Maximilian. The French-imposed emperor and his consort Carlotta adopted many aspects of the native culture, including *mole*. They first tasted the national dish in the village of Acultzingo, Veracruz, and although the chiles brought tears to their eyes, they nevertheless incorporated it into their banquet menus.¹¹⁴ But such gestures were not always welcomed by conservatives eager for what they considered to be the civilizing influences of European culture. The *Calendario del cocinero* (Chef's Calendar) reflected the resulting confusion among the wealthy. First published in 1865 in the wake of the archduke's arrival, it celebrated the elite taste for such cosmopolitan dishes as Flemish leg of lamb and kidneys sautéed in champagne. But when national dishes began appearing on the imperial table, the publisher revised the 1866 calendar — inserting three different *moles*, *pipian* (pumpkin-seed stew), and even tamales — in an effort to follow this unexpected fad for Mexican food.¹¹⁵

Nineteenth-century Mexicans clearly recognized their national cuisine in the forms of pre-Columbian tamales and colonial *moles*. Women continued to prepare these foods, both within sheltered domestic spaces and in boisterous street festivals. Yet male leaders proved remarkably unwilling to acknowledge such dishes as legitimate expressions of the national culture, leaving European cuisine as the standard for public banquets. Moreover, after 1900 Mexican elites, who had once dismissed maize as simple Indian fodder, began to attach a sinister-new meaning to the Native American grain, considering it to be one of the greatest impediments to national development.



Provincial banquet in Oaxaca, about 1850, with the geometrically placed dishes, numerous wine bottles, and elaborate centerpiece of European haute cuisine.

(Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)



Mexico City street corner restaurant, about 1900, equipped with *casuelas*, tortilla baskets, dishes, coffee cups, and a water bucket.

(Archivo General de la Nación)