

Chapter XXXVII: The Cooking of Mexico

Note: - The word '*Indian*' in this handout refers to the natives of South America- the Aztecs and Mayans and not the Indians from India.

In the nearly 500 years since the Spanish conquest of Mexico and South America, a series of richly diverse cuisines has developed in the region. In Mexico, where there was high *Indian Civilization*, modern cooking is still firmly based on its Aztec- Mayan foundations, while revealing clearly the impact of Spain, which introduced its own foods and cooking methods. To a lesser extent, Mexico was influenced by the sophisticated dishes that were brought in from France and Austria during its brief experience as a French puppet state ruled by the ill-starred Maximilian and Carlotta. The dishes of Peru, heart of great Inca Empire, which took in most of what is now is Ecuador, as well as the better part of Chile and Bolivia and a small part of Argentina, still bear the unmistakable stamp of their ancient past overlaid by Spanish imports. Brazil is kaleidoscopic. There was no great society here, so the indigenous people contributed little more than raw materials. Today, the cooking of Brazil is a mixture of Portuguese, African slave and primitive Indian influences, and it is both unique and good. The cuisines of Chile, Argentina and Uruguay, with no great indigenous traditions of their own, have evolved as the many European strains in the population- Spanish, English, German, Italians and others- reacted to the native ingredients. Many a fine dish started as an improvisation using a local food instead of an unobtainable European one. Many a home dishes suffered a sea change in the long migration. English bread sauce, surely one of the most innocent inventions of the kitchen, becomes quiet complicated in Chile when as *salsa de pan* it takes the place of béchamel as the basis of what would have been the cream dishes. Adaptations and inventions, the clash as well wedding of cultures, have produced a repertoire as varied as the geography of the mountain-dominated continent.

The rapidity with which New World accepted Old World foods was rivaled by the speed of the reverse process. The Spaniards, obsessed by gold, did not at first realize that the real treasure of the Americas was - sweet corn, potatoes, tomatoes, chilies, chocolate, tobacco, avocados, peanuts, cassava (tapioca, manioc or yuca), beans, vanilla, sweet potatoes, pineapples and papayas. But these foods quickly spread to other parts of the world, and today it is impossible to imagine life without most of them. Modern transport and food-handling means, moreover, that a great many of the foods necessary for cooking the Latin American way are readily available in the cities throughout the Europe.

Latin American cooking is not just another kind of European cooking. To be sure, there are Spanish and Portuguese influences in it, and the big hotels that cater for foreigners serve standard international food just as they do in New York or London, but under this superficial layer is food that differs sharply from anything found in Europe or the United States. It is partly African, brought by slaves from West Africa. It is partly tropical, using hot-country produce not available in Europe. Most of all it is Indian, inherited from the civilized *Indians* of the New World- the Aztecs, the Incas and others - who were conquered by the Spaniards but whose descendents still cling tenaciously to many parts of their ancient culture, and particularly to their indigenous foods.

The *Indian* influence is naturally strongest in countries where most of the population has Indian blood. For this reason Mexican cooking is more *Indian* than Spanish, and in Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, which were parts of highly civilized Inca Empire, a large percentage of people still eat Inca food almost unmodified. But the *Indian* influence shows up strongly all over South and Central America. Even in Buenos Aires, whose population is entirely European, characteristically *Indian* dishes have a traditional place in the cuisine.

When the Spaniards and the Portuguese began exploring this part of the New World at the end of the 15th century, they found large areas thinly inhabited by savage *Indians* who lived chiefly by hunting and fishing and by gathering wild vegetable foods. Most of Brazil, the Argentine and Uruguay was in the primitive "food-gathering" state, but along other coasts and Caribbean islands the *Indians* were more numerous and supported themselves by accrued sort of agriculture. The Spaniards particularly noticed a tall and beautiful plant that the people of Cuba grew in small fields and called by a name that sounded like "my-ees". It grew 10 or more feet high and bore great cylindrical ears with closely set, shiny yellow kernels. This wonderful plant was maize, or the *Indian* corn, the staff of the life of New World. It not only took the place of the Old World's wheat, but also produced greater yields and would flourish in many places where wheat will not survive.

Corn by itself is not a complete and health-giving diet. It has less protein than wheat and lacks certain vitamins and other desirable nutrients, but *Indians* seems to have had a folk wisdom that anticipated by thousands of years our modern scientific knowledge of dietary needs. As well as corn they grew beans: the ordinary kidney beans that most of the world eats now. Beans are rich in protein, and when they were planted in the same field as corn, the bacteria on their roots collected nitrogen and helped to preserve the fertility of soil, which is quickly depleted by the corn planted alone. The corn-bean combination, supplemented with other vitamin-rich vegetables, was the staple food of the Indian civilization, and millions of people in Latin America still live on it today.

When the Spaniards and the Portuguese settled among the *Indians* of the Latin America in the 16th century, they brought with them the foods and the cooking of the Mediterranean world: their edible plants, domestic animals- especially pigs- together with onions, garlic cinnamon, rice and many other things. The reception of theirs imports varied a good deal. Some conservative *Indian* communities accepted only a few, others were more open minded or were compelled as slave laborers to grow European crops for their conquerors and prepare European dishes for them.

In most areas a gradual mixing and blending took place, with differences in each locality. Spanish foods were cooked by *Indian* methods, producing such hybrids as tortillas made of wheat instead of corn. Indian foods were cooked by Spanish methods: meats were often fried rather than roasted or stewed. Rice, introduced from the Old World, was enlivened with New World tomatoes and chilli and became the familiar Spanish rice that is eaten under various names in most of Latin America. European onions and garlic must have filled an aching need. They made an immediately hit and are now grown in every tucked-away valley. Their flavour is strong in dishes in all other respects Indian.

Out of this culinary crossbreeding came the regional or Creole cuisines of Latin America. Probably the most varied and remarkable of them is the Mexican, which managed to preserve the pre-Conquest Indian cooking while freely adopting and modifying many good things from Spain. At its best Mexican cooking is very good indeed, and the Mexicans are enormously proud of it. Their scholarly gourmets dig into old records to find the first mention of a famous dish, and gastronomic nationalist campaign against the snobbish and commercial propaganda which they blame for the inroads made by French and international cooking among the upper classes and growing popularity of American hot dogs and hamburgers among the common people. The Creole cooking that gourmets hold in such honour evolved in a variety of fascinating ways. The story is told of a banquet that Hernan Cortes, the commander of the Spanish conquistadores, gave for his Indian allies at Coyoacan, which is now a suburb of Mexico City. A feature was roast pork with Spanish pigs, but was far more important than the meat itself was the fat dripped from it. The Spaniards showed the *Indians* how it could be used to cook many foods in a new and convenient ways, by frying. The pre-Conquest *Indians* had used no cooking fats or oils, but they cooked tortillas on pottery griddles called comales; these were easily modified into frying pans, some of which were made with depressions to hold fat. As pigs multiplied and spread rapidly over Mexico, the *Indians* learned to vary many of their ancient foods by frying them in lard.

It would be an exaggeration to say that modern Mexican cooking equals Aztec cooking plus pigs, but it is very nearly truth. The food of the Aztecs was boiled, grilled or steamed, or eaten raw. Their finest dishes were elaborate stews containing many ingredients cooked in a thick sauce. Modern Mexican cooking retains all these methods but adds frying, both in deep fat and on a lightly greased griddle. Perhaps half the food in Mexico is fried in some way before it is served. Tortillas may be fried, and vegetables and meats are fried before or after boiling; even cooked beans are fried. Good Mexican food is seldom greasy, but most of it is could not be produced without frying, which was the great contribution made by Spaniard's pigs!!

Mexican cooking starts, now as in Aztec days, with tortillas, the "bread of Mexico", and only those who have tasted them hot off the griddle know how good tortillas can be. They are not at all hard to make, and are good with butter or eaten plain as an accompaniment to other foods. Tortillas are eaten by the humbler Mexicans with just a little chilli, beans or sauce. Mexicans use them also as plates, forks and spoons. They dip their tortillas into stews and use torn-off pieces of them to scoop up sauces. They can even, with skill, eat soup with them. Almost any kind of food that is not too liquid can be dumped on a tortilla and rolled up in it. This combination is a *taco*, the Mexican equivalent of a sandwich. It may be taken directly from the griddle, in which case it will be soft, or it may be stuffed, rolled or fried. Whether soft or hard, *tacos* may contain nothing more than chopped chilli or they may be bursting with meat and rich sauce. If so, they should be eaten with caution to keep the contents from squirting out at far end. A good precaution is to bend the taco a little, holding the far end closed and slightly raised. It is also important to bite with the teeth only, and not to squeeze the *taco* with your lips. With a little practice this is easy, and it makes *taco* eating much more relaxed and dignified.

A more elegant adaptation of tortilla is the *enchilada*. This is a tortilla that has been dipped in a thin sauce, usually of green or red tomato, and rapidly fried. It is then rolled up like a taco, but unlike the improvised *taco*, the *enchilada* may have an elaborate filling of pork or shredded chicken breast, as well, perhaps, as onion, cheese, coriander, and tomato. The remaining sauce is poured over enchilada before serving, and top may be decorated with cheese and chopped onion. Thrifty Mexican housewives customarily use left-over tortillas to make not only *enchiladas* but, among other things, chilaquiles, tortillas that have been shredded, fried and layered in casserole with a chilli sauce.

The way to use tortillas is almost endless. Tortillas two to five inches in diameter that have been fried crisp and sprinkled with chopped onion, chilli, grated cheese or bits of meat are called *tostadas*. The smaller tostadas make excellent canapés. Like little edible plates, these fried tortillas, which are flat, round versions of the corn crisps widely sold in United States, can support almost anything that is not too juicy, and they taste better than conventional cocktail biscuits.

Another excellent variation is the *quesadilla*, which is freshly made tortillas filled with meat and sauce, beans, cheese or vegetables, and folded like a turnover. The dough is sometimes flavored with grated cheese, bone marrow or chilli. The edges of tortillas are crimped to make them stick together, and the whole thing is fried crisp in deep fat. *Quesadillas* are easy and excellent and anyone who happens to have raw tortilla dough can experiment with them. When made very small they are delicious two-bite canapés.

Besides giving variety to a tortilla-based Mexican diet, lard - the great gift of Spaniards- also revolutionized the cooking of beans. In the day of Aztecs beans are grown and eaten as much as they are now, but although they come in many sizes and colors, there were few ways of cooking them. They were generally simmered in an earthenware pot and flavored with chilli and herbs. Beans are still cooked in much this same way and served *de olla* (out of pot), but equally popular are fried beans. They are first boiled until soft, then mashed and fried slowly in lard until the paste is stiff and dry enough to hold its shape. It is usually sprinkled with grated cheese, and may be

decorated with bits of fried tortilla stuck into its sides and top. Fried beans, illogically called *frijoles refritos* (refried), are served in nearly every house and every restaurant in Mexico. Foreigners often find them rather dry, but a little water added to them after frying solves the problem. Anyone who eats beans- or almost any other Mexican food- must face the chilli problem. Most Mexicans are crazy about chilli, that vegetable dynamite, which they inherited from their ancestors and of which there are at least 140 varieties. Almost every part of Mexico has its own special chillies, of which the local citizenry is aggressively proud. Grocer's shelves and market stalls are piled high with the fiery stuff. Country people grow chillies in their back gardens and munch the hottest of them raw as if they were strawberries. Most of the wonderful-looking stews and sauces sold in Mexican markets are spiced with chilli that is too hot for most visitors to Mexico even to touch with the tips of the tongues, and some recipes call for quantities of it that will knock the average tourist off the chair.

Heavy chilli eating does not seem to do any harm; there are no Mexican ailments that can be blamed on it. Indeed, their gourmets look on it as a special national asset that no other people can properly enjoy. Chilli, they say, is the wine of Mexican poor, which ennobles their otherwise monotonous diet of corn and beans. Some recipes call for several kinds of chilli, and gourmets claim that they can tell at a taste whether any one of them has been omitted or substituted.

In spite of this mystique about chilli, people who visit Mexico need not worry about having their tongue burned. Restaurants patronized by foreigners are careful to serve dishes containing little or no chilli. They sometimes make two versions of each dish, the mild one for foreigners. In the larger Mexican cities many private homes are as free of chilli as they would be in Manchester. Many members of Mexican upper class copy American or European customs and even feel that there is something rather about chilli. Although jarring accidents do happen now and then when the unwary tourist gulps a numbing mouthful, it would be shame if chilli eating were to die out. Once a modest immunity has been acquired, which is not difficult, the hot *Indian* stews and sauces become wonderfully interesting.

Chilli is really for those whose palates are educated to it. Traditional Mexican dishes are still delicious and unusual even when they contain little or none. Many of them consist of a sauce, usually a very thick one that is poured over or contains solid food, such as beans, pieces of tortilla or shredded meat mixed with chilli. Plain roast meat or chicken is rare in traditional Mexican cooking, partly because in the old days meat and chicken were so tough that they had to be boiled for hours before human teeth could cope with them. Their quality has since improved, but Mexican cooking still features stews and sauces. Mexican cookery books devote most of their attention to them, and at least one is devoted solely to sauces. Many of the mysterious concoctions that perfume the *Indian* markets with their enticing smells are sauces pure and simple. The purchaser gets a small amount in an earthenware bowls and eats it with hot, freshly cooked tortillas that he has bought from a nearby stall.

If local variations are included, the full Mexican cuisine has hundreds of sauces. Some are simple, merely chilies- or chilies, onions and tomatoes-chopped fine, mixed with water or vinegar and served either raw or boiled to enliven tortillas, tamales or any other dish that needs enhancement. Mexicans generally believe that nothing should be eaten without some sort of sauce.

More complicated sauces are generally called *moles*, which comes from an Aztec word, *molli*, meaning a sauce flavored with chilli. Some of these are very complicated indeed. The most famous of them, *mole poblano*, is the essence of Mexico's national holiday dish, *mole poblano de guajolote* (turkey in Pueblan sauce). *Moles* can now be bought in packets. But a generation ago traditional Mexican kitchens were small factories where numerous servants needed to prepare a mole and other time consuming dishes. For mincing and blending the ingredients they used a technique handed down from Aztec times, employing a stone pestle and a *molcajete*, a three-legged mortar usually made up of pocked volcanic stone. The work was slow, but servants were cheap and plentiful, and results were worth the investment in time and manpower.

Molcajetes are still the mainstay of the humbler Mexican kitchen, and are still on sale on market stalls. Hundreds of thousands of them must have been carried home by tourists. Small ones make an excellent ashtray, especially for pipe smokers who want something solid against which to knock pipes. But in up-to-date kitchens molcajetes are obsolete. Servants are not as plentiful nor as humble in modern, prosperous Mexico as they used to be. Today the Mexican servant disdains the slow and laborious molcajete and demands an electric blender. Indeed, the kitchens of large houses need two or more blenders to reduce chilies, nuts, tomatoes, marrow seeds and what-have-you to *mole* smoothness.

Mexican cooking is still laborious, even with blenders. In most kitchens there are numerous chilies and tomatoes are to be heated over a flame or over glowing charcoal to make the skins come off; tortillas must be toasted; earthenware pots and casseroles must be watched during the long hours of simmering. But convenience foods are beginning to penetrate Mexico. In prosperous residential districts of the larger cities, modern supermarkets are replacing the little specialty shops and open air markets that traditionally distributed Mexico produce. The supermarkets look much like their American prototypes, and they offer the same bewildering variety of canned and packaged food, most of it produced in Mexico. Side by side with items familiar to Americans are others peculiar to the country, such as the many kinds of dried or powdered chilli, in plastic bags. Packets of dried meat and dried shrimps are also popular, and the shelves offer more kinds of beans and corn than would be found in American supermarkets.

In spite of convenience foods and labor saving devices, many Mexicans still insist on eating in an elaborate manner. Families who can afford to do so eat four meals a day, all of which are served in the dining room with much changing, and washing of dishes. Breakfast is substantial, with fruit, tortillas, bread or sweet rolls, coffee or chocolate with milk, and eggs or meat, or something both. The big meal is dinner, *comida*, on the middle of the day, usually starting between 1 and 2 p.m. Around 6 p.m. comes *merienda*, a sort of tea-less high tea, when the father of the family, exhausted by the daily grind, restores himself with coffee or chocolate, sweet rolls, biscuits or cake, and *atole*, a rich corn broth usually fortified with sugar, milk, eggs or fruit. Supper (*cena*) comes late, 8 to 10 p.m. It is often skipped, and at home is usually light. But on formal occasions or in restaurants it can be very heavy indeed.

But the midday meal (*comida*) is a traditional feast and has at least six courses, with a change of plates for each course and a stream of hot tortillas circulating continuously in their napkin-lined baskets. First comes soup, and Mexican soups are likely to be nourishing beyond the call of duty, swarming with the dumpling like tortilla balls, vegetables, noodles and pieces of meat or chicken. The next course is also called soup, although soup has nothing to do with it. The *sopa seca* (dry soup) is actually a highly seasoned, starchy dish of rice, noodles, macaroni or cut up tortillas cooked in an elaborate sauce. Then comes a course of chicken or fish, or perhaps the wild game, followed by a salad. The main course consists of beef, pork, lamb or *cabrito* (young goat), roasted, boiled or fried, and several vegetables, and this followed by "refried" beans smothered with grated cheese. Lastly there is the sweet, usually a baked pudding, custard or a cooked fruit dish, and then-after coffee and fresh fruit in season-the family retires for a well-earned and, by this time, much needed siesta.

Except when entertaining formally, most modern Mexican families do not serve these *gargantuan* midday dinners. Some of them have even taken to northern ways, eating their main meal in evening and skipping the afternoon merienda. The pangs of hunger caused by this deprivation are stilled by the extraordinary amount of nibbling between meals that goes on in Mexico. In most residential districts hardly a street lacks a stall or pavement peddler selling some sort of snack. Some sell *tacos*, *tamales*, sandwiches, sweets, peeled fruit or fruit juices. More elaborate establishments have rotating spits on which chickens or pork are grilled or great masses of sliced bacon whose outer layers curl and whose fat drips into a pan beneath. At any hour of the day there are plenty of customers, and office workers who can not get to them keep stocks of food hidden in their desks. By American standards Mexico is poor, but most of its people, in the cities at least, seem to have enough money to nibble when ever spirits move them.

Nearly all food in Mexico, from the street corner snack to the eight-course dinner served in lordly mansion, tastes differs from its northern counterparts, when such counterparts exists. Most often the difference is chilli, which shows up in unexpected places, such as in scrambled eggs, or in sauce for another favorite, huevos rancheros. Even a bright green garnish that looks like chopped parsley turns out to have a completely unfamiliar flavour, perhaps of fresh coriander. Sometimes, indeed, half a dozen unfamiliar herbs and spices contribute to the effect of a Mexican soup or stew. Other differences of taste come from Mexican ways of cooking. Even in modern kitchens many utensils are likely to be made up of earthenware, and the slow, steady simmering permitted by this material affects the taste of this dish. The popular Mexican habit of frying skinned tomatoes slowly into lard until they turn into a thick paste also yields a sauce that tastes quiet unlike tomatoes cooked in any other way.

Mexican food also varies widely from region to region. North of Mexican border, a traveler can drive from New York City to Los Angeles and almost identical meals at roadside restaurants all along the way. Mexico is not so homogenous. It is not really a single country; it is many small countries tied loosely together. In pre-Spanish days it was inhabited by Indians speaking at least 14 distinct families of languages and varying in culture from fierce savagery to a rather surprising sophistication. Many of them were independent of the Aztecs, and even those Indians who were subject to them clung stubbornly to their own peculiar customs.

This situation continued after the Conquest. Because there was little commerce or travel across Mexico's rugged mountains, the *Indian* communities kept their identities and handed down their customs to the populations of mixed Spanish and *Indian* ancestry that developed locally. The country people in adjacent valleys wear different hats, live in different kinds of houses, and cook different food. A pleasant recreation of a Mexican gourmet is to travel around their country sampling different local cuisines. Often they find distinctive traditional dishes in remote places that are known in Mexico City.

Northern Mexico, especially the larger states that border on United States, was thinly inhabited in pre-Conquest times by warlike, primitive Indians, mostly nomadic hunters whom the civilized Aztecs called *Chichimecs* (Son of the Dog). When the Spaniards arrived with hardy long-horned cattle, a wave of pioneer-Spaniards, *mestizos and Indians* - moved north to graze their animals on the rich grasslands of Chichimecs. They also took varieties of wheat that thrived where there was less rain than corn required. The north is still cattle country with wheat grown on favorable areas, and beef and wheat are more prominent in the cuisine there than they are in other parts of Mexico.

One beef dish from the north- **chili con carne** - is not considered Mexican in Mexico proper. It was developed in Texas, the Mexicans say, and is therefore American. Supposedly it was invented in Texas when that state was part of Mexico's wild frontier. Few Mexican cookery books describe it, but they give many recipes for beans cooked with meat, onion, tomato, chilli and spices. Originally beef in **chili con carne** was cut into small pieces instead of being minced. It tastes much better when meat is prepared that way.

Since northern Mexico is arid cattle country where any moisture evaporates quickly in the hot, dry air, it is only natural that dried beef, called **cecina**, should be one of the traditional foods. This is not the thinly sliced, unnaturally pink, almost flavorless stuff that is sold in the United States under the name of chipped beef. It is robust even overwhelming, and the way it is made in Northern Mexico tells you why. The first step is to buy a large solid chunk of beef and form it into a long sheet by making alternate knife cuts from opposite sides that do not reach quite the way all through. Opened up in accordion folds, this ribbon of meat is sprinkled with salt on both sides and folded up again for two hours to absorb it. It is then unfolded and exposed to the sun until it is dry but not stiff. It is rubbed with lemon juice and pepper and stretched out in the cool shade for two days to mature. After this it is pounded with a mallet - or a stone- to tenderize it. Finally it is refolded for future use. During these vicissitudes it acquires a powerful flavour like those marvelous well-hung steaks that are served in expensive restaurants but can not be bought in supermarkets. It can be boiled in stews, soaked and fried, or chopped and made into fillings for **tacos**, **enchiladas** and **tamales**. Everywhere, cecina makes itself known in no uncertain manner, like strongly flavored cheese.

The Mexican north is also a land of cheese. It is not very splendid cheese and is used mostly in cooking, for which it serves very well. A fine dish from *Chihuahua*, the big state opposite west Texas, is made of beans cooked till barely soft, fried in lard and heated carefully with cheese until cheese melts. In *Sonora*, another northern state, they make a rich potato soup - first frying the potatoes with onions, tomatoes and chilies - and cover it with a substantial layer of melted cheese.

In other parts of Mexico beef and cheese are not as important. The place of beef is taken by pork, goat, turkey or chicken. Goat, if it is young, is excellent eating. In season, you can buy kid in London but you usually have to order it beforehand.

In small central state of *Aguascalientes*, cabrito is rubbed with a sauce of garlic, chilli and spices in vinegar and left overnight to marinate. The next day, while it is slowly roasting, it is basted with same sauce, which dries till it forms a savory crust on the meat. An even more festive dish in the north is a whole carbitto stuffed with an elaborate mixture of tomatoes, minced pork, ham cubes, raisins, almonds, pine-nuts, hard-boiled eggs and many spices. Few who taste this splendid roast worry much about the endearing personality of the sacrificed cabrito.

In the tropical parts of Mexico, which mostly lie along the coasts, hot-country fruits and vegetables play a prominent part. The banana, which grows nearly everywhere, is used both as a fruit and as a vegetable. The varieties are generally eaten ripe and fresh or made into desserts, though they are also fried. The non-sweet kinds, plantains, which are more important, are always cooked. A typical fish of Gulf Coast is boiled, mashed plantains, fried in oil with onions and tomatoes. It is usually served hot with prawn and chilli sauce and has only a very faint banana flavour.

The favorite fruit-vegetable of Mexico is the avocado, which is grown in many varieties in warm regions and converted into the famous *Guacamole*. It may be native to Mexico, but most think it was domesticated in Peru or some other part of South America several thousand years ago. Some avocados have black skins and are no bigger than plums, while others are green and grow to the size of cantaloupes. The flavour varies from poor to wonderful.

Mexicans eat avocados with sauce vinaigrette just as we do, but that is only the beginning. Avocados are also eaten with salt and lemon juice, to enhance their bland flavour. Pieces of avocado show up in any dish, including soups and stews. An excellent soup is made up of entirely mashed avocados, and sometimes a few avocado sliced are spread on top, and they also melt into it if the soup is hot enough. The most famous avocado dish is *guacamole*, which is mashed avocado mixed with tomato, chopped onion, fresh coriander and chilli. The proportion of the dish varies all over the country, and the chilli may be left out. Salt and pepper are included and often olive oil. *Guacamole* is usually served with tortilla dishes, refried beans or anything that can benefit from its soft green smoothness and the contrast of flavors. Or it can be served as a separate dish. It can be eaten with a fork or spoon or used as a dip, but Mexicans like to make tacos of it by rolling it into tortillas. They take the tacos on the picnic, and since this paste turns brown on exposure to the air, Mexicans cover its surface with avocado seeds in order to avoid discoloration.

The cuisine of Southern Mexico is different from other regions - and even more exotic. The state of Oaxaca, for example, is a southern centre of *Indian* tradition whose cooking features red, yellow, green and black moles. Famous *Oaxaca* dishes are made up of flowers and young shoots of marrow plants and of "sea- chestnuts", a kind of crustacean with a shiny dark-brown shell. One of the oddest is made of *chalupines*, crickets that are gathered in the corn-fields. In *Oaxaca* and other warm parts of Mexico *tamales* are wrapped in banana leaves instead of corn husks. The stiff centre rib of the banana leaf is removed and the remainder of the great leathery leaf is put into water and brought to the boil. It is then soft and pliable and can be torn into squares and wrapped around tamale as easily as if it were as sheet of cooking parchment. The result is unusually unattractive, and pleasure of unfolding green Oaxaca tamale increases the enjoyment of eating the food inside.

Perhaps the most distinctive of all the local cuisines of Mexico is that of Yucatan, a state so hemmed in jungles and swamps that, until a modern highway was built, it could not be reached from the rest of the country except by air or sea. *Yucatan* is a land of Maya, whose civilization reached amazing heights and went into decline long before the arrival of the conquering Spaniards. Many Yucatecs are descendents of these Maya; their profiles look like the bas-reliefs carved on the ancient ruined temples of the area. These people still speak the Maya language, and names of the some of their favorite local dishes baffle tongues accustomed only to English. A perch grilled with spicy sauce, for example, is called *mero en tikin-xik*.

Prawns are plentiful in *Yucatan*, and a pleasant local way of serving them as a cold hors d'oeuvre is to arrange four very large ones in a soup plate and cover them with vinegar, olive oil, finely chopped onion, chilli, diced tomato and chopped fresh coriander. The dish is half prawn salad and half prawn cocktail - and a far better way of serving them either.

A well-known *Yucatan* specialty is *papatzul*, which means "food of the lords". It is tortillas rolled into tacos stuffed with shredded pork or hard boiled eggs and served with two sauces, one made principally of ground, toasted marrow seeds and the other made with tomatoes. The tacos are then glazed with clear green oil pressed from the marrow seeds.

Panuchos are another agreeable specialty of Yucatan. They are small tortillas stuffed with mashed beans or chopped meat, and covered with a special spicy sauce. The stuffing operation is a delicate one. It is a special skill lifting the thin skin that forms when a tortilla is cooked, and the women who do it are not eager, or perhaps not able, to explain how they accomplish this feat.

Many meat or fowl dishes in Yucatan are called *pibil* to show that they are steamed in a pit, *pib* in Maya. In some case cooking is actually done in a laborious way, but often *pollo pibil* (steamed chicken, Yucatan style) is steamed for hours in a covered pot, which gives much the same effect. The chickens are cut up and the pieces marinated for 24 hours in a sauce that contains *achiote* (annatto), the red orange spice and coloring that is so dear to the Yucatec. Then they are folded like tamales in banana leaves and steamed till, they are tender. Opening one of these packaging is a delight. The banana leaf is pulled apart with two forks and a wonderfully fragrant steam arises. The chicken pibil inside has a pungent flavour and a bright red colour that no one would expect.

For the adventurous traveler, Mexico offers many such tempting foods yet tourists who hear about the strange and the delicious dishes of many local cuisines usually make no attempt to taste them. The expensive tourist hotels, which look so hygienic and seem to be impersonally modern, serve mostly international food with perhaps a few standard Mexican dishes, carefully watered down to suit the palates of the most of the timid guests. Tourists might be tempted to eat in purely Mexican restaurants, many of which look marvelous, but they heard terrible traveler's tales about compatriots who have died after drinking unbottled water, or even after a single bite of a septic taco.

Modern medicine has worked an enormous change in what a tourist should or should not eat that gives the lie to these tales of woe. Mexican standards of sanitation are certainly well below those of most parts of Europe, but immunization wards off the worst disease. Typhoid, which is carried by food and water, and other gastric infections are not as terrifying as they were before antibiotics were developed. And the worst of all - Malaria, Yellow fever and Typhus - have nothing to do with eating.

Many foreigners who visit Mexico suffer from diarrhea, sometimes called "*Montezuma's revenge*". It generally goes away of its own accord, but there is no reason to let it spoil a holiday for even a short time. A few doses of Enterovioform usually restore peace and calm to the intestinal tract. In most of the cases upset is not caused by the dangerous germs but merely by exhaustion or change of routine or climate. Mexicans and other Latin Americans frequently suffer from the self-same affliction when they come to Europe.

The best policy when exploring strange Mexican foods off the sheltered tourist track is simply to use elementary caution and a reasonable amount of common sense. Then stop worrying. Both Mexico and the other countries of Latin America have an endless variety of unusual but wonderful dishes waiting to be tasted.

Chef Vernon Coelho
IHM, Mumbai
2009-2010