





# FLAVORFUL HERITAGE

EXPLORING THE CUISINE OF  
MEXICO BY ERIC LUCAS



**SOMETIMES ANCIENT DOCUMENTS** REVEAL GREAT TREASURES, AND NOT JUST IN THE MOVIES.

NOT LONG AGO, MEXICO CITY CHEF GERARDO LUGO MADE PRECISELY SUCH A FORTUITOUS DISCOVERY WHILE HE WAS PERUSING A 400-YEAR-OLD MANUSCRIPT. BACK WHEN THE MANUSCRIPT WAS PREPARED, MEXICO WAS PART OF NEW SPAIN, AND THE LAND'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES STILL LIVED IN SMALL VILLAGES MUCH AS THEY HAD FOR CENTURIES. IN 1545, A VISIONARY FRANCISCAN FRIAR BEGAN DEVOTING HIS LIFE TO TRAVELING THE COUNTRYSIDE, RECORDING THE TRADITIONAL LIFE-STYLES, BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE 5 MILLION OR SO SUBJECTS OF WHAT HAD BEEN THE MEXIC (AZTEC) EMPIRE.

MOST RECORDS OF EARLY MEXICAN LIFE WERE DESTROYED DURING THE SPANISH INQUISITION, BUT WHAT BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN WROTE OVER THE COURSE OF MORE THAN 40 YEARS IS ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING TESTAMENTS TO ANCIENT MEXICAN CIVILIZATION. POPULARLY CALLED THE FLORENTINE CODEX—ITS ACTUAL TITLE IS “GENERAL HISTORY OF THE THINGS OF NEW SPAIN”—THE DOCUMENT IS A PRICELESS JOURNAL OF THE WAY PEOPLE LIVED IN PRE-HISPANIC MEXICO. THE ORIGINAL RESTS IN THE LAURENTIAN LIBRARY IN FLORENCE, ITALY, BUT DIGITIZED VERSIONS ARE NOW ONLINE, IN SPANISH AS WELL AS ENGLISH AND ITALIAN.

Lugo was browsing through the Spanish version when he spied a one-sentence note explaining how indigenous peoples sometimes subjected their bean crops to a process called *nixtamalization* (treating with an alkaline solution such as limewater), more commonly used today to prepare corn for tortillas. This information had literally been lost in the dust of history. Lugo was astonished and intrigued.

“This hadn’t been done for centuries. Nixtamalize beans? Nobody ever heard of it. I thought, why not? Let’s see what it’s like,” Lugo recalls.

And so, at his neighborhood restaurant, Nico’s, in the Azcapotzalco district of Mexico City, Lugo decided to revive this ancient practice. Nixtamalization subjects foods such as corn, beans and sorghum to treatment with alkaline substances—ash and clay are traditionally used in Mexico and the Southwestern United States—thereby removing the skins, boosting the food’s nutritional properties and lending a distinctive musky taste and aroma.

Lugo acquired heirloom beans called *ayocotes* grown in Hidalgo; these were large, dark-lavender gems the size of lima beans. He stewed them in an ash-and-clay solution, then added them to two other heirloom beans known as *veronicos* and *vaquitas*, and cooked all three in a simple broth of water, lime juice, chiles and salt. Pleased with the results, he added this *sopa de frijoles* to his menu.

I’m at a table conversing with Gerardo, about to taste his neo-traditional culinary invention, which epitomizes one of the most marvelous and heartening phenomena in the global blossoming of regional cuisine. Across Mexico, from dusty villages in Baja California to the upscale streets of

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The use of multiple varieties of chile peppers lends Mexican cuisine a distinctive flavor and character.

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the capital's Polanco district, the country's food has leapt from local specialty to international prominence. Some of the country's most talented chefs are reinventing the traditional dishes of Mexico; mainstream restaurants are embracing their country's venerable culinary traditions; and visitors are discovering the astounding breadth and diversity of a cuisine once widely perceived in some places as little more than tacos and beans. The transformation climaxed two years ago when, for the first time, UNESCO declared the national cuisine of Mexico and the culinary customs of France World Heritage cultural treasures.

For Mexico, that's heady company. Today, at high-style resorts such as Cabo's famed Las Ventanas, celebrity chef Fabrice Guisset serves an almost all-Mexican menu on which handmade tortillas have replaced bread, salt-cured *nopales* (cactus) salad accompanies lamb, and even steak is served Tampiqueña style, atop a stew of corn and poblano chile.

"Mexican cuisine is so much more than tacos and guacamole," says Guisset. "Mexico has an incredible variety of dishes."



COURTESY EM ARTE VISUAL

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In Zihuatanejo's Old Town market, Juan Antonio Garcia Giles (right) explains to the author the ideas behind classically inspired Mexican cuisine, such as his chicken in apricot molé with watercress and jasmine rice (below).  
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LESLIE FORSBERG

OF COURSE, such mainstay foods as tacos, beans and guacamole do have their place in the current Mexican culinary renewal. Guisset's steak Tampiqueña is served with an accompaniment of guacamole, and a visitor to Mexico can still simply walk into any

of the country's wonderful *mercados* at noon, sit down at a lunch counter and order a plate of tortillas handmade on the spot, filled with stewed pork or beef, seasoned with three-chile salsa or pico de gallo and resting amid a dollop of *frijoles de la olla*—literally,



## EATING IN MEXICO

Finding good-quality traditional Mexican cuisine is generally as easy as a midday trip to each city or town's *mercado*, where food stands and sit-down cafes serve the regional basics—carnitas, pozoles and sopas, fresh fish, salsas and fresh tortillas. There are excellent markets in Zihuatanejo, Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo, Mazatlán, Mexico City and Guadalajara; and a small market in San José del Cabo that has a couple of food stalls. In smaller cities such as Zihuatanejo and Mazatlán, a trip to the market is as easy as hiring a cabbie and asking to go to *el mercado*, but in bigger cities, a guide is invaluable. Elsie Mendez offers Mexico City tours that combine cultural attractions, such as the Zócalo and National Palace, with a visit to one of the capital's markets and a fine dining restaurant; tours can be customized however visitors wish. Contact Mendez at 52-555-502-8067 or lossaboresdemexico.com.

### A FEW TIPS ON APPRECIATING MEXICAN FOOD:

- The Mexican government has emphasized food-handling safety over the past couple of decades, and workers at market stands, cafes and restaurants are fastidiously cleaning and polishing their premises. Thus, the old advice that tourists should avoid markets and food stands no longer carries the same weight it once did. However, it remains wise for visitors to use common sense and focus on cooked rather than raw foods—luckily, the best of Mexico is cooked food, and travelers can safely enjoy all of it in food stalls and restaurants. Those with delicate immune systems should probably still avoid street vendors.
- What Americans know as salsa (fresh tomatoes, onions, chiles and cilantro) is called *pico de gallo* or *salsa fresca* in Mexico. Mexican salsa is a cooked sauce of garlic, onions, chiles and oil; salsas range

from mild (chipotle-based) to blistering (*habañoero*).

- Most Mexican food is not *picante* (spicy) in and of itself; Mexicans doctor their tacos, enchiladas and other dishes with salsas to their personal taste. If you like hot food, ask for *salsa muy picante*.
- Most tortillas are fresh-made each day in markets and better restaurants. The best tortillas, however, are handmade and cooked to order; the rest are machine-made, and the difference is easy to tell: Machine-made tortillas are perfect circles with blade-cut edges, while handmade tortillas are more irregular. Many restaurants post a sign by the door reading, "*Tortillas hecha a mano*"—tortillas made by hand.
- Nachos, tomato sauces and fajitas—while they can be delicious, and many restaurants in Mexico offer them—are not real Mexican dishes. (Fajitas were

invented in the mid-20th century in Texas.) For a more authentic culinary experience, look for iterations of tortillas, sopas, roast pork, beef, lamb and goat.

- Mexican ice creams (*helados*) and ices (*nieves*) are huge treats. Usually handmade, and based on tropical fruits such as guava (*guayaba*), pineapple (*piña*), coconut (*coco*), soursop (*guanábana*) and passion fruit (*maracuyá*), they are available everywhere and unfailingly delightful.
- The various forms of ceviche and sushi-like seafood preparations are particularly pleasant Pacific Coast specialties. In Baja and Mazatlán, *camarones aguachiles* are fresh raw shrimp, seasoned in lime juice and serrano chiles; in Baja a very similar (and sensational) dish is prepared with local scallops or chocolate clams. Elsewhere in coastal resorts, numerous varieties of ceviche may include fish, shrimp, shellfish and octopus. —E.L.



COURTESY: LAS VENTANAS AL PARAÍSO, A ROSEWOOD RESORT

heritage committee declared, citing in particular the tortilla tradition—growing corn, harvesting and treating it, and preparing tortillas by hand every day. But as integral as these foods and traditions are to the cuisine of Mexico, the organization also noted the country’s contributions to the global kitchen: UNESCO recognized corn, beans, chiles, tomatoes, squashes, avocados, cocoa and vanilla, all of them key ingredients in cuisines around the world, and all of them sent around the world from Mexico after the arrival of the conquistadores, as part of an anthropological event called the Columbian Exchange. Beans, for example, are vital to a famous French dish, cassoulet, which is a complex bean stew that could be construed as an extremely fancy frijoles de la olla.

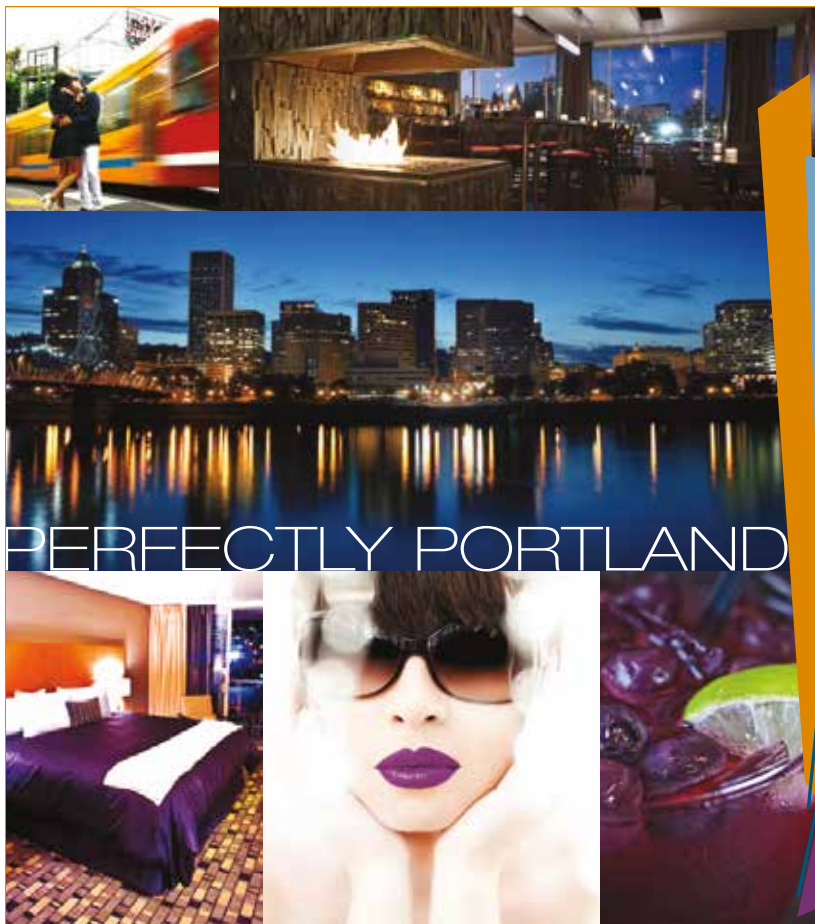
The UNESCO declaration came in Nairobi, Kenya, on November 16, 2010, and Lugo was there. His feelings at achieving success were particularly deep—he’d been on the Mexican committee seeking designation for his country’s food.

“beans of the pot,” a classic Western Mexico dish. In towns that lack their own public markets, such as Baja’s Todos Santos, there’s always a food cart offering similar repast. This is pretty much the same midday meal people have enjoyed in Mexico for centuries, and its enduring significance in daily life is what particularly appealed to UNESCO.

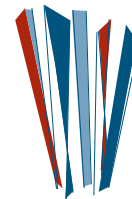
“Mexican cuisine is elaborate and symbol-laden [. . .] Central to the cultural identity of the communities that practise and transmit it from generation to generation,” UNESCO’s cultural

○○○  
 Chef Fabrice Guisset  
 prepares guacamole  
 at Las Ventanas in  
 Los Cabos.

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"My feelings—indescribable. Absolute joy. Great honor and pride," he says, offering me a basket of freshly made tortillas to use as I taste his *sopa de frijoles* that harks back centuries. By themselves, the beans are surprisingly sweet, but not sugary; spooned into a tortilla, the result is redolent with the earthy depth created by nixtamalization, which produces an aroma that is almost textural.

"Old, but good, yes?" Lugo asks. In mere moments every bit of food on the table is gone; old but good, indeed.

GUISSET'S OBSERVATION about the complexity of Mexican cuisine can be readily witnessed at any Mexican *mercado*, where the many stalls invariably proffer a staggering array of ingredients. Not a few, but dozens of kinds of dried beans; dozens more chiles, dried into an array of colors ranging from cinnamon through persimmon into indigo; and squashes and fruits and fishes and sauces beyond numbering.

In Zihuatanejo's Old Town market, local chef Juan Antonio Garcia Giles is showing me just a few of the chiles he uses—*ancho*, *criollo* (creole), *guajillo*, *costeño*, *morita*, *cascabel*, the latter a fiery small item ("little bell") that dries to a rich red saddle-leather color (the *cascabel* not only looks intense—it is). "Look here—each type of *molé* is named after the family that makes it," Antonio Giles says. He directs my attention to another vendor selling a dozen types of *molé* paste in jars; indeed, they are called "Don Pancho" and "Doña Chabo." "I promise you each one tastes different, too," he adds.

Executive chef at Zihua's seminal *La Casa Que Canta*, one of Mexico's finest boutique hotels, Antonio Giles makes his own *molé* using peanuts, *guajillo* and *ancho* chiles, onion, garlic, sesame, cloves, cinnamon, cumin, *platano mancho* (plantains), corn oil and one slice of toasted bread. Diners may find the *molé* used on crabcake or chicken, and it's every bit as complex as any classic Continental sauce. But Antonio Giles is just as proud of his own version of *frijoles de la olla*, which he makes using black beans, lard, serrano

chiles, onion and epazote, a type of Mexican herb with a flavor similar to tarragon. Asked to supply a dish for the inaugural Food & Wine Festival Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo a few years back, Antonio Giles brought innovative dishes from his kitchen including seafood *pozole* and shrimp in *tomatillo* sauce—along with his flavorful *frijoles de la olla*—down to the festival on the beach below the resort.

"This is real Mexico," Antonio Giles says. "This is the food we eat in our homes every day."

Of course, Mexican cuisine is rarely as simple as just tortillas and beans; there are numerous regional variations within this vast country. Consider the many types of chile-broth soup. *Pozole* is the term for a rich version made with hominy, chiles, onions, garlic and some sort of meat broth, such as chicken or pork. *Pozole* made in Guerrero may be fragrant with *chiles de arbol*; in Sinaloa, with *chiles guajillo*; in Jalisco, *chiles cola de rata*. *Sopa Tarasca* is a rich, chile-laden broth that includes beans, and is common in the highlands between Guadalajara and Mexico City. Tortilla soup, a version more familiar to American travelers, is a chile-broth soup with baked tortilla strips and avocado added. And as for *molé*, there are literally hundreds of versions, varying by the inclusion of Mexico's dozens of varieties of chile, peanuts, tamarind, chocolate, raisins, mangos, guavas, figs and any number of other possible ingredients ranging from almonds to orange zest.

While Mexican cuisine is centered on native Mesoamerican ingredients such as corn and chiles, there has been no hesitation to incorporate Old World foodstuffs, as well, such as European garlic, citrus fruits and Mexico's mainstay meat, pork. (The closest New World relative of the pig were peccaries, or *javelinas*.) The ubiquitous garnish found on almost every soup or plate, cilantro, is as common in Mexican cuisine as it is in dishes from Thailand or Vietnam.

Nor are all the modern practitioners of this ancient cuisine Mexican in origin. Guisset is from France, and relishes describing how his colleagues in Provence

and Paris felt he was voluntarily relocating to a culinary wilderness when he moved to Mexico in the 1990s. “That’s what people thought,” Guisset recalls. “Outside Mexico, most people don’t have a clue” of what real Mexican food is like, he says.

Marco Bustamante, food and beverage director and executive chef at Capella Pedregal, a resort in Cabo San Lucas, is of combined Salvadoran/Cajun ancestry and grew up in Louisiana. He savors the fact that both Cajun and Mexican cuisine borrow liberally from every incoming element but are distinguished by indigenous ingredients—the most famous Cajun dish, gumbo stew, is essentially a New World bouillabaisse seasoned with chile peppers and a Mississippi Delta spice, filé (ground sassafras root). Now, back in Mexico, Bustamante’s menu at Capella’s Don Manuel dining room blends Old and New World styles seamlessly—duck chorizo, fava bean puree, and tamales prepared with ingredients such as beans, sunflower seeds, duck and lobster.

“This is as complex and wide-ranging a cuisine as any on Earth,” Bustamante says.

Until recently, Mexican cuisine may have been considered somewhat unsophisticated in other parts of the world, but it’s also one of the world’s most popular outside its homeland. Mexican restaurants are ubiquitous in the United States and Canada—there’s even a Mexican cafe in Barrow, Alaska, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Elsewhere in the world, Mexican restaurants are not as common as Italian or Chinese, but one still finds them from Sweden to Singapore.

Carlos Ambrosi, now the general manager of the boutique hotel Guaycura in Baja’s Todos Santos, recalls a previous job as a culinary consultant, sourcing Mexican ingredients while working in Libya. “My biggest challenge was to make sure we had a steady stream of tortilla flour, beans, chiles and all headed across the Atlantic,” Ambrosi says. “If you can’t get the right ingredients, the food doesn’t taste right.”

That thought rings in my ears in a small village south of Zihuatanejo, Barra de Potosi. I’ve stepped into the kitchen of a



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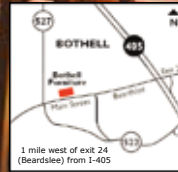
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beachfront seafood restaurant, Enramada Teresita, to watch the *tortillera* (tortilla-maker) at work. Each order for a basket of tortillas—they'll be served with the restaurant's lunchtime grilled local fish—prompts her to reach into a huge bowl of *masa*, expertly roll out five balls of dough, flatten them in her palms, toss them on the pine-wood-fired *comal* (griddle) and quickly roast them. The *masa* is from a mill just three blocks away, *Tortillería el Triunfo*; the corn the mill treats and grinds is grown in a number of local backyard plots—thus bearing that ultimate local-flavor essence the French call *terroir*—and the resulting tortillas, slightly charred and lightly smoke-infused, are intensely aromatic. In fact, she's so enchanted by my attention and questions that she hands me a couple right off the *comal* and then weighs in on what's apparently a fierce debate in traditional Mexican cuisine: whether earthenware or cast-iron *comals* are better. Hers is pottery; the day before, I'd watched another *tortillera* in a nearby village use a metal *comal*.

"This distributes the heat better," the Barra de Potosi *tortillera* tells me. "Metal gets too hot," she adds, layering on supporting arguments while she effortlessly flips tortillas on the griddle, turning each one three or four times.

Recognizing the essential value of the right ingredients is what leads food historian Ken Albala, a professor at University of the Pacific, in Stockton, California, to buy local field corn to make his tortillas. Albala's the author of a new book about three world cuisines he considers intrinsic to understanding human cookery (*Three World Cuisines: Italian, Mexican, Chinese*; AltaMira Press, 2012).

"Despite the UNESCO declaration, despite people like me who recognize the worth of really practicing traditional cookery, I'm worried that these traditions will be swamped by modern convenience," Albala frets. "There aren't that many Mexican homes now where they fire up the *comal* in the morning for fresh, hand-made tortillas. There aren't that many travelers who know about the incredible depth and complexity of Mexican cuisine."

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There are signs this might be changing. Elsie Mendez, a Mexico City local-foods advocate and culinary tour guide, reports that the UNESCO designation has somewhat boosted interest in her country's cuisine—largely among European travelers. She credits a much larger share of the renewed interest in traditional food to the global movement toward regional cuisine and local ingredients, a phenomenon burgeoning from the Arctic to Italy.

“People are paying more attention to our cuisine because they want to enjoy original cuisines with strong flavors, exotic ingredients and dishes that have stories behind them,” Mendez says. “Some tourists are looking to live the best culinary experience when they travel.”

Mendez leads tours to a couple of Mexico City's best markets, and chefs such as Antonio Giles make almost daily market trips to procure ingredients for their dining rooms. Here, while modern life has transformed some things, the currents of the past run strong. If he is looking for a sack of chiles for tonight's molé, Antonio Giles will be buying a food that has been grown in central Mexico for more than a thousand years, virtually unchanged.

Born and raised in Guerrero, Antonio Giles recalls with a laugh that he came to Zihuatanejo's resorts as a young cook just to get experience but originally intended to head out into the supposedly more sophisticated outside world to pursue his career. That was 23 years ago. “Look at all this wonderful food,” he exults. “It's fresh. It's good. It's even organic—just because that's how we've always grown things here. This is as good as it gets. I found the greatest treasure right here in my home.” ▲

*Eric Lucas lives in Seattle.*

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