

GLEE STARS ROCK
FASHION'S NIGHT OUT

VOGUE

SEP

SOMETHING
FOR EVERYONE!

758

PAGES

THE
FALL
FASHION
EXTRAVAGANZA

TEN YEARS LATER
A 9/11 SURVIVOR
LOOKS BACK

HOW TO
WEAR
COLOR
ON YOUR
FACE, ON
YOUR BODY

EXCLUSIVE
KATE
MOSS

AN INSIDE LOOK
AT THE MOST
ROMANTIC
WEDDING OF
THE YEAR

MADE IN CHINA
THE EXPLOSIVE RISE OF
A STYLE SUPERPOWER

\$4.99US \$5.99FOR

08449

0 751154 9

09

SOUTH OF THE BORDER

ON A QUEST
FOR AUTHENTIC
(AND MODERN)
MEXICAN CUISINE,
JEFFREY STEINGARTEN
FINDS CHEFS
WHO CELEBRATE
THE COUNTRY'S
PRE-HISPANIC ROOTS.
PHOTOGRAPHED
BY ERIC BOMAN.

We arrived in Mexico City with one restaurant reservation, a 20-day booking at the hotel Condesa DF, and four bulging suitcases. Most people like to travel light. We travel heavy. One suitcase was full of books and papers—documents on Mexican food and its strange ingredients and methods, books on the destiny of lost civilizations, files of eating advice (some from people to whom I would entrust my last meal), maps and guidebooks, and several novels set in Mexico City or in Mexico, or at least in Latin America. It was time, at last, to get serious about Mexican food.

How can I have so little mastery of this fascinating cuisine? I've eaten what is called Mexican food in many parts of the U.S., but it is difficult to learn much from it, except for, say, Rick Bayless's restaurants in Chicago, or Zarela Martínez's late and lamented restaurant Zarela in Manhattan. And unlike my good friends in Houston and Los Angeles, I do not need to believe that what I'm eating here in Manhattan is truly Mexican cooking. Yes, I have had very fine Mexican street food in L.A., but is Mexican cuisine limited to what you can buy on the street?

That's one of the issues I needed to settle. I was especially interested in unearthing (1) undeniably authentic Mexican cooking (despite the complete humiliation that the word *authentic* has suffered over the past decade or two); (2) a modern style of Mexican cuisine; and (3) apart from either of these, the existence of Mexican haute cuisine (*alta cocina*). I was worried that in only three weeks I would not be able to eat myself into an understanding of all three. As it turned out, I was right to worry. And to top it off, I stumbled on a Chinese restaurant that had opened in Manhattan 20 years ago, won good reviews, then migrated to Houston and now to Mexico City. Yes, it was frivolous of me, but how could I resist?

It's not as though I haven't spent lots of time in Mexico. When my wife, Caron, and I first got together, we boldly drove around the Yucatán, then west along the Gulf Coast and across the isthmus to the town of Tehuantepec, where women were said to wield the economic power and wore elaborate and colorful dresses, using the men as servants or as field hands (Frida Kahlo adopted the outfits of the powerful women of Tehuantepec). We headed east to Chiapas, near the Guatemalan border; back over to Oaxaca (vaguely pronounced like "wa-HAH-ca"); and up to Mexico City. I'll concede that in those days, exploring for really good food was not among my highly developed skill sets. But much later, when Caron was working in San Diego—fifteen minutes from the Mexican border—I would drive down to northern Baja California. I wrote in detail about the construction of a remarkably uncompromising taco in Rosarito Beach, spent time in Guadalupe, which is at the center of Mexico's growing wine industry, visited my friend's bluefin-tuna farm, and dined on abalone and pitch-black clams in Ensenada, a major fishing port that supplies areas as distant as Mexico City and Oaxaca.

Then how could I have learned so little about Mexican cuisine? For one thing, it is amazingly complex and varied, and there's much more to learn than with more familiar and codified European cooking. There are said to be eight gastronomic regions, but as I discovered, each one is rich in variation—as I've read Italy was until the sixties, when TV, improved transportation, and an influx of tourists brought cosmopolitan values to much of the country. For another, all but the most ambitious Mexican restaurants in this country are content to offer only the most common of pleasures, for which the weary traveler is happy to settle. But not this weary traveler. Not

HAT TRICK

Mexico's rich culinary history derives as much from early Indian civilizations as from Spain. Louis Vuitton collar. Details, see In This Issue.

Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.



anymore. Cultural attractions—even visits to the spectacular Museo Nacional de Antropología and to the several houses of Luis Barragán, the great Mexican architect (and winner of the second Pritzker Prize)—would be tucked in around our sacrosanct breakfasts, lunches, and dinners.



Our first meal (and our one advance booking) was at Pujol, opened by chef Enrique Olvera and his family eleven years ago. It is probably the most “modern” Mexican restaurant in Mexico City in both its cooking and its decor, with warm, dark walls and snowy-white tablecloths illuminated from above. Olvera is 35 years old, a graduate of the culinary-arts program at the Culinary Institute of America, where he won several prizes, one for writing the best thesis. He is brimming with talent and intellect.

We arrived breathless from the airport and an hour late. Olvera had advised me to put off eating at Pujol until the end of our trip—probably because when a chef composes variations on established themes (these days widely referred to as *riffs*, as in jazz), an appreciative eater should be familiar with the underlying traditions. Of course, we ignored his advice, but by our second visit, ten days later, we had learned a thing or two. In any event, our waiters and sommelier were extremely knowledgeable, patient, and graceful; only once did they need to ask the chef for the answer. Enrique’s food is stunningly modern in design but suggestive of Mexico’s culinary history, which derives from thousands of years of Indian civilizations as much as from Spain.

Pujol offers two tasting menus, one having seven courses, mostly of fish and seafood, the other with eight courses and more varied ingredients. The cooking is *experimental*, in Harold McGee’s apt word for the contemporary style of cooking that prizes originality, even novelty, but it is not science-based. An early course on the shorter menu was Enrique’s fine ceviche of ocean fish heightened with yerba buena, a relative of spearmint; aguacate criollo, the Mexican avocado; and the flavor of chile güero. Botanists have counted more than 1,000 varieties of chiles, but for practical purposes, Mexican kitchens rely on, say, ten types, although with many more names, depending on whether the chile is smoked, steamed before or after smoking, and so forth. My friend César Vega, originally from Mexico but now a food scientist at the Mars candy company, described his most recent visit to his mother, where he felt overwhelmed by the vast catalog of chiles.

Near the start of both menus, Enrique presented what appeared to be a ceramic or preserved pumpkin, and inside were slightly charred baby corns in a kind of cream; next to that was a squash blossom stuffed with bean puree and a vase of crunchy greens known as marsh samphire. Small tacos might appear, placed on very warm, smooth, flat tan stones that had been set before us. There was an amazing red octopus tentacle curled around the center of a plate. A palate cleanser is served before dessert, a crimson sorbet of zarzamora (blackberries), dusted with gusano and flamed with Mezcal. At the end came a dark chocolate biscuit or cake, broken into rough cubes, topped with a popcorn-flavored sorbet; next to it were pools of honey ganache and of chocolate. The biscuit was a memorable chocolate “cake,” conveying the depth of cocoa without the bitterness that some pastry chefs favor.

Pujol is “modern” also in Enrique’s method of interpreting some Mexican traditions—what is known nowadays as “deconstruction.” In Ferran Adrià’s definition from a dozen years ago, “It consists of taking a gastronomic reference that is already known, embodied in a dish, and transforming all or some of its ingredients by modifying its texture, taste, and/or temperature. The result has a direct relationship with the diner’s memory . . . in other words he recognizes it.” And Enrique is “modern” in that like other progressive chefs he is bringing pre-Hispanic foods and methods into haute cuisine. Before the Spanish arrived, the several Indian cultures were consuming chocolate in its many forms, corn, chiles, tomatoes, squashes, turkeys, beans, agave—all of these unknown in Europe. And although they knew how to ferment the sweet nectar from the agave plant into pulque, it is unlikely that they distilled it into a highly alcoholic liquor. Widespread drunkenness had to wait for the arrival of the Spanish and their distillation technology, which enabled the creation of Mezcal (a powerful liquid with up to 60 percent alcohol and an herbal, smoky flavor, distilled from the heart of the maguey plant, a type of agave).

The next morning at breakfast, I had chilaquiles, a lavish dish covering a large platter but made from common Mexican staples. As I’ve discovered, an endless number of recipes exist for chilaquiles. The version at the hotel Condesa seems typical. The bottom layer consists of freshly fried tortilla triangles drenched with salsa at the center of the plate; after trying several chilaquiles, I preferred the green sauce, a wonderful balance among acidic and fruity tomatillos, chiles (mild, such as jalapeños), plus onions and cilantro. These are topped with queso fresco, a few more tortillas, grated cheese, and two fried eggs. Some people add unnecessary chicken. I wish I had watched the kitchen make it.

The sheer pleasure of eating chilaquiles led us to a restaurant recommended by nearly everybody, although Enrique is ambivalent and says, “If Benito Juárez came back to Earth, he would not be surprised by any of the menus” at El Cardenal, Casa Merlos, and La Hostería de Santo Domingo. But Enrique is a real fan of street food—quesadillas, tacos—and is fascinated by the marisquerías near the markets (where the freshest seafood becomes ceviches). El Cardenal has three branches, and the menu changes throughout the day. As we had arrived before lunch, there were lots of egg dishes on offer: fried eggs on fried tortillas and beans, covered with green-tomato sauce and grated cheese; tortillas topped with fried eggs, covered with a proprietary red sauce, and over that some melted cheese and strips of poblano chile; a tortilla with escamoles (more about them to follow) sautéed with onions and sliced nopales (cactus pads), served with scrambled eggs and beans. It might seem that these are all made from the same ingredients, just in a different order. But I’ve left out the dishes with sausage, jerked beef, or minced pork mingling with the eggs. Mexican cooks seem especially skilled at egg cookery.

Within a day of our arrival, we had made two crucial discoveries about Mexican cuisine. First, the people of Mexico—at least those eating where we did—consume many more bugs and worms than I had imagined. Margaritas and Mezcal are typically served with a plate of orange sections dusted with (or accompanied by a tiny bowl of) sal de gusano, literally “worm salt,” a narrow definition because apart from ground-up worms and salt it is deeply tinted and strongly flavored with dried red chiles. By telephoning Casa Mezcal on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, my home island, I discovered

that they ordinarily have *sal de gusano*; they've recently run out and are awaiting a fresh supply. A *gusano* is a caterpillar that lives in the maguery plant.

One evening, Patricia Quintana invited us for supper upstairs at her restaurant, *Izote*. I first met Patricia in New York 20 years ago, when the Metropolitan Museum mounted a colossal exhibition of Mexican art from the past 30 centuries; she was in charge of the menu at a celebratory dinner. I've met up with her now and then, but never tasted her own food, which is noted for its modern style. We alternated between glasses of *Mezcal* and dishes of food. Before long, our table was covered with bottles of *Mezcal*, some from Oaxaca and some from Guerrero, the two major areas of production. Some were clear, others were golden; they varied in flavor and smokiness; some were well aged and others were fresh. But all shared the power to induce sudden intoxication. Patricia prepared a *cebiche* [sic] of shrimp and chiles, tacos stuffed with river crayfish in a popcorn sauce with green chiles, more *cebiche* with lime and grapefruit, a wonderfully cute tamale filled with sweet kernels of young corn, crisp duck with a black mole, and at the end, *natilla*, a sweet, eggy custard. Patricia does not make a point of using primarily pre-Hispanic ingredients, but the only deviations in our entire dinner were a pinch of saffron and the use of some dairy.

Our second vital discovery is that not all Mexican dinners begin with *guacamole*. Just kidding—I've known this almost since birth. But Mexico is the largest producer and consumer of avocado, which originated there. A Mexican variety, *aguacate criollo*, is smaller and triangular with a shiny, smooth, black skin that one sometimes eats, especially when Enrique includes it in a salad-like composition.

Back to *escamoles*. These are ant eggs, and they were in season. I've eaten various bugs and worms and strange body parts in Thailand and Mexico, but only because I needed to know how the Thais and the Mexicans eat. Unlike some of my colleagues on TV, I don't eat bugs to demonstrate my fearlessness. Sure I'm fearless. I've actually enjoyed deep-fried bamboo worms in Bangkok, which, as long as you don't see their little faces, you might mistake for French fries. But as César Vega points out, Mexican *escamoles* are the only creatures of the lower orders of the animal kingdom that one eats for the sheer enjoyment of their flavor and texture. They are much larger (between an eighth and a quarter of an inch) than the red-ant eggs I ate in Thailand and abhorred, and although it may be my imagination, they tasted like . . . eggs! You sauté them in butter for a few minutes with just a little onion and possibly garlic and the wonderful Mexican herb *epazote*.

One day we visited the San Angel Inn for an afternoon tequila or two with Elsie Mendez, who conducts culinary tours and had shown us around the San Juan market. The inn is a hacienda from the late seventeenth century built around a large flowered courtyard. It's an old-fashioned place with tuxedoed waiters from whom we ordered drinks and *escamoles*, which were accompanied by small tortillas and two salsas, red or green. The margaritas were fruity and smooth (I had the tamarind version), poured from silver carafes lodged in little silver ice buckets, one for each of us. Ah, the gentility of snacking on ant eggs in the capital of Mexico.

San Angel Inn does not serve *Mezcal*, but I can see why *Mezcal* appeals to modern chefs: It is artisanal, made by relatively small companies using old recipes, and most of it is

produced in the region of Oaxaca, which somehow seems like the spiritual gastronomic home of central Mexico. Perhaps it is Oaxaca's connection with mole, which, although invented in the city of Puebla, thrives in Oaxaca. Mole is a sauce and not a very specific one, except that it has many, many ingredients and a complex taste, and it takes forever to make. It is vaguely associated with pre-Hispanic cooking.

There are green moles and red moles and yellow moles, those named for places and those named for an ingredient. Susana Trilling, a well-known cooking teacher who lives near Oaxaca, has written a little book titled *My Search for the Seventh Mole*. Oaxaca has been known as the place of seven moles, but she knew how to make only six. In the course of the story, we learn lots about moles. But I still don't know what qualities unite all moles.

At the end of our trip we spent three brief days in Oaxaca and some time with Alejandro Ruíz, an ebullient and gregarious chef who owns two excellent restaurants and the hotel where everybody advised us to stay and dine, the Casa Oaxaca. Alejandro grew up in straitened circumstances in a tiny town some hours away. I asked Alejandro about the seven moles of Oaxaca. "If you're talking about the Oaxaca region," he said, "there are many more than seven. There are

YES, I HAVE HAD VERY FINE MEXICAN STREET FOOD IN LOS ANGELES, BUT IS MEXICAN CUISINE LIMITED TO WHAT YOU CAN BUY ON THE STREET?

dozens, hundreds." He paused as though he were mentally counting them. Then he said, "But to me, there is really only one mole. The black mole of Oaxaca!"

Two women, each living on the outskirts of the city, open their houses to Oaxacans (and outsiders) who love their cooking and are willing to pay a little for it. The first of the two fed us her *estofada*, a complex stew of beef and fruits, and herbs from her backyard, which she and her family stirred for seventeen hours until the meat fell apart, the fruit dissolved, and everything melted together. The other home cook, Ofelia Toledo Pineda, is famous for her black mole and sent us off with a kilogram of it, which is now in our freezer, awaiting a special occasion. Ofelia told us that she had taught a famous Chicago chef and some of his cooks about her moles. His name was on the tip of her tongue; of course, it was Rick Bayless. Both women were proud to announce that theirs was the true cooking of the isthmus, part of the far-flung Oaxaca region.

Having spent three recent weeks in Mexico, I feel fully qualified to psychoanalyze the country and even write a book or two about it. Nearly every chef whose cooking we ate was reaching into Mexico's past, trying to get closer to pre-Hispanic ingredients and cooking methods, of which, as Enrique told me, there were three: boiling, charring, and *barbacoa*—roasting. Astute research into the foodways of the distant past has been the province of both Mexicans and gringos. I know of only one chef in Mexico City who is a strict purist in these things, but by turning away from European models and their dominance of the haute cuisine, Mexican chefs are reclaiming their culinary inheritance. □