

Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Qué vivan los tamales!* :
Food and the making of Mexican identity
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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 maguay 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 *boja 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." 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 textiles 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 *molcajetes* (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 maguey cactus and fermented its sap to make *pulque*, a mildly alcoholic and highly nutritious drink. Within the central valley, an algae called *tecuilatli* 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 Toltec 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 Mexico'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," *chinampa* 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 *bermejo* chiles and ground squash seeds. Another red chile, the *chiltécpil*, 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 *polkanes*, and canoelike *chalupas*. 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 *tlatonli* feast on tamales in the banquet halls of Tenochtitlán, but the cuisine of corn survived in markets and villages.