

John Pilcher, “The Conquests of Wheat: Culinary Encounters in the Colonial Period,” *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identities* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998)

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

Or so goes the legend. Modern authors have used this colonial dish, combining spices from the Old World with chiles from the New, as a symbol of the mestizo Mexican nation. Alfonso Reyes, Carlos de Gante, Artemio del Valle Arizpe, Salvador Novo, Amando Farga, Paco Ignacio Taibo, Mayo Antonio Sanchez, and Alfredo Ramos Espinosa have produced a literary genre exploring the mysterious origins of this dish. About 1680 the nuns of Puebla supposedly created *mole* in honor of Viceroy Tomas Antonio de la Cerda y Aragon. Another version of the *mole* legend—with a satirical rather than divine view of the national identity—attributed the mixture to a certain Fray Pascual, who accidentally spilled the spice tray into the dinner pot.² The authors of these tales, although relying on vivid imagination rather than historical research, correctly perceived the importance of *mole*, and of cuisine, in the blending of cultures that forged modern Mexico.

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

Nevertheless, *mole poblano* has inspired a historiography of several competing interpretations. Judith Friedlander made an innovative attempt to trace the origins of *mole* through its ingredients. In her excellent anthropological study of Indian identity in a Morelos village, she pointed out that the majority of the components

came from the Old World. Native products included only chiles, chocolate, the turkey, and the name, which derived from the Nahuatl word *molli* (sauce). The dish was traditionally served for religious celebrations when priests made their greatest efforts to convert the natives to European practices. Friedlander therefore concluded that Spanish missionaries introduced *mole* to Indian communities. This approach, while important to understanding colonial cuisine, assumed that Spanish conquistadors annihilated the local culture and did not give sufficient credit to native traditions.⁵

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

The complexity of *mole* has inspired another interpretation, the baroque. Its proponents, including most modern Mexican commentators, have attempted to place cooking within the artistic milieu of seventeenth-century New Spain. Architects, musicians, painters, and poets of the age lavished their work with ostentatious ornamentation. *Mole poblano*, with its elaborate ingredients, supposedly represented the gastronomic counterpart of the celestial ceiling fresco or the recursive musical fugue. Modern descriptions of *mole* resonate with the baroque aesthetic: a palate in constant motion between effervescent tastes of spices, each playing chords within a symphony of flavors. But while this image holds a certain poetic charm, it lacks heuristic value.⁷

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

“The grocer, not the conquistador, is the real Spanish father of Mexican society.”⁸ These words of Justo Sierra, the great Porfirian educator and intellectual, aptly summarized the Spanish presence in the New World. Emperor Charles V, fearing that Cortes and his men would establish independent kingdoms, sent trusted administrators to rule the newly conquered territories. Henceforth government remained largely in the hands of peninsular bureaucrats, who had little attachment to their colonial subjects. These officials dreamed primarily of returning home to Spain as rich men and were discouraged from marrying provincial women. Shopkeepers and other settlers thus bore much of the responsibility for creating a European society on American soil. Grocers, in particular, contributed to New Spain’s development by satisfying the colonists’ hunger for familiar Iberian foods. The introduction of European crops was a natural step in the conquest of America, for Spanish cuisine itself had resulted from a long series of invasions. A millennium before Christ, Iberian people had cultivated wheat and herded sheep using methods developed in Syria and Egypt. The first challenges to Iberian domination came from Celtic invaders who occupied the peninsula’s northern areas between the ninth and sixth centuries. These blond, blue-eyed immigrants added physical variety to the rather dark-skinned inhabitants, particularly in the central plateau where the two groups intermarried, and they may also have been the first to ferment grapes in the peninsula. Spain’s wine industry nevertheless owed its origins to Phoenicians who settled along the Mediterranean coast at about the same time. Successive Greek and Carthaginian colonists also introduced olives and chickpeas.⁹

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

The next great advance in Iberian agriculture following the collapse of the Roman empire came not with the fifth-century Visigothic invasions from the north; instead, medieval Spain drew its culinary inspiration from Muslims who overran the peninsula between 711 and 722. For a century after the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632, the soldiers of Islam had swept across Africa and Asia, conquering or converting all in their path. They also accumulated considerable scientific knowledge in their travels. The Moors revolutionized agriculture in Al-

Andalus, as they called Spain, through the use of sophisticated fertilizers and irrigation works. In addition, they carried a wide range of crops from India to Europe. Heat-resistant grains such as rice and sorghum increased Iberian productivity by adding a summer growing season to the traditional winter wheat. The Arabs also introduced spinach, eggplant, artichokes, and watermelons, as well as sugar and saffron. Asian citrus fruits, especially limes, lemons, and bitter oranges, likewise found fertile soil in Spain. The Moors loved fruit so much that they continued to cultivate Iberian vineyards despite the *Qur'an's* prohibition on alcoholic beverages.¹³

Islamic agricultural interests reflected a sensual delight in food that differed sharply from the Christian ideal of abstinence. Muhammad promised endless pleasure gardens to the faithful, and many considered earthly gratification a legitimate prelude to Paradise. Moreover, with their access to the spices of the Indies, Muslims could satisfy their desires for heavenly foods. Banquets from Baghdad to Granada featured dishes perfumed with pepper, ginger, cinnamon, clove, cardamom, mace, nutmeg, saffron, and sugar. A thirteenth-century Hispanic-Moorish cookbook explained that “the knowledgeable use of spices is the principal base of prepared dishes, because it is the cement of cooking, and upon it cooking is built.”¹⁴ Muslim cooks were also skilled in using sugar to create pastries, nougats, syrups, and custards. These confections, often based on almonds, dates, honey, and cream, were likewise fragrant with cinnamon, citrus, and rosewater. But not all of the smells of Moorish cooking were sweet, as the Christians observed when they dubbed the Arabic stews *ollapodrida* (rotten pottage).¹⁵

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

Yet the highly spiced dishes of classical Arabic cooking became accessible to only a small elite. Jaime Vicens Vives, the great Spanish economic historian, observed that the medieval Iberian economy depended “on two elements—wheat and sheep.”¹⁷ Popular cuisine consisted largely of preservation techniques such as cheese making, which was a vital part of the shepherd’s life. Old sheep eventually made it into the stewing pot, but on a daily basis peasants started their *olios* with stale bread soaked in water. To this they added chickpeas for a steamy *puchero*, onions and cucumber for a cold *gazpacho*, or, if nothing else, garlic and olive oil for a simple *sopa de pan* (bread soup). Wheat bread held such a central place in Europeans’ lives that it took on popular

religious significance, particularly for women. An altar-piece from fifteenth-century Portinari, for example, showed Christ disguised as a sheaf of wheat ready to be milled for the Eucharist wafer. A shepherd living in the Pyrenees Mountains even risked heresy by suggesting that “the soul of man is bread.”¹⁸

Wheat bread held particular importance for those Spaniards who migrated to the Americas. A series of disastrous grain harvests had struck the peninsula beginning in 1504, as a consequence of the agrarian policies of Ferdinand and Isabella. In an attempt to foment Iberian wool production, the Catholic monarchs had allowed shepherds to run their animals through farmers’ fields and to cut down whole forests to provide pasture. The resulting famines ravaged the Spanish countryside, and memories of hunger drove the conquistadors on their New World exploits. Moreover, the impoverished southwestern crescent of Extremadura and Andalucía provided the vast majority of colonists. Their voracious appetites for wheat and meat transformed the Americas.¹⁹

Creoles and the Columbian Exchange

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

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

prices fell so low in the sixteenth century that ranchers slaughtered the animals for their hides and often left the carcasses to rot.²¹

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

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

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

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

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

Italians had a much greater influence than the French on Hispanic cuisine. Northern Italian princes had dictated Renaissance fashions two centuries before Gallic chefs asserted their gastronomic hegemony over Europe. Diego Granado’s *Libra del arte de cocina* (Book of the Art of Cooking), published in Madrid in 1599, included few French recipes but many Italian ones such as a Lombard vegetable torte, Venetian grilled chops, Milanese stuffed cabbage, and Roman macaroni and cheese.³⁴ Personal ties likewise bound the Castilian court to Italian cuisine. Guilio Alberoni exemplified this connection; a humble cook from Parma, he rose to become *de facto* prime minister of Spain. He entered the service of the Duke of Vendome, and accompanied the French general to Madrid during the War of Spanish Succession (1700-1713). Through the judicious use of Parmesan cheese and prosciutto, Alberoni ingratiated himself with the royal court of Philip V. By 1717 he had become a Catholic cardinal and government minister, but he proved a less successful statesman than chef, and two years later was exiled.³⁵

Italian dishes appeared prominently in the cuisine of New Spain. Spaghetti with tomato sauce became a

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

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

Culinary Blending in the Countryside

The people of Mesoamerica had been eating tortillas for two thousand years before Fernando Cortes stepped off the ship from Cuba. Their lives centered around maize; it provided the essence of their identity. The vast majority of men, save for a few warriors and merchants, raised corn for subsistence, while women were cooks who derived much of their self-worth from skill at the *metate*. The efforts of Cortes and his followers to transform New Spain into a replica of the old therefore met with stubborn resistance from Native Americans reluctant to abandon their traditional cuisine. European settlers eventually satisfied their own demand for wheat through forced Indian labor, but the natives largely refused to eat this foreign grain. Like the Creoles, they adopted primarily those new foods that fit into their already established cuisine.

Spanish attempts to indoctrinate Native Americans to European culture and religion began with the

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

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

Supplying wheat to Creole markets placed onerous burdens on the Native American population. Even after the abolition of *encomienda* tribute labor, rotating *repartimiento* drafts assigned Indians to public works including flood control, silver mines, and wheat farms. Moreover, historian Charles Gibson has shown that wheat farms served as the foundation for Spanish usurpation of Indian lands in central Mexico. About the end of the sixteenth century, large haciendas came to dominate wheat production around Mexico City, drawing *repartimiento* workers from nearby villages such as Tacuba and Tacubaya. Other major wheat zones developed to the east, around Atlixco in the province of Puebla, and to the west, at Zamora and Valladolid in Michoacan.⁴¹ A few entrepreneurial Indians also grew for European markets, to the irritation of Spanish competitors. The natives of Oaxaca, for example, supplied the limited urban wheat demand from their own lands and often ground flour in mills owned by *caciques* (native nobles) and *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods).⁴² These cases notwithstanding, commercial agriculture often provided a means of subjugating Indians. But Europeans did not propagate wheat only for pecuniary motives.

Spanish missionaries preached the goodness of wheat as part of their evangelical message to pagan Indians. Father Sahagun instructed them to eat "that which the Castilian people eat, because it is good food, that with which they are raised, they are strong and pure and wise.... You will become the same way if you eat their food."⁴³ Although Sahagun later questioned the wisdom of acculturating Indians, wheat remained a religious necessity because it was the only grain recognized by the Roman Catholic Church for the Holy Eucharist. Since

the eleventh century, priests could substitute no other bread for the body of Christ. The unreliability of colonial pack trains, which often delivered spoiled flour, made wheat production essential to religious missions, and priests stationed in the desolate north frequently complained of their inability to say Mass for lack of altar breads.⁴⁴

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

Native Americans, when left to their own devices, almost invariably planted corn instead of wheat, in part because they disliked the taste of the foreign grain. The *Florentine Codex* records their initial reaction to bread as being “like famine food . . . like dried maize stalks.”⁴⁹ Spaniards, accustomed to presenting bread as alms in their homeland, were shocked to find that they could not even give it away to beggars. Juan Suarez de Peralta explained that “destitute natives would not think of accepting bread, and I don’t mean crumbs, but a good pound-and-a-half loaf, they shove it back in your face.”⁵⁰

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

Aha, for example, abandoned the foreign grain immediately after the death of their *encomendero*. In the New Mexico revolt of 1680, Pueblo insurgents expelled the Spaniards from Santa Fe and, for good measure, destroyed their wheat fields.⁵³

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

Male farmers and herdsmen did not alone determine which European plants and animals would enter the native cuisine. Women often mediated cultural change through their control of the domestic sphere. Vegetable gardens were perhaps the most important place for incorporating new culinary influences. Such plots, fertilized by kitchen scraps and household pets, had long served as places for experimentation. In pre-Columbian times, these apparently haphazard gardens yielded a wide variety of herbs, fruits, and vegetables. After the conquest, women added cabbages, cucumbers, artichokes, lettuce, radishes, and European beans. The prestige attached to Spanish vegetables in some cases led to the neglect of native varieties such as *quelites*. Yet despite the constant encouragement by priests to consume wheat bread, the sight of women bent over *metates* remained a ubiquitous feature of the Mexican landscape well into the twentieth century.⁵⁷

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

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

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

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

Bakers often named their creations “kisses” and “underpants,” and engaged in flirtatious wordplay with maids who came to buy bread. Even when freed from forced labor after independence, Mexican bakers retained unusual habits — working nights to have bread ready in the morning — and also kept the picaresque stereotype of being humorous but drunken flirts.⁶¹

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

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

They Were What They Ate

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

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

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

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

This ideal notwithstanding, a scarcity of European women in the colony made race mixture inevitable, which led in turn to the development of the system of castes. Peninsular Spaniards claimed a racial superiority over Creoles, in addition to their political advantages arising from the crown's distrust of colonial loyalty. The Creole population indeed included substantial numbers of mestizo children who adopted the racial identity of their European parent. Other mestizos, scorned by Spanish fathers, were raised as Indians in their mothers' native community. But not all people of mixed blood gained acceptance in either of the two societies. An urban underclass appeared of mestizos who had adopted European culture, but lacking a Spanish patron, had little hope of economic advancement. They, along with Africans and mulattoes, could find only menial labor, and were referred to contemptuously by elites as *leperos* (street people).⁶⁹

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

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

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

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

He carries tamales, and a few maize ears, passing like a gigolo
through a sea of lovers.

And out in the pond, mere is no salamander, nor frog nor fish
he would not devour.

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

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

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

The archbishop’s assertion notwithstanding, large numbers of *blancos* (whites) subsisted on corn. This indicated not the abandonment of European prejudices, but rather the colony’s ever-present downward mobility. In tropical Yucatan, where wheat refused to grow and even imported communion wafers “did bend like to wet paper, by reason of the extreme humidity and heat,” settlers acquired a taste for corn out of necessity.⁷⁷ Even in Mexico City, immigrants who failed to strike it rich found themselves reduced to eating cheap tortillas, just as they were obliged to accept Indian or mestiza marriage partners, despite their preferences for wheat bread and Spanish women. So when the gentlemen of Chiapas went out on their doorsteps to brush bread crumbs from their ruffled collars, they affirmed both social status and Creole identity.

For *mole poblano* to have gained social status in colonial Mexico, therefore, it would have been seen as a Creole rather than mestizo dish. And notwithstanding the New World chiles lurking inside, *mole* would have

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

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

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

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