Jeffrey Pilcher, *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

Culinary Conquistadors

Although Mexican food is often considered an iconic example of global fusion, the initial encounters between Spanish and Native American palates were marked by mutual disgust. Moctezuma's emissaries reported that European bread tasted "like dried maize stalks," while Bernal Díaz del Castillo complained of the "misery of maize cakes" that served as rations while on campaign.[15] Food even became an instrument of conquest; cattle and sheep, let loose to forage, often preceded the Spanish armies, devouring indigenous crops. The founding of wheat farms later helped to institutionalize European control over native land and labor. Animal and human incursions met with fierce resistance from Indians, who fought in court to preserve their fields for maize. By the end of the colonial era, this battle had reached a stalemate, both geographic and social, that left a strong regional imprint on the cuisines of New Spain. Native staples predominated in rural areas, especially in the south, where the indigenous population was heaviest before the conquest, while Hispanic foods gained the upper hand in urban areas and in the sparsely settled north. Despite colonial efforts to segregate Europeans and Indians in

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distinct societies, native women working as domestic servants and concubines were conquistadors of a sort, seducing the Spaniards with the piquant flavors of their cooking.

Taste was only one of many reasons that settlers sought to transplant the Mediterranean complex of wheat, olive oil, and wine to New Spain. Food was heavily freighted with markers of status and identity in the early modern era. Colonists feared that without access to European foods their bodies would degenerate in the climate of the Americas, eventually transforming them into Indians. Perceiving themselves as a new aristocracy, conquistadors claimed the privilege of wheat bread and Oriental spices. Missionaries were equally intent on culinary change for evangelical purposes. Wheat was the only grain that could be used for the Eucharist according to medieval Church doctrine, while wine signified the blood of Christ, and olive oil was essential to sacraments and celebrations. Unfortunately for colonists, the life cycle of European plants did not match the climate of New Spain, where the rain came in summer instead of winter, causing fungus to grow on wheat and diluting the sugar in grapes, which made for insipid wines.[16]

Eager to maintain status, Spaniards willingly purchased foods they could not grow themselves. Customs receipts from Veracruz, reported by the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, indicate that wine and brandy alone accounted for nearly 20 percent of colonial imports from Spain in 1802. Olives, capers, nuts, and spices were also significant expenditures. This picture of conspicuous consumption of luxury goods was confirmed by rare menus from judicial archives indicating that colonial elites spent lavish sums—and occasionally walked out on the bills—for *pucheros* (stews), salads dressed with oil and vinegar, Jerez sherry and claret wine, and, for Christmas Eve, the traditional Iberian salt cod.[17]

If Spanish colonists paid dearly for most familiar foods, meat was cheap by comparison with the homeland, at least in the early days. The catastrophic decline of Indian populations from disease and abuse allowed European livestock to take over abandoned fields. This herbivorous invasion had serious environmental consequences. For example, the Mezquital Valley, northeast of Mexico City, was overrun by sheep in the 1550s. With neither predators nor competition, they denuded the hills and encouraged erosion, rendering the land unfit for farming or herding. Eventually the soil adjusted to the new demands, supporting smaller numbers of livestock than during the boom years. Meanwhile, Native Americans overcame their initial aversion and began

to raise animals and eat meat, particularly chicken, but it rarely constituted a significant part of their diet.[18]

Maize remained the foundation of indigenous livelihoods, in part because it was less expensive and more reliable than its European competitor at every step from the field to the table. Unlike the low yields of wheat, a single seed of corn produced hundreds of grains on each of several ears, all protected from disease by sturdy husks. Moreover, wheat required substantial capital investments, teams of oxen to plow the soil, mills to grind the grain into flour, and ovens to bake it into bread. By contrast, corn could be grown and cooked with only the simplest of tools: a digging stick for planting, and a metate and comal for cooking. Maize was particularly favorable on the hilly landscapes, and terraced agriculture flourished on mountainsides that farmers could never plow. Some native communities did grow wheat for sale to urban markets, just as some indigenous nobles ate bread in imitation of European rulers. Spanish priests also did their best to incorporate wheat bread into village festivals, but on a daily basis, maize was the grain of choice in rural Mexico in the sixteenth century, and it remains so in the twenty-first.

Social and culinary hierarchies were more complicated in cities because of widespread race mixture. Although the technical definition of a mestizo was the offspring of a Spaniard and an Indian, in practice, the legitimate children of wealthy parents were accepted as Spaniards, while those abandoned by their fathers often remained in their mothers' communities as de facto Indians. Over time, an urban underclass emerged comprising poor Spaniards, African slaves, unattached Indians, and assorted mestizos. To make sense of these people who did not conform to the expectations of either Spaniards or Indians, colonial officials devised an elaborate "system of castes" with bizarre, bestial categories such as *coyote* mestizo and *zambaigo* (literally "son of Sambo," the offspring of mixed Indian and African parents), in an attempt to divide and rule this variegated society.[19]

Definitions of race therefore depended as much on culture as on physical appearance, and the baker's guild of Mexico City reinforced this artificial hierarchy by producing breads appropriate for every rank and income. In the eighteenth century, the purest wheat was milled and cleaned by hand, kneaded with shortening and a little leavening, and then baked into delicate loaves called *pan frances* or *pan español* (French bread or Spanish bread). Just two master bakers had permission to make this special variety; one worked on consignment for the viceroy, the other for the archbishop. Wealthy Creoles purchased *pan floreado* (flowered bread), made of select wheat, and shaped in round or

Figure 1.2. Casta painting with tamales. "From Indian and Basina, Zambayga" ("De indio y basina, zambayga") by Miguel Cabrera. Inventory number 00010. Courtesy of El Museo de América, Madrid.

ring loaves. Large commercial bakeries used lower-quality wheat, maize, and other flours to produce coarse *pan común* and even less desirable *pambazos* and *cemitas*, thereby matching mixed-grain breads to people of mixed race, at least in theory. At the bottom of this hierarchy were Indians, who, even in Mexico

City, consumed large quantities of corn tortillas, as did many other plebeians unable to afford the cheapest bread. Of course, both racial and gastronomical castes emerged from the Spanish imagination and only approximated the complicated social realities.[20]

Foods crossed social boundaries in multiple directions in colonial New Spain. Some culinary borderlands were close to home, such as the kitchen gardens where Indian women planted aromatic European vegetables—onions, carrots, and garlic—to supplement their chiles and squash. Native cooks also learned to beat pork fat into the corn dough for tamales, giving a lighter texture to these steamed cakes. Other mixtures took place in commercial production, such as the use of European distilling technology to transform fermented pulque into a highly potent alcohol called *mezcal*. By the eighteenth century, colonial brewers had raised the ire of Spanish moralists with a wide range of beverages, Hispanic *aguardiente* (sugar cane brandy), hybrid *charagua* (pulque fermented with sugar syrup and chile colorado), and native *sangre de conejo* (literally, "rabbit blood," a bright red cocktail of pulque and prickly pear juice, named for the Nahua deity of drunkenness, 400 Rabbits).[21] Europeans also made dietary accommodations to the new environment and culture. Pork fat became a widespread substitute for expensive olive oil, and indigenous frijoles replaced chickpeas in Spanish pucheros. The native beverage chocolate quickly gained a following among Creoles, particularly women, who depended on it as a stimulant for Catholic fast days and even drank it during mass. Perhaps the most creative result of New Spain's mestizo kitchen was the perennial festival dish, mole de guajolote, a thick turkey stew blending chile peppers and chocolate with the spicy banquet foods of medieval Europe.

Box 1.1 Recipe for Avocados in Guacamole

Peel and seed the avocados, chop with a knife of silver or wood—metal gives them a bad taste and bad color—arrange on a platter and serve with oil, vinegar, onion, oregano, and chile ancho. There are persons who mash the avocados and convert them into a paste. This platter can be eaten with all sorts of grilled meats and with stew.

Source: Vicenta Torres de Rubio, *Cocina michoacana* (Zamora: Imprenta Moderna, 1896), 18.

perhaps because many people considered them to have an unpleasant soapy flavor. Europeans ignored the herb until the nineteenth century, when it reappeared in Asian cookery under the exotic name of Chinese parsley. Nevertheless, coriander seeds continued to be used as a spice and indeed became a standard component in the Creole moles of New Spain. By contrast, Native Americans fit cilantro into their own culinary system in the category of *quelites*, assorted greens that were eaten wild as a snack, cooked in broth, or added to their own moles. The fragrant leaves proved to have a natural affinity for chile peppers, and today they are considered an essential ingredient in guacamole. But as late as the nineteenth century, the Creole version of guacamole—the recipe that appeared in cookbooks—was basically an avocado salad with chiles and onion, often chopped rather than mashed in a basalt mortar, and dressed with oil and vinegar.[22]

The cultural encounters of New Spain were not limited to Europeans and Native Americans; instead, this gastronomic system of castes incorporated cooks and cuisines from around the world. Tracing the origins of any given dish is difficult, not least because of the imprint left on Iberian cooking by eight centuries of Muslim rule, from 711 to 1492. Delicately perfumed Arab stews, roasts, and meatballs were taken up by European medieval courts and eventually carried to New Spain as the inspiration for mole de guajolote. Muslim traders also introduced sugar along with many Asian plants, and Indians learned to make candy with everything from sweet potato (*camote*) to coconut (*cocada*) and amaranth seeds (*alegría*). The convent kitchens of New Spain also reproduced Middle Eastern marzipan, nougat, and custard. Another Arabic cooking practice that became common was the vinegar marinade *escabeche*, used to