



SEASON 3

Mexico

CAN MEXICAN CORN BE SAVED?

SEASON 3 / SLICE OF LIFE / MEXICO / EAT / KNOW

Author: Jackie Bryant, Header Image: Rafael Emiliano Olivera Toro Reyes / EyeEm via Getty Images, 19 March 2018

“So you want to know about corn?” Rafael Mier asks, grabbing two suitcases out of the back of a beat-up station wagon. “We are having a crisis in Mexico.”

It is, as it always is, a bluebird day in Baja California, Mexico. When I heard a man was in town who was trying to save Mexican corn, I zipped over the border from San Diego, wondering what about Mexican corn could possibly need saving. I drove down the coast highway and ended up in the garage of an oceanfront luxury high-rise in Rosarito, where Mier is staying. After spending more than a week in northwest Mexico, meeting with chefs multiple times a day, he is surprisingly energetic, almost like it’s his first day on the job.

Mier is the founder of the Organización Tortilla de Maíz Mexicana, a mostly one-man activist organization focused on educating Mexicans about good tortillas. He hopes his efforts will save the country’s heirloom corn varieties from extinction. He travels around the country talking to rural-village farmers, big-name chefs, government officials, and anyone else who might be wondering what is actually in the tortillas they’re eating. Since tortillas are a staple Mexican food, they are an entry point for learning about the country’s corn varieties and its monolithic supply chains. Perhaps the greatest surprise is that this organization needs to exist at all: Aren’t *corn* and *Mexico* synonymous? Yes, but also no, because a lot has changed.

Tortilla consumption in Mexico has fallen by roughly 40 percent in the last 30 years, **according to** Mexican government agencies. Mier says to our first audience of the day, at the Culinary Art School in Tijuana. While holding up a bag of tortillas from a popular store-bought brand, he explains that the tortillas people are still eating aren’t high quality, either.

colorants, and preservatives and, in some cases, wheat flour. Googling “how to make corn tortillas” illustrates the point: Not one English or Spanish-language recipe that comes up calls for using fresh *masa*.



Rafael Mier showing an ear of corn to Salvador, the head farmer at Rancho la Puerta in Tecate, Mexico. (Photo by Jackie Bryant)

Real corn tortillas, Mier tells everyone—multiple times so it sinks in—are made with three things: water, corn, and calcium hydroxide. The corn must be nixtamalized, by which corn is soaked and boiled in an alkalinized solution before being husked. This process allows for easy grinding, improvement in flavor, and emulsification—ideal qualities for tortilla making. But sourcing the right corn is a problem too.

Corn cultivation started in Mexico somewhere between 7,000 and 11,000 years ago. Historically, all regions grew their own corn for local consumption. Many homes and towns



farm. In the last generation, *milpas* have all but disappeared from many homes.

Changes in the supply chain made processed and prepackaged food cheaper and more convenient than ever. Such foods include tortillas and other corn products. People began relying on store-bought goods to feed themselves and their families. Wealthy and middle-class families gladly made the switch. Rural families began to see more cash in their communities, thanks to remittances from relatives in big cities or the United States, as well as from other governmental social programs; so they started buying packaged food too.

Since the late 1980s, corn production has been industrialized and centralized. Now 44 percent of white-corn crops are centered in three states: Sinaloa, Jalisco, and Mexico. Distribution is controlled by a few multinational corporations, like Cargill and Gramosa. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) made the United States' low corn prices attractive, causing its yellow corn to enter the Mexican market for the first time ever.

American yellow corn, which never used to be eaten in Mexico, now makes up a third of the country's overall corn supply and is used mostly as animal feed, though it can be found in human food products as well. Local production chains have been so demolished that, during the 2016 teacher protests in Oaxaca, **corn had to be airlifted into the state** to ensure people had enough to eat throughout the blockades. Oaxaca had been one of the regions where corn domestication was first discovered, but now its people rely on eating corn that comes from points north.

The result of all this change, according to Mier, is that 59 varieties of heirloom corn native to Mexico are on the verge of extinction, as are the many regional dishes they are supposed to be made with. Another byproduct is the health issues that have been plaguing Mexico. The substitution of junk food and bad tortillas have had a strong hand in the country's ranking second-highest in the world for obesity, first for childhood obesity, and as a world leader in diabetes diagnoses. Mier says that if people ate real tortillas made from local corn, a lot of these problems will be alleviated. The office of the Mexican Secretary of Health agrees, and advocates for for a **traditional mesoamerican diet** as a way to reduce the nutritional epidemics affecting the country.

This information is what Mier brings with him to towns throughout Mexico. Half the time he goes alone, but sometimes friends go along. He also carries two suitcases filled with dozens of

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Some of the heirloom corn varieties Rafael Mier presents to chefs and farmers around Mexico.

(Photos by Cintia Soto)

Mier will talk to anyone who wants to learn, a task to which he seems uniquely suited. Always he is outfitted in a proprietary white collared shirt with the Tortilla de Maíz Mexicana logo. He is calm and authoritative in front of a crowd, seeming more like a friendly uncle ready to dispense life advice than someone who's about to upend the food system. He is never frustrated at anyone's lack of knowledge or their questions and never seems annoyed that he



That corn is so endangered is news to many Mexicans, many of whom don't have a deep understanding of the seismic supply shift that has occurred behind their backs, as it happened only within the last generation. Mier didn't realize it either. As we travel to his first presentation of the day, I ask how he got involved with corn activism. He lights up and explains that his journey started at least five years ago, when he began tending to his own land in Mexico state. He thought to plant popcorn, an ancient variety known as *palomero toluqueño*, when he discovered that nobody had any seeds he could use.

“Town by town I looked for these seeds, studying where they might be located. I started driving to many states in Mexico trying to find them, but there were none. It was so disappointing. One by one, I had people telling me that their grandparents planted them but not anymore, and they lost the seeds a while ago,” Mier laments. “I visited a very old lady who recalled planting them herself, but there was a big frost many years ago that caused her to lose all her seeds. After that, she started buying tortillas.”

“Around the same time, I also decided I wanted to plant blue corn, which is common to the state of Mexico. No farmers near me had any seeds saved,” he continues. “That was one of the reasons I started the foundation: I never realized corn was actually endangered. It was shocking to find out that ancient popcorn, one of the most common varieties, was about to become extinct; and it was frustrating to not be able to buy seeds from a catalog. How could this happen to corn in Mexico? We've been planting corn for, it's thought, 11,000 years. The government should be able to promote and help farmers everywhere in the country, because there's nothing new about corn. We know everything already. It should be organized better. I had this feeling that we needed to start something.”

Though Mier has spent much of his adult life working in a family furniture business, most recently as its chief financial officer, he says he always felt a pull between his “two sides.” So he has been running Organización Tortilla de Maíz Mexicana for the last two years as a side project, and he recently decided to make it his full-time job.

After his presentation at Tijuana's Culinary Art School, which is credited with creating the lauded Baja California cooking culture that made the state's chefs a target for Mier's efforts, we land at Rancho La Puerta. “The Ranch,” as enthusiasts call it, is a tony spa retreat in the town of Tecate that sits directly on the border fence with the United States and San Diego



Cutting corn tamales in Rosarito, Mexico. (Photo by Jackie Bryant)

As he passes around the ears—some with white and pink speckled dots, others with pearlized black kernels—everyone oohs and aahs at the possibilities. It’s hard not to wonder what that corn would taste like, say, in tortilla form, doused in salsa and stuffed with meat and cheese. That is precisely Mier’s goal.

His message generally strikes a chord. In Mexico it is said, “sin maíz no hay país” (without corn there is no country). Mayan legend attributes the creation of man to corn. But people don’t have an easy way of getting good corn products. They may not have the time, interest, or ability to start farming. Their local *tortillería*, Mier says, doesn’t have to disclose what is in its tortillas and likely isn’t using nixtamalized corn. Store-bought tortillas are the default for most, offering little in terms of choice or quality.

Still, Mier says he can see the spark in their eyes when he asks them to recall family memories, whether about corn or specific dishes that may have been lost over time. “In



mixture of ground roasted corn with various spices] during a discussion about traditional dishes. Then she realized she never made it for her children despite eating it all the time herself. She was shocked! She never thought about it. So that day we made the first *pinole* for her children, who were 18 and 20—not children anymore. I couldn’t believe they’d never had it,” he remembers.

Denise Roa, the executive chef at Rancho La Puerta, comments that she doesn’t know anywhere she can buy fresh masa, so she relies on store-bought tortillas. This is an echo of what Mier hears from chefs throughout the country, even at Mexico City’s finest restaurants, he says. It’s a particular crime, considering how Mexican food—especially the high-end kind—has swept the globe in recent years. One chef, in particular, has paid attention to Mier’s efforts. René Redzepi, of Noma in Copenhagen, heard about his work and tapped him to give a presentation to Redzepi and his staff during his pop-up in Tulum in late spring 2017. Mier says that the kitchen staffs he meets hardly ever know how to make fresh tortillas, much less about different heirloom corn varieties. Ever the optimist, he never fails to be amazed.

Mier doesn’t have any ready-made solutions on hand. His goal is to let people know that their heritage is in danger, and he expects that from there people will begin to change their habits. He would love to see seed catalogs, like there are in the United States, and dreams of starting one. He wants to connect small farmers and chefs in the hope of creating a supply chain based on seasonality and suitability. As of August 2017 the Mexican government approved Mier’s foundation status, which means Organización Tortilla de Maíz Mexicana will be able to receive donations and grants. And he was eventually able to find the popcorn seed he needed from a farmer in Mexico state. After planting, it will be part of his 2017 personal harvest as well as, he believes, the first harvest of this variety in 60 years. He is also encouraged by one particular recent victory for agricultural activists: [A 2013 lawsuit filed against Monsanto](#) was upheld in Mexican court in January 2017. For now it bans the company from planting GMO corn, though such corn enters the food system anyway due to American imports.

While driving, we pass a building with “100% elote” painted on its wall, so we stop. As Mier samples the owner’s tamales, he chats with her about how she makes them and goes back for seconds. He is satisfied that she used only corn, though he knows it is either the standardized white corn or imported American corn. I get the sense that half of his excitement is due to the fact that he knows something she doesn’t: that as good as her tamales are, one day he’ll



suitcases, reminding Mexicans of their birthright one ear of corn at a time.

Originally published at [Roads & Kingdoms](#) on Sep. 2, 2017.

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