SABOR!

THIS IS MEXICAN FOOD

Summer 2017 / Vol I

WHEN MONEY GREW IN TREES

Cocoa as currency in ancient Mexico.

Unlike any other seed in the history of Mesoamerica, cocoa beans rose to become the most desired edible commodity in the Mayan courts, equally valued as a sacred plant, an object of desire and the unforeseen star of the complex economic system during Mexico's colonial period.

Tributes paid to the Aztec Empire, including 200 loads of cacao. Mendoza Codex 1535. (oppisite) Cacao Tree and Cocoa Pod F. E. Guerin, 1833. Public Domain.

The great civilizations that flourished in Mesoamerica shared many similarities with other great emerging cultures of the time as they transitioned from nomadic to sedentary cultures. The exchange of man-made products such as weapons, clothes, and tools along with gathered fruits, vegetables and hunted animals were the basis for the development of primitive economic systems. Each item was assigned a value based on supply and demand and the price of each item was negotiated until those bartering agreed to a fair exchange.

For centuries, this basic system of bartering prevailed without much change. However, as the City States which ruled the territory in pre-Columbian Mexico and Central America grew, and the volume of exchanged products went from individual items to thousands of units, a more effective way to perform these transactions was needed. The problem lay in the system's inability to cope with the vast increase in the smaller number of transactions that had to take place as the city states become larger and more complex. In many other parts of the world this problem was solved by the development of currency - coins were created from precious metals - creating a more flexible economy where goods and services could be bought and sold. This is a concept with which we are only all too familiar!

However, such a system did not develop in Mesoamerica for a number of reasons, chief among them being that precious metals were generally more abundant than in other parts of the world, so their use as currency was limited as a result.

(3)

(7)

(7)

(7)

(8)

Chocolate tamales preparation. (above, opposite) © R. Carvajal 2017.

Moles aren't exclusive to one specific Mexican region, but perhaps more than any other recipe, that from the city of Puebla has been most widely mentioned in many historical documents. Several of these date back to the 17th century, when the cloistered nuns of the Santa Rosa nunnery specially prepared a lavish mole to mark the visit of the Viceroy Tomás Antonio de la Serna y Aragón. Although there isn't a surviving recipe from that event, the proud culinary tradition of Puebla has plenty historical sources from which a very similar mole with equal complexity has been reproduced ever since.

Mole ingredients (opposite) Grinding Stone and mole ingredients (this page) © R. Carvajal 2017.

Chilled chocolate (opposite) Bottom of chocolate jícara. © R. Carvajal 2017.

AZTEC CHOCOLATE

Recipe

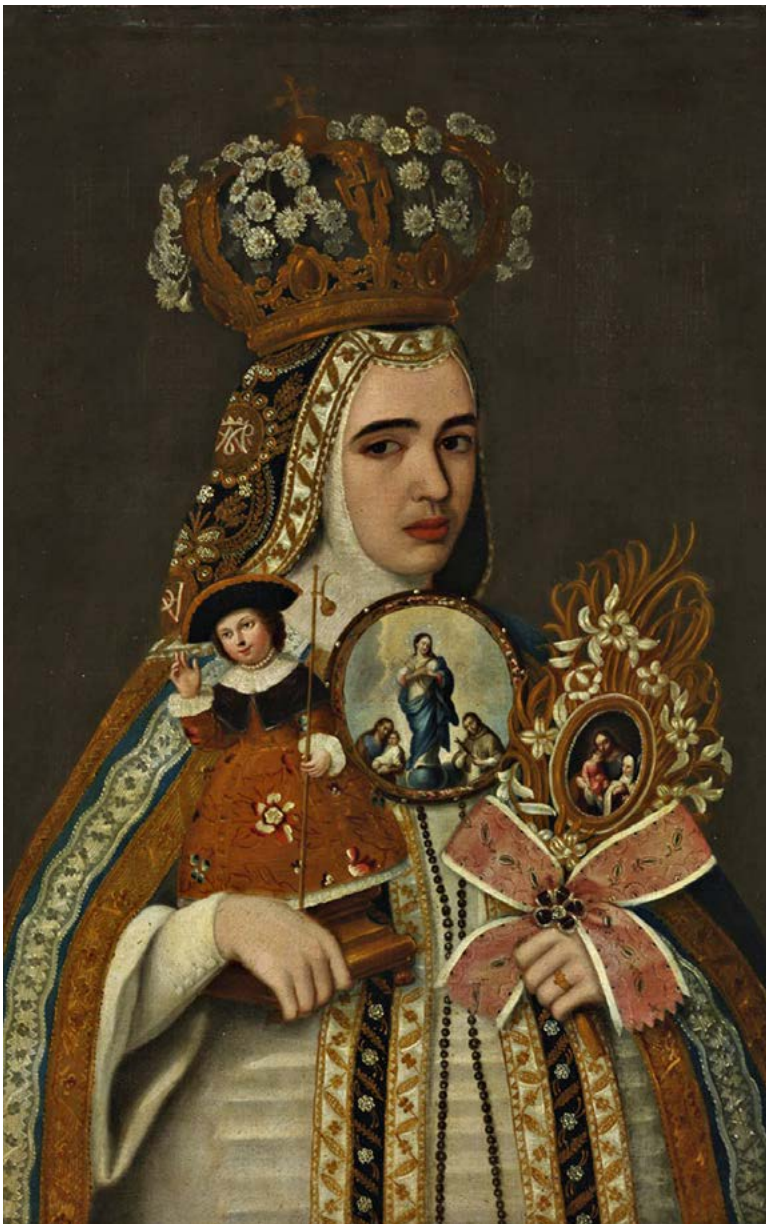
The following recipe is based on a complex range of research to uncover the preparation methods of this exquisite and historical treat.

Ancho chilies. (opposite) Aztec chocolate. © R. Carvajal 2017. Cocoa Tree. Tudela Codex. (opposite) Public Domain.

Very often history tends to focus on the big stories of the grand civilizations and the events that determined the rise to power of individuals, countries or empires. Sometimes, though, in our rush to cover the big stories, the smaller, more accessible and interesting subjects are overlooked. This is very much one of those stories.

The Aztec, or Mexica, empire was at its prime when the Spanish conquest of the Americas took place, but before the Aztec civilization dominated Mesoamerica, many other truly unique civilisations rose and fell, leaving behind a wide range of majestic relics - pyramids, murals, objects and sometimes even traditions left behind as part of their cultural footprint.

The mighty Maya kingdoms ruled the Caribbean peninsula and almost all of Central America, and although most of their culture was rapidly disappearing as their civilization collapsed, the surviving city-states still exercised a profound influence over some of the emerging powers in the remote central high planes of Mexico. Some of this influence can still be felt today, and when it comes to gastronomic traditions, chocolate is the most recognisable Mayan legacy that we enjoy today. While the Mayan recipes changed, the Mexica culture and other tribes embraced both the religious and secular aspects of the preparation and enjoyment of drinking chocolate, adding their own perspective in the process. The following recipe is based on complex research work undertaken to trace the historic origins and preparation methods of this exquisite indulgence.



This cultural exchange, which happened through a combination of force and necessity, found in the colonial kitchen an unexpected space of negotiation and cooperation, rather than conflict. Combinations that once might have seemed outrageous or exotic became a useful metaphor for the unavoidable cultural integration that was happening in New Spain at the time. The particular case of drinking chocolate is one such example. Already a well-established cultural institution amongst the ruling classes in Mesoamerica, it rapidly became the drink of choice of the colonial elites.

Chocolatl, or kakau, which were usually heavily spiced and served as a cold drink were subject to major culinary transformations when the drink was appropriated by the Spanish. The most radical change was that it was no longer considered as a cold but as a hot beverage, and although it is unknown who, when it happened, or how cow's milk replaced water, it couldn't be denied that it added a creamy and rich texture that was further enhanced by the addition of sugar, which replaced honey and agave syrup. In another change, annatto and chilies were left out of the new interpretations of the traditional recipes and cinnamon and vanilla were used instead.

Portrait of M. Maria Anna Josefa de Sr. Sn. Ignacio. 1795. (top left)
Casta Painting. De mulato y española sale morisco. (top right) Public Domain.
Santa Rosa Nunnery Kitchen. (opposite) © R. Carvajal 2017.

Many Mexican culinary traditions combine the use of pre-Columbian and Spanish cooking techniques, ingredients and tools. For instance, the recipes for preparing of drinking chocolate actually requires the use of Mexican, European, Asian and Middle Eastern ingredients including cocoa, milk, cinnamon and sugar. In many ways, then, chocolate is very much a unique reflection of the global trade of the 16th century. Water and milk are the liquids most commonly used to prepare drinking chocolate in Mexico. Using water will produce a lighter and slightly bitter drink, while milk produces a much creamier, sweeter and richer chocolate.

When it comes to the preparation, presentation, and pairing of the drink, however, there are three other fundamental aspects to consider when making chocolate: it is commonly expected that it be prepared and served immediately while still hot, it should have a thick foam, and it is invariably presented with an array of pastries regardless of whether it is served as part of a breakfast, brunch, dinner or an evening pick-me-up called merienda – the Mexican equivalent of afternoon tea.

Served hot chocolate (opposite) Molinillo installation. MUCHO chocolate museum, Mexico.