

“Mexican Cuisine”

Mexican cuisine is a style of food that originates in Mexico. It is known for its varied flavors, colorful decoration, and variety of spices and ingredients, many of which are native to the country. The cuisine of Mexico has evolved through the centuries through a blending of indigenous and European elements since the 16th century. In November 2010 Mexican cuisine was added by UNESCO to its lists of the world's "intangible cultural heritage".

Elements:

The staples of Mexican cuisine are typically corn and beans. Corn is used to make masa, dough for tamales, tortillas, gorditas, and many other corn-based foods. Corn is also eaten fresh, as corn on the cob and as a component of a number of dishes. Squash and peppers are also prominent in Mexican cuisine.

The most frequently used herbs and spices in Mexican cuisine are chili powder, oregano, cilantro, epazote, cinnamon, and cocoa. Chipotle, a smoke-dried jalapeño chilli, is also common in Mexican cuisine. Many Mexican dishes also contain garlic and onions.

Next to corn, rice is the most common grain in Mexican cuisine. According to food writer Karen Hursh Graber, the initial introduction of rice to Spain from North Africa in the 4th century led to the Spanish introduction of rice into Mexico at the port of Veracruz in the 1520s. This, Graber says, created one of the earliest instances of the world's greatest fusion cuisines.

“Geography of Mexico”

The **geography of Mexico** entails the physical and human geography of Mexico, a country situated in the Americas. Mexico is located at about 23° N and 102° W in the southern portion of North America. It is also located in a region known as Middle America. From its farthest land points, Mexico is a little over 3,200 km (2,000 miles) in length. Mexico is bounded to the north by the United States (specifically, from west to east, by California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas), to the west and south by the Pacific Ocean, to the east by the Gulf of Mexico, and to the southeast by Belize, Guatemala, and the Caribbean Sea. The northernmost constituent of Latin America, it is the most populous Spanish-speaking country in the world.

Almost all of Mexico is on the North American Plate, with small parts of the Baja California Peninsula in the northwest on the Pacific and Cocos Plates. Some geographers include the portion east of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec including the Yucatán Peninsula within North America. This portion includes the five states of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán, representing 12.1% of the country's total area. Alternatively, the Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt may be said to delimit the region physiographically on the north. Geopolitically, Mexico is generally not considered part of Central America. Politically, Mexico is divided into thirty-one states and a federal district, which serves as the national capital.

As well as numerous neighbouring islands, Mexican territory includes the more remote Isla Guadalupe and the Islas Revillagigedo in the Pacific Ocean. Mexico's total area covers 1,972,550 square kilometers, including approximately 6,000 square kilometers of islands in the Pacific Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean Sea, and Gulf of California (see the map.) On its north, Mexico shares a 5000-kilometer border with the United States. The meandering Río Bravo del Norte (known as the Rio Grande in the United States) defines the border from Ciudad Juárez east to the Gulf of Mexico. A series of natural and artificial markers delineate the United States-Mexican border west from Ciudad Juárez to the Pacific Ocean. On its south, Mexico shares an 871 kilometer border with Guatemala and a 251-kilometer border with Belize.

Mexico has a 9,330 kilometer coastline, of which 7,338 kilometers face the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of California, and the remaining 2,805 kilometers front the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. Mexico's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which extends 200 nautical miles (370 km) off each coast, covers approximately 2.7 million square kilometers. The landmass of Mexico dramatically narrows as it moves in a southeasterly direction from the United States border and then abruptly curves northward before ending in the 500-kilometer-long Yucatán Peninsula. Indeed, the state capital of Yucatán, Mérida, is farther north than Mexico City or Guadalajara.

“Culture”

Mexican culture reflects the complexity of the country's history through the blending of pre-Hispanic civilizations and the culture of Spain, imparted during Spain's 300-year colonization of Mexico. Exogenous cultural elements mainly from the United States have been incorporated into Mexican culture.

The Porfirian era (*el Porfiriato*), in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, was marked by economic progress and peace. After four decades of civil unrest and war, Mexico saw the development of philosophy and the arts, promoted by President Díaz himself. Since that time, as accentuated during the Mexican Revolution, cultural identity has had its foundation in the *mestizaje*, of which the indigenous (i.e. Amerindian) element is the core. In light of the various ethnicities that formed the Mexican people, José Vasconcelos in his publication *La Raza Cósmica* (The Cosmic Race) (1925) defined Mexico to be the melting pot of all races (thus extending the definition of the *mestizo*) not only biologically but culturally as well.^[214] This exalting of *mestizaje* was a revolutionary idea that sharply contrasted with the idea of a superior pure race prevalent in Europe at the time.

Language

Mexico is the most populous Spanish-speaking country in the world. The overwhelming majority of Mexicans today speak Spanish, however, the government recognizes 62 indigenous Amerindian languages as national languages. Some Spanish vocabulary in Mexico has roots in the country's indigenous languages, which are spoken by approximately 6% of the population.^[2] Some indigenous Mexican words are common in English. For example, words such as tomato, chocolate, coyote, and avocado are Nahuatl in origin.

National holidays

Mexicans celebrate their independence from Spain on September 16, and other holidays with colorful festivals known as "Fiestas". Many Mexican cities, towns and villages hold a yearly festival to commemorate their local patron saints. During these festivities, the people pray and burn candles to honor their saints in churches decorated with flowers and colorful utensils. They also hold large parades, fireworks, dance competitions, beauty pageant contest, party and buy refreshments in the market places and public squares. In the smaller towns and villages, soccer, and boxing are also celebrated during the festivities.

Other festivities include Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe ("Guadalupe Day"), Las Posadas ("The Shelters", celebrated on December 16 to December 24), Noche Buena ("Holy Night", celebrated on December 24), Navidad ("Christmas", celebrated on December 25) and Año Nuevo ("New Years Day", celebrated on December 31 to January 1). "Guadalupe Day" is regarded by many Mexicans as the most important religious holiday of their country. It honours the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, which is celebrated on December 12. In the last decade, all the celebrations happening from mid December to the beginning of January have been linked together in what has been called the Guadalupe-Reyes Marathon.

Piñatas are unique to Mexican celebrations. A pinata is made from papier-mache. It is created to look like popular people, animals, or fictional characters. Once made it is painted with bright colors and filled with candy or small toys. It is then hung from the ceiling. The children are blind folded and take turns hitting the piñata until it breaks open and the candy and small toys fall out. The children then gather the candy and small toys.

Cuisine

Mexican cuisine is known for its blending of Indigenous and European cultures. Popular dishes include tacos, enchiladas, mole sauce, atole, tamales, pozole and burritos. Traditionally the main Mexican ingredients consisted of maize, beans, chicken, pork, beef, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, chilies, Habenero peppers, Naga Jolokia peppers (Ghost chili) (the hottest/spiciest pepper in the world), onions, nuts, avocados and guavas. Popular beverages include water flavored with a variety of fruit juices, and cinnamon-flavored hot chocolate prepared with milk or water and blended until it becomes frothed using a traditional wooden tool called a *molinillo*. Alcoholic beverages native to Mexico include mescal, pulque, and tequila. Mexican-produced beers are also popular in Mexico and are exported. There are international award-winning Mexican wineries that produce and export wine.^[8]

The most important and frequently used Spices in Mexican Cuisine are chili powder, cumin, oregano, cilantro, epazote, cinnamon, and cocoa. Chipotle, a smoked-dried Jalapeño pepper, is also common in Mexican Cuisine. Many Mexican dishes also contain onions and garlic, which are also some of Mexico's staple foods.

Next to corn, rice is the most common grain in Mexican Cuisine. According to food writer Karen Hursh Graber, the initial introduction of Rice to Spain from North Africa in the 4th century led to the Spanish introduction of Rice to Mexico at the port of Veracruz in the 1520s. This, Graber says, created one of the earliest instances of the world's greatest fusion Cuisine's

On the other hand, in Southeastern Mexico, especially in the Yucatán, is known for their spicy vegetable and meat dishes. The Cuisine of Southeastern Mexico has quite a bit of Caribbean influence, given its geographical location. Seafood is commonly prepared in the states that border the Pacific Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico, the latter having a famous reputation for its fish dishes, *à la veracruzana*.

In modern times, other cuisines of the world have become very popular in Mexico, thus adopting a Mexican fusion. For example, sushi in Mexico is often made by using a variety of sauces based on mango and tamarind, and very often served with serrano-chili-blended soy sauce, or complemented with vinegar, Habenero peppers and Chipotle peppers.

Chocolate originated in Mexico, especially by the Aztecs, and it's now used in Mexican cooking, especially in Mexican desserts.

“History of Mexican Cuisine”

Conquistadores arrived in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), they found that the people's diet consisted largely of corn-based dishes with chiles and herbs, usually complemented with beans and tomatoes or nopales.^[3] The diet of the indigenous peoples of pre-Columbian Mexico also included chocolate, vanilla, tomatillos, avocado, guava, papaya, sapote, mamey, pineapple, soursop, jicama, squash, sweet potato, peanuts, achiote, huitlacoche, turkey and fish. In the 1520s, while Spanish conquistadors were invading Mexico, they introduced a variety of animals, including cattle, chickens, goats, sheep, and pigs. Rice, wheat, and barley were also introduced as were olive oil, wine, almonds, parsley, and many spices. The imported Spanish cuisine was eventually incorporated into the indigenous cuisine.

Chocolate played an important part in the history of Mexican cuisine. The word "chocolate" originates in Mexico's Aztec cuisine, derived from the Nahuatl word *xocolatl*. Chocolate was first drunk rather than eaten. It was used as currency and for religious rituals. In the past, the Maya civilization grew cacao trees and used the cacao seeds it produced to make a frothy, bitter drink. The drink, called *xocoatl*, was often flavored with vanilla, chili pepper, and achiote (also known as annatto). Chocolate was also an important luxury good throughout pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and cacao beans were often used as currency. For example, the Aztecs used a system in which one turkey cost one hundred cacao beans and one fresh avocado was worth three beans; and all of the areas that were conquered by the Aztecs that grew cacao beans were ordered to pay them as a tax, or as the Aztecs called it, a "tribute". Today chocolate is used in a wide array of Mexican foods, from savory dishes such as mole to traditional Mexican style hot chocolate and champurrados, both of which are prepared with a molinillo.

Regional Cuisine

Mexican food varies by region because of Mexico's large size, local climate and geography, ethnic differences among the indigenous inhabitants and because these different populations were influenced by the Spaniards in varying degrees.^[citation needed] The north of Mexico is known for its beef, goat and ostrich production and meat dishes, in particular the well-known arrachera cut. The staples of Mexican cuisine are typically corn and beans. Corn is used to make masa, a dough for tamales, tortillas, gorditas, and many other corn-based foods. Corn is also eaten fresh, as corn on the cob and as a component of a number of dishes. Squash and peppers also prominent in Mexican cuisine. Honey is an important ingredient in many Mexican dishes, such as the *rosca de miel*, a bundt-like cake, and in beverages such as *balché*.

Mexico's six regions differ greatly in their cuisines. In the Yucatán, for example, a unique, natural sweetness (instead of spiciness) exists in the widely used local produce along with significant use of achiote seasoning. In contrast, the Oaxacan region is known for its savory tamales, celebratory moles, and simple tlayudas, while the mountainous regions of the West (Jalisco, etc.) are known for goat birria (goat in a spicy tomato-based sauce).

Central Mexico's cuisine is largely influenced by the rest of the country, but has unique and tasty dishes such as pozole, menudo, barbacoa and carnitas.

Southeastern Mexico is known for its spicy vegetable and chicken-based dishes. The cuisine of Southeastern Mexico has a considerable Caribbean influence due to its location. Seafood is commonly prepared in states that border the Pacific Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico, the latter having a famous reputation for its fish dishes, *à la veracruzana*.

In pueblos or villages, there are also more exotic dishes, cooked in the Aztec or Mayan style (known as *comida prehispánica*) with ingredients ranging from iguana to rattlesnake, deer, spider monkey, chapulines, ant eggs, and other kinds of insects.

Modern Cuisine

Recently other cuisines of the world have acquired popularity in Mexico, thus adopting a Mexican fusion. For example, sushi in Mexico is often made with a variety of sauces based on mango or tamarind, and very often served with serrano-chili-blended soy sauce, or complimented with habanero and chipotle peppers.

Immigration of Middle Easterns, Africans, Asians, and Europeans in Mexico has influenced Mexican culture. For example, Spanish rice, Dates, Tacos Árabes and Dolma have their origins in Arab cuisine.

Mexican Cuisine Outside of Mexico

Mexican food is widely available north of the U.S.-Mexico border. Cultural influences left from Spanish colonization of the Southwest and California remain not only in the names of places but also in the ingredients in cooking; these influences are strongly reinforced today by their proximity to northern Mexican states like Sonora, Baja California, and Chihuahua. Prickly pears (often made into jams) are as popular a food north of the border as they are south. Ingredients common to both sides include chili peppers (the genus 'capsicum'), maize, beans, tomatoes, tortillas, tequila, and beef (both areas have a strong tradition of cattle ranching). However, there is an increasing American influence the farther one is away from Mexico, resulting in variations such as Tex-Mex cuisine. For example, the chimichanga, a deep-fried burrito, is a Mexican-inspired dish popular in the United States.

In most regions of Mexico, it is very unusual to put cheese in tacos or tostadas (unless it is the typically Mexican panela cheese). However, in southern Mexico, it is common to use cheese in both tacos and tostadas and in other Mexican dishes such as picadas and enchiladas.

While Mexican restaurants can be found in many towns throughout North America, and in many cities around the world, restaurants outside the American Southwest often feature nontraditional ingredients, such as grated American-style cheese, "nacho" cheese or tomato-based sauce substitutes for Mexican chile-based sauces or mole. The four states bordering Mexico (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California), and the other southwest states such as Colorado, Nevada, and Utah have large expatriate Mexican populations, which in effect has produced a wide variety of authentic Mexican restaurants. In other areas of the United States and Canada, Mexican dishes and restaurants vary as much as Chinese restaurants and dishes do between China and many locations in the western hemisphere.

“Culinary Influences”

Mexican food is one of the popular cuisines of the world with the famous Mexican tacos, nachos or the enchiladas - Mexican gastronomical delights have titillated the taste buds of food-lovers all over the world. Popular Mexican dishes are now available in multi-cuisine restaurants across the globe. However the Mexican cuisine is much more than the popular spicy salsa and the refreshing guacamole. Here is an attempt to fathom the various culinary influences that have led to the emergence of a rich and colorful cuisine.

Mexican Food History: Culinary Influences on the Mexican Cuisines

Mexican cuisine has a wide variety of influences owing to the colonization in the earlier period and later owing to the trade functions between people from various countries and colonies. The Mexican cuisine is thus a resultant of several, diverse culinary influences and hence is a concoction of diverse cooking styles and ingredients in various cultures.

Mayan Influence on the Mexican cuisine: *Comida Prehispánica*

One of the earliest influences on the Mexican food was the culinary influence of the Mayan Indians who were traditionally nomadic hunters and gatherers. The Mayan Indians lived in the Yucatan area in Southeast Mexico. Owing to the fact that the Mayan Indians were hunters, their food basically included wildlife animals like raccoons, deer, rabbits, armadillos, rattle snakes, iguanas, spider monkeys, pigeons, turtles, frogs, turkeys and even several insects. Other accompaniments included tropical fruits, beans and corn. Although some of the influences are still retained, this kind of food in the Mexican cuisine is now known as pre-Hispanic cuisine or *comida prehispánica*, which is considered to be a rather exotic cuisine in Mexico.

Mexican Cuisine in the Pre- Columbian Era

Yo soy como el chile verde, picante pero sabroso ...(I am like the green chile, hot but tasty)

These are the lines borrowed from a famous folk song of Mexico. These lines very accurately describe the Mexican cuisine of the Pre-Columbian period. Before the influence of Europe, Mexican diet was quite simple and was limited to the locally grown agricultural products, especially corn, chilies and beans. Corn was the most popular and most widely used ingredient in the Mexican cuisine in this pre-Columbian period. Some of the popular cooking methods for consumption of corn were corn tortillas and tamales, which included the inclusion of corn into various, flour preparations. In addition to this these corn products were often complemented with ingredients like tomatoes and chilies. Early Mexican cuisine also included a wide variety of herbs and mushrooms as well.

Spanish Influence on the Mexican Cuisine

The Spanish invasion in 1521, there was a prominent Spanish influence on the Mexican food, be it in terms of the ingredients used or the cooking methods. When the Spanish soldiers, arrived in the Aztec capital *Tenochtitlan*, they found that the people's diet consisted largely of corn-based dishes with chilies and herbs which was usually accompanied by beans and tomatoes. The soldiers eventually combined their imported diet of rice, beef, pork, chicken, wine, garlic and onions with the native foods of pre-Columbian Mexico which included tomatoes, beans, chocolate, maize, vanilla, avocado, papaya, pineapple, chili peppers, squash, sweet potato, peanut, fish and turkey. Spanish influences lead to the emergence of dishes such as *lomo en adobo* (pork loin in a spicy sauce), *chile rellenos* (large, mild-flavored chilies stuffed with cheese, beef or pork), the *quesadillas* or the very popular *guacamole* which have been a part of the traditional Mexican food ever since.

French Influence on Mexican Cuisine: *La Comida Afrancescada*

When the French occupied Mexico, they introduced a wide variety of baked goods in the Mexican cuisine. The Mexican sweet breads and *bolillo* are some of the examples of French influences on the Mexican cuisine. It is believed that the French cooking techniques and the Mexican ingredients made an excellent gastronomic combination. Native Mexican ingredients like squash blossoms, and avocados were just perfect for the French style mousses, crepes and soups. The empire of *Maximilian* and the presidency of *Porfirio Díaz* were influential in promoting the French style of cooking in the Mexican cuisine. An interesting find about the French influence on Mexican cuisine is a menu dated March 29, 1865, which is written in French. It includes a five course meal including two soups, five fish and shellfish dishes, five meat dishes and side dishes, desserts, champagne and French, Hungarian and even Rhenish wines.

Other Minor Influences on the Mexican Cuisine

In due course of time, the Mexican cuisine experienced a wide range of culinary experiences starting from the Caribbean, the South American, the West African as well as the Portuguese, which led to the emergence of a highly diverse cooking style which also varied from region to region. The Mexican cuisine also has a minor Filipino influence owing to the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade from 1565 to 1815.

Popularity of Mexican Cuisine in America: *Tex-Mex*

The popularity of the Mexican cuisine has led to emergence of several variations of this cuisine in other countries. The Tex-Mex cuisine evolved on the Texas-Mexico in the Southwest America and is a modification of the traditional Mexican cuisine with an unusual American touch to it. One of the best examples of the Tex-Mex cuisine is the 'refried beans' which is a term that has actually been coined in Texas and is the translation of the Mexican term *Frijoles refritos*. The Tex-Mex cuisines is however quite different from the original Mexican cuisine although it might include the same ingredients to a certain extent. Similarly there also exists a 'New Mexican Cuisine', which is type of regional cuisine originating in the state of New Mexico in USA and in southern Colorado and is a subset of Mexican-American cuisine.

Mexican Cuisine Today

The Mexican cuisine is a blend of all the above-mentioned influences, however there still exists diversity in the cuisine according to the regional differences in Mexico. Mexican food varies by region, and is influenced by the local climate, geography and ethnic differences among the inhabitants. The northern Mexico is famous for its beef production and meat dishes, whereas southeastern Mexico, is known for its spicy vegetable and chicken-based preparations. On the other hand, seafood is commonly prepared in the states of Mexico, which border the Pacific Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico. Here is a list of some common dishes found in the authentic Mexican cuisine:

Appetizers: *Arroz Amarillo, Arroz con lima, Arroz Español* (Spanish rice), *Arroz Verde, Bolillos, Calabaza, Camote, Mexican Dry soup, sopa, Consomme, Curtido, Ensalada de fruta, Elote, Fideos, Frijoles pintos, Frijoles negros, Frijoles charros, Guacamole, Jicama, Lentejas, , Nopalitos, Frijoles Refritos Pambazos, Papas, Pico de gallo, Salsa, Yuca Cassava and Iris.*

Main Course: *Arroz con camarones, Arroz con pollo, barbacoa, birria, Bistec a la Mexicana, bistec picado, burrito, caldo(soup), carne asada, carnitas, cecina, cemitas (sandwiches), chapulines and escamoles, chilaquiles, chiles en nogada, chile rellenos, chilorio, chilpachole de jaiva, chimichangas, choriqueso, chorizo, churipo, coyotes, huaunzontles, empanadas, enchilada, gorditas, glories, huevos divorciados, machaca, mancha manteles, mole, nachos, parilladas, pozole, quesadillas, rajas con crema, tacos, tamales, taquitos, tortillas, tortas, tripas, and venado.*

“Religion”

The 2010 census by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía gave Roman Catholicism as the main religion, with 82.7% of the population, while 9.7% (10,924,103) belong to other Christian denominations, including Evangelicals (5.2%); Pentecostals (1.6%); other Protestant or Reformed (0.7%); Jehovah's Witnesses (1.4%); Seventh-day Adventists (0.6%); and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (0.3%). 172,891 (or less than 0.2% of the total) belonged to other, non-Christian religions; 4.7% declared having no religion; 2.7% were unspecified.

The 92,924,489 Catholics of Mexico constitute in absolute terms the second largest Catholic community in the world, after Brazil's. 47% percent of them attend church services weekly. Every Mexican city, town and village holds a yearly feast day to commemorate their local patron saints. The feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, is celebrated on December 12 and is regarded by many Mexicans as the most important religious holiday of their country.

The 2010 census reported 314,932 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, though the church in 2009 claimed to have over one million registered members. About 25% of registered members attend a weekly sacrament service although this can fluctuate up and down.^[210]

The presence of Jews in Mexico dates back to 1521, when Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztecs, accompanied by several Conversos. According to the 2010 census, there are 67,476 Jews in Mexico. Islam in Mexico is practiced by a small population in the city of Torreón, Coahuila, and there are an estimated 300 Muslims in the San Cristóbal de las Casas area in Chiapas. In the 2010 census 18,185 Mexicans reported belonging to an Eastern religion,¹ a category which includes a tiny Buddhist population.

“Climate”

The Tropic of Cancer effectively divides the country into temperate and tropical zones. Land north of the twenty-fourth parallel experiences cooler temperatures during the winter months. South of the twenty-fourth parallel, temperatures are fairly constant year round and vary solely as a function of elevation.

Areas south of the twentieth-fourth parallel with elevations up to 1,000 meters (3,281 ft) (the southern parts of both coastal plains as well as the Yucatán Peninsula), have a yearly median temperature between 24 and 28 °C (75.2 and 82.4 °F). Temperatures here remain high throughout the year, with only a 5 °C (9 °F) difference between winter and summer median temperatures. Although low-lying areas north of the twentieth-fourth parallel are hot and humid during the summer, they generally have lower yearly temperature averages (from 20 to 24 °C / 68 to 75.2 °F) because of more moderate conditions during the winter.

Between 1,000 and 2,000 meters (3,281 and 6,562 ft), one encounters yearly average temperatures between 16 and 20 °C (60.8 and 68 °F). Towns and cities at this elevation south of the twenty-fourth parallel have relatively constant, pleasant temperatures throughout the year, whereas more northerly locations experience sizeable seasonal variations. Above 2,000 meters (6,562 ft), temperatures drop as low as an average yearly range between 8 and 12 °C (46.4 and 53.6 °F) in the Cordillera Neovolcánica. At 2,300 meters (7,546 ft), Mexico City has a yearly median temperature of 15 °C (59 °F) with pleasant summers and mild winters. Average daily highs and lows for May, the warmest month, are 26 and 12 °C (78.8 and 53.6 °F), and average daily highs and lows for January, the coldest month, are 19 and 6 °C (66.2 and 42.8 °F).

Rainfall varies widely both by location and season. Arid or semiarid conditions are encountered in the Baja California Peninsula, the northwestern state of Sonora, the northern altiplano, and also significant portions of the southern altiplano. Rainfall in these regions averages between 300 and 600 millimeters (11.8 and 23.6 in) per year, although even less in some areas, particularly in Baja California Norte. Average rainfall totals are between 600 and 1,000 millimeters (23.6 and 39.4 in) in most of the major populated areas of the southern altiplano, including Mexico City and Guadalajara. Low-lying areas along the Gulf of Mexico receive in excess of 1,000 millimeters (39.4 in) of rainfall in an average year, with the wettest region being the southeastern state of Tabasco, which typically receives approximately 2,000 millimeters (78.7 in) of rainfall on an annual basis. Parts of the northern altiplano, highlands and high peaks in the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental occasionally receive significant snowfalls.

Mexico has pronounced wet and dry seasons. Most of the country experiences a rainy season from June to mid-October and significantly less rain during the remainder of the year. February and July generally are the driest and wettest months, respectively. Mexico City, for example, receives an average of only 5 millimeters (0.2 in) of rain during February but more than 160 millimeters (6.3 in) in July. Coastal areas, especially those along the Gulf of Mexico, experience the largest amounts of rain in September. Tabasco typically records more than 300 millimeters (11.8 in) of rain during that month. A small coastal area of northwestern coastal Mexico around Tijuana has a Mediterranean climate with considerable coastal fog and a rainy season that occurs in winter.

Mexico lies squarely within the hurricane belt, and all regions of both coasts are susceptible to these storms from June through November. Hurricanes on the Pacific coast are often less violent than those affecting Mexico's eastern coastline. Several hurricanes per year strike the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico coastline, however, and these storms bring high winds, heavy rain, extensive damage, and occasional loss of life. Hurricane Gilbert passed directly over Cancún in September 1988, with winds in excess of 200 kilometers per hour (124 mph), producing major damage to hotels in the resort area. It then struck northeast Mexico, where flooding from the heavy rain killed dozens in the Monterrey area and caused extensive damage to livestock and vegetable crops.

“Mexican Commonly Use Ingredients and Condiments”

Authentic Mexican cooking starts with ingredients that are traditionally used across the various regions of Mexico. Substitutions can of course be made or ingredients left out - the dishes will still be flavorful and tasty. But to enjoy the food as it was intended to be eaten, then you should try to get authentic ingredients. Depending on where you live, some ingredients might be easier to find than others. Luckily, there are **several internet shops** that can help out when you can't find the products locally.

This is not a comprehensive list of ingredients used in Mexican cooking, but a list of the most commonly used items. If you like to cook Mexican dishes, it might be worth your time to grow some of the fresh herbs - such as cilantro, oregano, epazote, and some chiles - at home.

- **ACHIOTE:** Reddish-orange seed of the annatto tree. It is used to season and color foods. A seasoning paste is often made from the seeds, you can use either the seeds directly (often times ground first) or the paste in your recipes. Achiote is used extensively in the Yucatán region.
- **ALLSPICE:** An aromatic spice used whole or ground to flavor many foods. In the US, it is commonly used to flavor pumpkin pies and other desserts. Allspice trees grow mainly in the states of Tabasco, Veracruz, Oaxaca and Chiapas (southern Mexico).
- **AVOCADO:** Avocados are native to Mexico and there are many varieties. One of the most commonly found in the US is the Hass variety, which is preferred due to its creamy texture and rich flavor. To ripen avocados, store at room temperature for 2 to 3 days or until barely soft when pressed lightly.
- **CANELA (CINNAMON):** Mexican name for the preferred cinnamon variety that comes from the light brown, soft bark of the true cinnamon tree native to Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon, that is why it is also known as Ceylon cinnamon) and now grown in Mexico. Canela is found ground and in sticks at Mexican stores and some supermarkets. The cinnamon commonly found in the US is a darker, more bittersweet flavoring from the cassia tree and will lend a different taste in foods.
- **CHAYOTE:** Pear-shaped pale green vegetable related to the squash. Chayotes are indigenous to Mexico and are used as a cooked vegetable just like summer squash. They are also stuffed and baked for desserts.
- **CHILES:** The generic words used for a large number of capsicum peppers - both fresh and dried - ranging from mild to extremely hot. As a rule, the smaller the chile, the more concentrated the heat. Read my article dedicated to just **chiles**.
- **CILANTRO:** Green herb also known as Chinese parsley. Cilantro has a distinctive flavor that is essential in many fresh salsas. It is popular and widely used in the US, so it should be easy to find (if you are in the US, of course).
- **CREMA:** Mexican cream that is thick and slightly sour, similar to French crème fraîche. It is used to garnish enchiladas, tacos and many snacks. You can **make crema** at home or substitute plain sour cream diluted with a little milk.
- **EPAZOTE:** Important green herb used in bean dishes, tamales, some sauces and stews. In some regions of Mexico, it is an essential flavor. It should also be available dried.
- **JICAMA:** Large root vegetable with light brown skin and white flesh, shaped like a turnip and with a crisp, sweet taste. Jicama is eaten raw, peeled and sliced, only occasionally is it used cooked.
- **MASA:** Fresh dough made of specially processed dried corn that is used to make corn tortillas, tamales, and other masa dishes. Dried masa, called **masa harina**, is dehydrated into a flour, packaged and sold in the flour section of many supermarkets.
- **NOPALES:** Paddles from the prickly pear cactus that are eaten as a vegetable throughout Mexico. The edible fruit of the plant is called a tuna. *Nopalitos* refer to the sliced cooked, cactus paddles.

- **OREGANO:** There are several herbs in the oregano family, and Mexican oregano has a generally more pronounced flavor than what is common in the US. Oregano should be crumbled or crushed before adding to recipes to release its flavor. It is found fresh and dried in many Mexican markets.
- **PAPAYA:** Fruit native to Central America and very common in Mexico. The Mexican variety is generally hand-sized with a dark green-yellow skin. The flesh is smooth pinkish-red with a rich, sweet taste. The grey-black seeds in the center are often thrown away.
- **PILONCILLO:** Unrefined sugar often found in hard cones in Mexican markets and some supermarkets. Can be grated or ground in a food processor or softened in water. Some recipes will actually call for a number of *piloncillos* to be used. Dark brown sugar can be substituted.
- **PLÁTANO MACHO, KNOWN AS PLANTAINS:** This is a cooking banana, not to be eaten raw. They are generally fried, baked or mashed. The peel is thicker than that of a sweet, yellow banana and turns nearly black when ripe.
- **SEVILLE ORANGE:** Small bitter orange important in the foods of Yucantán, Campeche and Veracruz. These oranges are hard to find in the US and can be substituted with grapefruit or orange juice mixed with lime juice.
- **TAMARINDO:** Brown pods from the tamarind tree whose contents make a tart juice used to flavor beverages, candies and sauces.
- **TOMATILLO:** Small green fruit with a papery husk that looks like a green tomato and has a tart flavor. Tomatillos are most commonly used in cooked and raw salsas and sauces throughout Mexico.
- **YUCA:** Edible root from a tropical plant that is used like potatoes, mainly in southern Mexico throughout the Yucatán peninsula. Often fried into small chips.

Agave nectar (also called **agave syrup**) is a sweetener commercially produced in Mexico and South Africa from several species of agave, including the Blue Agave (*Agave tequilana*), Salmiana Agave (*Agave salmiana*), Green Agave, Grey Agave, Thorny Agave, and Rainbow Agave. Agave nectar is sweeter than honey, though less viscous.

The majority of agave nectar around the world comes from Jalisco in Mexico and the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. However, in Mexico, the product is not exclusive from Jalisco, it is also produced in the states of Michoacán, Guanajuato and Tamaulipas.

Chamoy refers to a variety of savory sauces and condiments in Mexican cuisine made from pickled fruit. Chamoy may range from a liquid to a paste consistency, and typically its flavor is salty, sweet, sour and spiced with powdered chiles all at the same time.

Corn smut is a disease of maize caused by the pathogenic plant fungus *Ustilago maydis*. *U. maydis* causes smut disease on maize (*Zea mays*) and teosinte(*Euchlena mexicana*). Known in Mexico as **huilacoché**, it is eaten, usually as a filling in quesadillas and other tortilla-based foods.

“Mexican Cooking Equipments and Tools”

Cazuelas *Mexican Pottery Dishes*

These large clay dishes are ideal for simmering mole and other sauces because the clay heats very evenly eliminating burnt spots. Cazuelas are shallow, usually 5-7 inches deep and rounded like a bowl. They often have handles for easier handling over open fire. The outsides are sometimes painted with bright beautiful colors. The inside is glazed and the clay imparts a wonderful flavor to the dish.

Barro or Olla *Mexican Pottery Pots*

Barro literally means "mud" but generally means "clay," and olla means "pot." Ollas are large, deep clay pots perfect for simmering beans, stews and soups. The clay heats evenly and is perfect for all-day cooking over a direct flame. The clay can be fragile and sensitive to quick temperature changes. Cooking in the clay pots imparts an earthy flavor to the dish.

Comal *Griddle*

A large round griddle usually made of clay, aluminum or cast iron but the more modern ones usually have a non-stick finish. They are used to warm tortillas, and roast chiles and vegetables. They can range in size from a large dinner plate to 2 feet in diameter.

Metate y Mano *Hand Grinder*

A large tool usually made of stone or lava rock. It consists of a large stone surface, slightly concave, sitting on 3 short legs. It is usually about the size of a large, rectangular platter. There is a large cylinder of stone that is rolled on the surface to grind or mix the items placed on it. Sometimes the legs are longer, allowing the user to sit in front of it.

Molcajete y Tejolote *Mortar and Pestle*

A small wood, stone or clay bowl with an elongated cylinder of the same material that is rounded on each end. A small amount of spices or food is placed in the bowl and the end of the cylinder is used to smash the item against the sides of the bowl in a circular motion to pulverize it.

Molinillo *Wooden Whisk or Stirrer*

A cylinder of wood that is spun between the hands in a cup of hot chocolate to produce a foam on the top. They can be simple or highly decorated. T

Tortillero *Tortilla Press*

Originally made from wood, they are also made of cast iron. It consists of two large round plates or blocks of wood that you place a ball of masa and press together to form a tortilla. You may run across aluminum versions but they tend to break.

“Methods Used in Authentic Mexican Cooking”

In many ways, the cooking methods of Mexico are very similar to ones you use everyday. Common ones include frying, grilling and boiling. However, use of the molcajete or a steaming bucket may be new to you.

Early Methods

Mexican natives did not have ovens so everything was heated over an open fire. They used cast iron pots and pans and also ceramic ware. Today, you can get a similar result by using a grill instead of your oven.

Another method used was steaming. Barbacoawas made by steaming meat suspended over boiling water in a deep pit. The meat was often wrapped in cactus or banana leaves.

Frying was also a popular method of cooking. Tasty items like taquitos, flautas and chimichangas are a few examples of this method.

Natives also used a "metate y mano," a large tool made of stone or lava rock. It has slightly concave surface on which you can use the grinding stone to grind or mash your ingredients. They also used a smaller "molcajete" (mortar and pestle) to grind and mash.

Modern Methods

A lot of Mexican dishes are now much easier to prepare with modern conveniences. Previously, if you wanted tamales you would have to start by grinding dried corn with your "molcajete." Now you can buy masa (cooked, ground corn) by the bag into which you can quickly add in your other ingredients.

Today there are cast iron pans that make it easy to make homemade tortillas. They have a round top and bottom piece that you can press together to make perfect tortillas every time. There are also springform type pans that make flan as easy as pie. A modern metal grinder aides in grinding corn for masa.

You can use a dutch oven to replicate the process of steaming barbacoa and Birria.

Grilling

Grilling also enhances the flavors in Mexican dishes by bringing out the authentic tastes that used to come from cooking over an open fire. Carne Asada is superb when grilled as are fajitas. Almost any decent cut of meat can be marinated in Mexican flavors and grilled to bring out the warm smoky tastes.

On the Stove

Boiling or simmering is a great way of cooking meats and vegetables. Just place your meat and/or veggies into a large pot with broth or water and plenty of spices. Let it simmer all day and by dinner time the meat will be tender and fall apart. It is a perfect method for shredded beef tacos or carnitas. Large steaming pots or buckets are now available for making tamales. They cook a large amount of tamales at one time and the steaming adds moisture to the masa. And last but not least, wooden spoons are the traditional method of stirring the contents of a pot. Large cupped ones are used for stirring large pots of stew, and slim ones for sautéing garlic and onions.

“Mexican Staple and Traditional Food”

Real Mexican food is quite unlike the dishes found in most Mexican and Tex-Mex restaurants in other countries. In tourist areas you'll find restaurants with familiar names and *gringo* menus, though the offerings will often be over-priced and not of a high standard.

T h e b a s i c s

Tortillas

The staple food of generations of ordinary Mexicans, tortillas can be made of flour (more common in the north) or maize (the traditional method and still the most common in the south). Often served alongside a meal as bread would be, tortillas are also used in many typical dishes – rolled and baked for enchiladas, fried for tacos or grilled for quesadillas.

Frijoles (beans)

A good source of protein, beans of different varieties are most commonly boiled and then fried. They can be a main ingredient in a meal or served almost as a garnish.

Chilies

In general, the bigger the chili, the milder the flavor. Large Poblano chilies are stuffed and served as a main course, the small haba ero is ferociously hot. To ask if a dish is spicy, say " es picante?" – though hotel menus will often specify dishes that might offend tourist palates.

Guacamole

Avocado mashed with onions, chilies and cilantro (coriander). Served as a dip or as a garnish.

Salsa

A salsa is actually just a sauce, although it is most commonly associated with the red or green mix of tomatoes, onion, chili and cilantro (coriander) served on your table as a relish or a dip. Beware of ‘salsa haba ero’ in innocuous bottles like small jars of ketchup, and always try just a little salsa first as a precaution.

Tequila

This infamous spirit is most commonly served to tourists in the form of a margarita – mixed with lime juice in salt-rimmed glasses. It is actually derived from the maguey plant – a spiky bush often seen growing in fields. Mezcal is a cruder form of Tequila traditionally served with a worm in the bottle – the worm should be eaten when the bottle is finished!

Cerveza

Mexican beers are now known all over the world. Corona, Sol and Dos Equis are common brands, usually served cold and a very refreshing alternative to iced drinks.

Typical dishes

Ceviche

Raw fish marinated in lime juice, often in a chopped salad.

Chiles Renellos

Large Poblano chilies stuffed with cheese or spicy meat (picadillo). The chilies are mild, though the sauce may not be.

Enchiladas

Tortillas coated in a tomato and chili sauce, stuffed with vegetables, chicken or pork then folded and baked. Despite the chili content, enchiladas are often fairly mild. Enchiladas suizas are topped with sour cream.

Huachinango

Red Snapper, a common feature on the menus at coastal resorts. Often available ‘al gusto’, cooked in a choice of methods.

Quesadillas

Tortillas stuffed with cheese, folded and grilled. A simple dish often served with beans or a little salad and suitable for those avoiding anything spicy.

Mole sauce

A wonderful rich sauce made with the unlikely combination of chocolate, chilies and many spices. It can be red or green depending on the ingredients and the moles of Puebla and Oaxaca are particularly famous, hence ‘mole poblano’ or ‘mole oaxaqueño’. The sauce is often served over chicken, though turkey is more traditional.

Pipían sauce

Another of Oaxaca’s specialties, pipían sauce is green and made from pumpkin seeds. It is often served over chicken.

Poc Chuc

Another Yucatecan specialty, where pork fillet is cooked with tomatoes, onions and spices.

Pollo Pibil

A Yucatecan specialty, not often found outside this region. It traditionally consists of chicken marinated in orange and spices then barbecued in banana leaves.

Tacos

Tortillas fried until they are crispy and served with various fillings.

Tamales

Cornmeal paste wrapped in corn or banana husks and often stuffed with chicken, pork or turkey and/or vegetables, then steamed.

Tortas

Mexican sandwiches, often large rolls with generous fillings.

Tostadas

Thin and crisp tortillas served loaded with guacamole, sour cream, chilies, chicken etc.

A t b r e a k f a s t

Continental breakfast or 'American' bacon or ham and eggs are often available. Mexicans often have just coffee and sweet rolls first thing in the morning with a more substantial meal around 11am, but many of the options below could feature on your breakfast menu. Egg dishes are popular and very tasty, often served with beans.

Plato de Frutas

Mixed fruit plate, perhaps including banana, mangoes, melon, or papaya.

Chilaquiles

Tortillas stir fried with onions, spices and maybe chicken, topped with cheese and served with a sort of gravy.

Huevos Rancheros

Scrambled eggs, often served with bacon (con tocino) or ham (con jamón).

Huevos Motuleños

Fried eggs on tortillas, covered with a sauce of tomatoes, chilies, peas and ham. Topped with cheese and served with refried beans.

S a f e o p t i o n s

To Mexican food that aren't too spicy:

- Quesadillas
- Enchiladas (usually)
- Plain fish dishes
- Tostadas (check the ingredients)
- Beans and rice
- Tortas (check the fillings)

“Mexican Famous Food and Delicacies”

“Starter Foods”

For those who want to take it slow with the spices, here are some not too spicy food you can try:

- Quesadillas
- Tortillos with grilled cheese or other fillings
- Enchiladas Tortillas with a tomato and chili sauce coating and stuffings – chicken or pork, vegetables, and sauce. The tortilla is folded and then baked.
- Tostadas
- Soft tortillas filled with meat and green, red or mole sauce. Cheese may be an added ingredient.
- Tamales
- Meat or vegetables stuffed in a corn dough shell. Sometimes, fruits and nuts are used as fillings – these are called tamales dulces.
- Tortas: A sandwich with meat, lettuce, mayonnaise, tomatoes, onion, jalapeño and avocado.

Of course, it is best to check the ingredients if chili is included. For those who want their chilis on the mild side, here's the tip: the bigger the chili, the milder it gets. Large *poblano* chilies are stuffed and served as a main course, while the small *habañero* pepper is ferociously hot. To ask if a dish is spicy, say "es picante?" Hotel menus will often specify spicy dishes that might assault tourist palates.

Popular Mexican Food

Here are some dishes you must try when in Mexico

- **Guacamole**
A sauce made with crushed avocado, green chili, tomato, onion and lemon juice. Fried tortilla slices are also included.
- **Tacos Tortillas**
Served with various fillings – meat, chicken, shredded pork, tongue, meat from the cow skull (cabeza), or cow brains. Now that's not you standard issue taco, is it?
- **Gorditas**
Corn patty with stuffing, such as chicken, cheese and chicharon. It is topped with cheese, cream and hot sauce.
- **Pozole**
Broth from chick or pork with corn, lettuce, oregano, onions, dried ground chili, lemon juice and radish.

- **Carnitas**
Pork that is deep fried
- **Chilaquiles**
Tortilla chips topped with a green sauce made from tomatoes.
- **Sopes**
Corn patty with chicken, cheese and hot sauce as toppings.
- **Tostados**
Tortilla that is fried and topped with chicken, beans, tomato, onion, lettuce, cream, cheese and hot sauce.
- **Mole**
A peanut sauce that is spicy is poured over meat. Surprisingly, chocolate may also be added to this rich sauce.
- **Salsa**
A sauce made of tomatoes (red or green), onion, chili, coriander. This is usually used as a dip or a relish.
- **Chiles Renellos**
Chilies that are large enough are stuffed with meat, cheese and a hot sauce.
- **Huachinango**
Red snapper cooked the way you want it (al gusto)
- **Ceviche**
The Mexican version of sushi – raw fish “cooked” in lime juice, then added to a salad.
- **Pollo Pibil**
This Yucatecan dish is made of chicken that is marinated in spices and orange. The chicken is then cooked wrapped in banana leaves and cooked over coals.

Appetizer:

The Mexican Bolilo

Also known as *pan de agua* in some parts of Mexico, the *bolillo* is a type of salty bread traditionally made in Mexico. It is long oval shaped bread with crunchy crust and a soft inside.

Authentic Mexican Food:

Pambazo

Pambazo is an authentic Mexican dish which is made from special bread dipped in guajillo pepper sauce and filled with ingredients like potatoes, refried beans and onions and garnished with lettuce, salsa, cream and queso fresco which is fresh cheese.

Chile Relleno

The name of the dish, *chile rellenos* literally "stuffed pepper" and is one of the most prominent dishes served

in the authentic Mexican cuisine. Mexico is known for its wide variety of chilies starting from the Anaheim, poblano or the pasilla chili peppers and hence has several chili recipes. This is the simplest and most authentic form of the authentic Mexican Chile Relleno and is very easy to make once you know how to make authentic Mexican style refried beans and guacamole.