

Book Reviews

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Mexico: Cuisine of Contrasts

Rick Bayless, with Deann Groen Bayless

Authentic Mexican: Regional Cooking from the Heart of Mexico

Morrow, 1987; 384 pp. \$24.95

Illustrated by John Sandford

Aida Gabilondo

Mexican Family Cooking

Fawcett Columbine, 1986; 385 pp.; \$19.95

Patricia Quintana and William A. Orme, Jr.

The Taste of Mexico

Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1986; 303 pp.; \$35

Photography by Ignacio Urquiza; Marilyn Wilkinson, consulting editor

"Mexico, Land of Contrasts." The hoary cliché has been endlessly repeated in Spanish language textbooks, ridiculed by generations of American high school students, and repeatedly resurrected by travel writers and the Mexican Ministry of Tourism. So it was with nostalgia mixed with amusement that I read the first sentence of the jacket copy for *The Taste of Mexico*: "Mexico is a land of contrasts." My initial impression was confirmed when I discovered, still on the jacket copy, that Patricia Quintana, the cooking teacher responsible for the recipes in this volume, "is promoting the cooking of Mexico worldwide for the Mexican Ministry of Tourism." Still, clichés endure despite derision if they are true, and we ought to accept this one as a morsel of sagacity, if not true wisdom.

Proof of the platitude comes now in the form of these three contrasting new books on the cooking of Mexico, land of contrasts. *The Taste of Mexico* is a book of gorgeously reproduced

photographs of Mexican markets, foods, restaurants, kitchens, crafts, and scenery, accompanied by recipes and a text by William Orme, Jr., that is part travel writing, part description of Mexican regional cooking. *Authentic Mexican*, by the Americans Rick and Deann Groen Bayless, is an erudite but practical explorer's guide to the regional public foods of Mexico and ways to translate them to the American kitchen and outdoor grill. *Mexican Family Cooking*, by Aida Gabilondo, centers on one woman's recollections of household memories and recipes from her northern Mexican heritage, although it also contains recipes from other regions of the country.

North Americans accustomed to the sameness and mediocrity of most of our Mexican restaurants may well doubt that there exist vivid contrasts in Mexican cooking as well as scenery. Americans categorize Mexican food, with its substrata of tortillas, beans, and rice, as "cheap" ethnic food. Unfortunately, this expectation is too often met by restaurateurs who serve a small variety of "typical" dishes—the usual tacos, enchiladas, and "combination plates"—slathered with a repetitive tomato, onion, garlic, and chili-based sauce. To meet the demand for large portions of inexpensive foods, a few variations on this cooked sauce, and on a coarsely chopped raw version served with tortilla chips, are prepared in great quantities, like the rice and beans. Commercial canned mole paste substitutes for the expenditure of time and labor required in making real *mole poblano* and its relatives, which the Baylesses call "the queen of sauces." The nuances and permutations of both raw and cooked Mexican *salsas*, not to mention the absolute freshness necessary for their successful preparation, cannot be reproduced in a cost-conscious climate where this ethnic cooking must compete with standardized fast foods. Indeed, most Americans probably are acquainted with Mexican food as a type of fast food. The "big sombrero special" at Taco Burpo or what have you is far from what these cookbooks offer.

For more than fifteen years the Englishwoman Diana Kennedy has dominated the ways in which serious non-Hispanic American cooks think about Mexican food. Judging just from the hues of the mole and *adobo* stains on the pages of my copies of

her three cookbooks, most notably *The Cuisines of Mexico* (Harper & Row, 1986), I have these past fifteen years enjoyed many of her recipes. But the appearance of the cookbooks reviewed here is a major advance in opening up the complex cuisine of Mexico to English-speaking cooks and other interested readers. All three contain recipes and descriptions that extend Ms. Kennedy's work, although they by no means supersede it. Ironically, *Authentic Mexican*, the book by the Baylesses, makes the most useful contribution, even though its authors are the most gringo of the group, living up to its title boast of authenticity while presenting sensible contemporary variations on tradition.

Even *The Taste of Mexico* contains among its often exotic recipes some that are quite feasible to prepare in an American home. It is a splendid coffee-table book to admire and learn from, but I doubt I will put many mole stains on its pages. Ms. Gabilondo's *Mexican Family Cooking*, while fascinating in a different way, is at heart too singular a vision of one family's style of Mexican cooking to satisfy many American cooks. However, all three books are "authentic," and in their overlapping emphases they demonstrate the range of Mexican cooking from the curiously rustic to the practical to the elegant. These books may themselves be taken as a trio of emblems for contrasting spheres of Mexican food: that of particular families, that of the public domain, and that of treasured cultural artifacts displayed like museum pieces.

Besides compiling hundreds of Mexican recipes, these books, taken together, render many services. The recipes for *lengua à la veracruzana* (beef tongue, Veracruz style), for example, are instructive, only partly because beef, lamb, and pork tongues are savory and inexpensive meats that we North Americans often hide from ourselves and shouldn't. Ms. Gabilondo's rather simple version, with carrots and peas more prominent than capers and olives, is similar to one I have been served in homes like hers in northern Mexico and West Texas. But the Baylesses reveal much more than a recipe when they explain how the dish is a variation on the famous fish casserole of the Gulf of Mexico, *pescado à la veracruzana*, and its sauce of broth,

tomatoes, olives, capers, herbs, cinnamon, and chilies. Change the meat and broth from fish to tongue and you have translated a coastal dish to one fitting the freshly available ingredients of the inland hacienda.

The variations are in the details of both ingredients and technique. Ms. Gabilondo admonishes the reader not to cook the Veracruz sauce with any kind of chilies in it but to serve pickled *serranos* on the side. The Baylesses add pickled jalapeños to the sauce for either fish or tongue. Ms. Quintana's recipe for *lengua entomatada* (tongue in tomato sauce) is even simpler than Ms. Gabilondo's, the tomato sauce enlivened initially with only onions and jalapeños but with more herbs put in the water in which the tongue is first simmered. The broth is then reduced before being added to the tomato sauce. Among these variations, I have prepared only the Baylesses' tongue recipe, but it is superb—better than other versions that I remember of this Caribbean- and Spanish-influenced dish. When contrasted with Diana Kennedy's version—equally fine but with a more Indian sauce based on almonds, sesame, and ancho chilies—the variations possible within one broad cultural tradition are quickly recognized.

All these books are valuable on the subject of chilies and salsas. There has been lately so much chatter and frenzied experimentation on these subjects by food writers and in hybridized trend-setting restaurants that it is comforting to be reminded again of how Mexicans use these foods within their own traditions. The amazing combinations (and endless flavor contrasts) of the many chilies, herbs, and spices that make up the seasoning mixtures and sauces in different parts of Mexico should convince readers that Mexican cuisine is as complex and subtle in its use of plant-based flavorings as that of India.

Some may find this statement doubtful, given the vast nature of the Indian subcontinent and the multiplicity of its cultures. But Mexico, although much smaller than India geographically, is a rugged country, and the lack of easy transport in pre-Columbian times isolated the native population into hundreds of cultures and languages, each adapted to local conditions—this despite the sometimes overarching empires of Mayans, Toltecs,

Mextecs, Aztecs, and Spaniards. Where so many separate languages exist, it is not surprising that as many distinct cuisines exist also. The glory of Mexico's cultural heritage is that so much of this has endured despite the predations of both indigenous and European conquerors. Just as we make incomprehensible the richness of Indian cuisine by conflating it to "curry powder," we dishonor and distort the variety of today's European-influenced Mexican Indian cuisines by stuffing them conceptually into a jar labeled "chili powder." The great global exchange of plant and animal foods that accompanied the European exploration and exploitation of the early modern period enriched many cuisines: India got varieties of Capsicum—New World chilies—from the Portuguese just about the time Mexico got coriander and cumin from the Spanish. Today the foods of either nation are unthinkable without these ingredients.

There are other central components to any complex cuisine besides its condiments, and these books are instructive on the basics as well. Cooking liquids, for example: the Baylesses lay to rest an irritating canard of critics of Mexican food who say, "But all that lard! How unhealthy!" "According to the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture]," they point out, "lard has *less than half* the cholesterol of ordinary, respectable butter" (p. 346), that ingredient considered so indispensable and desirable in other cuisines. Although vegetable oils are increasingly popular in Mexico, some dishes require good-quality lard ("not the flavorless, hydrogenated loaves of lard commonly available in grocery stores," they caution) for natural flavor and texture. The sensory qualities of a smidgen of good rendered pork fat should not be shunned by those who indulge in this canard (or in *confit de canard*, for that matter).

Mr. And Mrs. Bayless also include several recipes that use bacon fat. They include *frijoles charros* (cowboy beans), which they say are ubiquitous in the northern industrial city of Monterrey; *frijoles fronterizos* (border beans), a name that shows the dish's proximity to the United States; and *frijoles borrachos* (drunken beans), a variation of Monterrey's *frijoles charros* that shows the influence of the local brewing industry in its inclusion of beer as an ingredient. All these are pervasive and public

northern Mexican dishes. Elsewhere the Baylesses include crumbled bacon and bacon fat in a contemporary grilled variation of the Pueblan dish *pato en pipian rojo* (duck in smooth pumpkin-seed sauce). Finally, bacon grease is one of several alternative fats (“lard, vegetable oil, bacon drippings, fat rendered from *chorizo*, or even butter”) suggested for *huevos à la mexicana* (scrambled eggs, Mexican style).

Like the Baylesses, Diana Kennedy stresses the importance of good home-rendered pork lard for authenticity in some Mexican dishes. Like them, she uses a light vegetable oil for many recipes, and even a fruity olive oil in a few regional ones, such as a unique seafood sausage from Veracruz. But nowhere does she acknowledge a place for bacon, let alone bacon grease, in Mexican cuisine. In fact, in *The Tortilla Book* (Harper & Row, 1975), Ms. Kennedy explicitly warns in her recipe for *frijoles refritos*, “To get the very best-flavored beans, fry them with good-quality pork lard, but do not use bacon fat, which is too strong” (p. 18).

On this point, Ms. Gabilondo writes: “Always fry, sauté, or stir-fry in very hot fat, and always use lard, vegetable oil, vegetable shortening, or bacon grease. Olive oil and butter are not much used in Mexican cooking. My favorite cooking fat is bacon grease; nothing compares to it for flavor” (p. 29). This bit of information reveals that influence of northern Mexico and the United States on Ms. Gabilondo’s cooking style. Smoked bacon is simply not a common food in most of Mexico, but her childhood on a cattle ranch where bacon was a staple preserved meat, as it is north of the border, made this fat the obvious choice.

She goes on to say, “I am sure this will be a welcome piece of news. So many housewives have an abundance of bacon grease on hand, and this is a great way to use it up.” This quote reveals much about her intended audience. I doubt many lovers of ethnic cuisine interested in trying out Mexican food in their own kitchens will have “an abundance of bacon grease on hand.” Nor do many cookbooks these days identify their readers as “housewives.” But this kind of comment is appropriate for that older world of un-fancy home cooking evoked by Ms. Gabilondo and

shared with her readers. The book is in some ways an archive of the lives of privileged but hardworking women on the ranches of South Texas, Chihuahua, Sonora, New Mexico, and Arizona in the early part of this century. In her reminiscences and descriptions of her grandmother's cooking, Ms. Gabilondo reaches back to the traditions formed in previous generations of Latin American life on the plains and in the valleys near the mountains of the American Southwest and northern Mexico. Her distinctive use of bacon grease is only one of many instances of the influence of southern and southwestern Anglo-American cooking on her hybrid regional cuisine.

Ms. Gabilondo's singular contribution is that she shows how in northern Mexico cooking can mirror our southwestern style in a way that might be called "Mex-Tex." The recipes in *Mexican Family Cooking* vary from a basic split pea soup with canned Vienna sausages (when is the last time you saw an ethnic cookbook with that ingredient?) to the more "authentic" styles and ingredients of the Baylesses' book. What many of Ms. Gabilondo's recipes demonstrate is the ingenuity of cooks of largely Hispanic (as contrasted to Indian) heritage who live far from cities and have very limited fresh seasonal ingredients. For a balanced diet, they depend on canned, dried, and preserved foods in the larder. Dishes like jalapeño macaroni and *pescado à la ranchera* (ranch-style fish fillets) show the practical necessities of running a middle-class family kitchen on a rural Mexican ranch in a hot climate far from cities and markets—"If unexpected guests arrive, you can stretch this dish by adding one large potato, peeled and cubed, and one small can drained peas and carrots to the sauce," she says of *pescado à la ranchera*.

Some of her recipes work beautifully without being particularly Mexican at all in the way most of us think of it. For example, I recently prepared her *ensalada de hongos y zanahorias* (mushroom and carrot salad) in a quantity to serve a group of fifty people as a side dish to a Texas chili dinner. The recipe is nothing more than equal quantities of thinly sliced fresh mushrooms, carrots, and zucchini combined with half the quantity of sliced white onion and marinated in *vinagreta con oregano* (Mexican-style Italian dressing with oregano)—

an ordinary oil, vinegar, herb, salt, and pepper dressing thinned with a little ice water. It was a simple dish that was very well received by our guests, making a perfect counterpoint to the fiery chili. Other recipes often reflect the eating habits of her childhood, influenced in many ways by American standards of the 1940s and 1950s. For these reasons, her book is an important document of the historical exchange of ingredients and cooking styles between Mexico and the United States, one that continues today in new forms that we see from north of the border.

Although Ms. Gabilondo's grandmother probably would not have found *The Taste of Mexico* very useful in her daily chores on the family *rancheras* of Sonora and Chihuahua, it is an informative guide, especially to the more unusual foods of Mexico that foreigners seldom or never sample. In the section on central Mexico, the authors note that "the cuisine of the state of Hidalgo is famous for exotic specialty dishes, such as ant eggs" (p. 261); and in the part dealing with the south Pacific coast they note: "The cuisine's native exoticism is epitomized by its extensive use of insects—living and dead, fried and fresh. Where else in the world could one order grasshopper or ant tacos?" (p. 103).

From Hidalgo comes the delicacy *gusanos de maguey, estilo pachuca* (maguey worms, Pachuco style). The fried worms are served with guacamole and green salsa and may be used as a taco stuffing or served as an appetizer with tequila. The recipe for *los escamoles, estilo pachuquilla* (ant eggs, Pachuquilla style) notes that sautéed escamoles are also good as a stuffing for omelets. But nothing is said about how to obtain four cups of maguey worms or six cups of ant eggs. These and other dishes in the book would be risky to serve and impossible to duplicate outside of Mexico—and even there, maguey larvae are becoming rare.

But this is more than just an odd bit of preserved culinary lore. *The Taste of Mexico* mentions in passing that red caviar may be substituted for ant eggs. In this we have a hint of how legitimate traditions connect to the newest trend for mixing food styles in certain types of American restaurants. Think of the dish of tiny blue-corn tortillas topped with caviar and smoked salmon prepared by John Sedlar at Saint Estephe Restaurant

in Manhattan Beach, California, in his nouvelle Southwest style. I would be curious to know if he realized this connection in his translation of Southwest ingredients with French techniques.

The Taste of Mexico does contain one howler: A photograph captioned “Sinaloan sea bass, fresh from the market” (p. 88) shows instead a Mexican woman carrying a string of three fresh, fat carp—the criss-cross of the carps’ large scales matching nicely the embroidered checks of the woman’s skirt. I wondered momentarily if “Sinaloan sea bass” was a humorous euphemism for carp, the way American fishermen call bullhead catfish “rubber bass” or a well-fought catch of hooked moss, “grass bass.” But the joke makes no sense in Spanish, and the photograph illustrates a recipe for *callos de lobina estilo culiacan* (striped-bass scallops, Culiacan style).

The format of *Authentic Mexican*, with its sidebars and magazine layout, has become the latest way to handle cookbooks. In most, this results in little bits of thought on which those with tiny attention spans or mere moments to read may nibble. But something else is happening in *Authentic Mexican*. The contemporary variations on traditional recipes given in the “cook’s notes” in the running sidebar, may be hard evidence of the development of a new generation of fused Mexican-American cuisine, just as Ms. Gabilondo’s recipes are a fusion from an earlier generation of contact between Hispanic and North American cultures.

This fusion is taking place for the most part in the kind of restaurants we call southwestern (even if in southwestern Manhattan) and in the cookbooks produced by this new generation of chefs. The Baylesses are furthering this fusion within the traditions not just of the borderlands but of the heartlands of Mexico. On this point Rick Bayless writes, “My approach is different from the one adopted by many chefs of the ‘new’ southwestern cooking, who utilize Mexican ingredients in classical/European preparations; I always start from the classic Mexican sauces and preparations, and I never let myself roam too far away” (p. 32).

The Baylesses’ book, as important as it is in bringing us a new generation’s interpretation of authentic Mexican cuisine, is

really part of a larger, coordinated package of ideas, techniques, and tastes this young couple have brought back from their ten years of exploration in Mexico. As many readers will know, they also have opened a wildly successful restaurant, Frontera Grill, in Chicago—one that I may even visit once sanity returns and either they institute a reservation policy or the ridiculous post-review crowds thin out. (I can cook almost any recipe in their book in the amount of time it takes to get a table there on a week night.) They have also starred in a public television series, “Cooking Mexican,” that I suppose should earn them the sobriquet “The Frontera Gourmets.”

The Baylesses deserve the fame and fortune that will come from their contributions to our understanding and enjoyment of the thriving contrasting heritage of Mexican cooking. The current popularity of their restaurant suggests that the opportunity is at hand for many more restaurateurs to establish classical Mexican restaurants of high quality in North America. The talent is undoubtedly already here in the millions of Mexican-Americans now making contributions to other areas of our national life; if they can recognize the demand, an important part of their culture could flourish in the more favorable economic climate of our cities.

Dennis Ray Wheaton



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