

ANCIENT DISHES &
HOW TO MAKE THEM
OAXACA

BY THE GOURMET ARCHAEOLOGIST

OAXACA MEXICO



My name is Matthew Singer and I am an archaeologist based out of Canada. As an avid traveller and lover of indigenous foods, I have started a series called, “Ancient Dishes and Where to Eat Them”, that combines my love of culinary traditions and ancient peoples. In this series, I hope to introduce you to some tasty traditional foods and provide some information on their history, development, and cooking techniques.

I spent a month in Oaxaca researching this book in January 2024. This guide will focus on the food stalls in the markets and streets however, some dine in restaurants are also featured.


Please send food suggestions/comments/ideas to matthew.singer@thegourmetarchaeologist.com


My websites:

www.thegourmetarchaeologist.com

www.diyfoodtours.com

www.eatyourownadventure.com

 [@thegourmetarchaeologist](https://www.instagram.com/thegourmetarchaeologist)

 [@thegourmetarchy](https://www.x.com/thegourmetarchy)

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To request permissions, contact
matthew.singer@thegourmetarchaeologist.com

First Ebook edition: April 2024

Edited by: Matthew Singer

Cover art by: Matthew Singer

Layout by: Matthew Singer

Photographs by: Matthew Singer

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ANCIENT DISHES AND HOW TO COOK THEM

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The story begins with Mesoamerican civilizations, like the Zapotecs and Mixtecs, who laid the groundwork for Oaxacan cuisine. Corn (maize) became the foundation of their diet, featuring prominently in dishes like tamales, tlayudas (giant tortillas), and atole (a cornmeal porridge). They also cultivated beans, squash, and chili peppers, adding variety and depth to their meals. Chocolate, another Oaxacan staple, was revered by these cultures for its ceremonial and medicinal uses. Evidence suggests they enjoyed chocolate beverages for centuries before the arrival of the Spanish.

The Spanish conquest in the 16th century marked a turning point. European ingredients like wheat, pork, and dairy products were introduced, forever changing the Oaxacan culinary landscape. New cooking techniques, such as frying and baking, were incorporated, giving rise to dishes like quesillo (Oaxacan cheese) and cemitas (sesame seed buns). The fusion of indigenous and European elements is a defining characteristic of Oaxacan cuisine today.

One of the most iconic Oaxacan dishes, mole sauce, exemplifies this fusion. While its exact origins are debated, some argue it has roots in pre-Hispanic times, where chiles were combined with ingredients like cacao seeds. The Spanish introduced new chilies, nuts, and spices, enriching the complexity of mole. Today, there are over seven varieties of mole sauces in Oaxaca, each boasting unique flavors and ingredients.



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Oaxaca's distinct geographical features also played a significant role in shaping its cuisine. The fertile valleys provided the perfect environment for growing chilies, a cornerstone of Oaxacan cooking. The surrounding mountains harbored unique ingredients like grasshoppers (chapulines), which became a popular protein source and a cherished addition to tlayudas.

Throughout the centuries, Oaxacan cuisine has continued to evolve. The introduction of global ingredients and techniques has broadened its horizons without compromising its essence. Chefs are now reinterpreting traditional dishes with newfound creativity, while local food movements emphasize sustainable practices and the preservation of indigenous ingredients.

Pictured (top left) Fonda Florecita Restaurant at the Mercado de Meced, (middle left, bottom left, and top right) from the Central de Abastos de Oaxaca City

TAMALES

The tamale, a ubiquitous Mesoamerican dish, finds a unique and vibrant expression in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Beyond the familiar corn masa and savory fillings, Oaxacan tamales are a canvas for regional ingredients, cultural traditions, and culinary artistry. Unlike their steamed counterparts elsewhere in Mexico, Oaxacan tamales are wrapped in banana leaves and cooked in clay pots over low heat. This slow-cooking method imbues the tamales with a smoky depth, a subtle sweetness from the banana leaves, and a distinctively moist texture.

The heart of an Oaxacan tamale lies in its masa. Unlike the smooth, homogenous dough found elsewhere, Oaxacan masa is often made with nixtamalized corn, a process where dried corn kernels are treated with an alkaline solution and then ground. This process not only enhances the corn's flavor and nutritional value, but also lends a characteristic coarse texture and a hint of nuttiness to the masa. This coarse texture further contributes to the unique texture of Oaxacan tamales, creating pockets of air that trap the steam and fillings, resulting in a light and fluffy end product.

The fillings in Oaxacan tamales are a testament to the region's rich agricultural bounty and culinary creativity. Traditional fillings might include mole, a complex sauce made with chilies, nuts, and spices, in a variety of colors and flavors. Shredded meats like chicken, pork, or even grasshoppers (chapulines) are also popular options. Vegetarian fillings like huitlacoche (corn smut) or squash blossoms seasoned with fragrant herbs like epazote offer delicious alternatives. No matter the choice, the fillings are often pre-cooked with achiote paste, adding a vibrant orange hue and a touch of earthy smokiness.

Photograph: (top) mole totemoxtle from Tamales Geno located in Mercado de Meced in Oaxaca City , (bottom) Frijol tamale from Tamales Doña Berta located at Mercado Benito Juárez in Oaxaca City



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The wrapping material also plays a significant role in defining Oaxacan tamales. Unlike the corn husks used in other parts of Mexico, banana leaves impart a subtle sweetness and a delicate floral aroma to the tamales. The leaves are also more pliable, allowing for the creation of unique shapes and sizes. Some

making gatherings (tamaleas), and a cherished comfort food enjoyed by families. The act of unwrapping a banana leaf reveals not just a meal, but a labor of love, a connection to ancestral traditions, and a celebration of Oaxacan ingenuity.



Photograph (top) Tamales (Amarillo (yellow one) and mole totemoxtle (green one) from Tamales Geno in Oaxaca City

tamales are rectangular, while others are triangular or even boat-shaped, each variation reflecting the cook's creativity and the intended purpose of the tamale.

Oaxacan tamales transcend mere sustenance; they are deeply woven into the cultural fabric of the region. They are a staple food served at celebrations, a symbol of community during communal tamale-

Oaxacan Tamales with Green Salsa
Oaxacan tamales are known for their unique flavors and often use banana leaves as wrappers.

Ingredients

Masa

3 cups masa harina
3-4 cups hot water or broth, as needed
1 cup + 3 tbsp lard, at room temperature (or vegetable oil)
1 tsp salt

Green Salsa Filling

3 tomatillos, husks removed
1 ancho chile pepper, stems, seeds, and veins removed
1 mulato chile pepper, stems, seeds, and veins removed
1 clove garlic, minced
1/4 cup chopped onion
1/2 cup chopped cilantro

1/4 cup chicken broth
Salt to taste

Other

36 banana leaves, softened (see package instructions for softening)
String or twine (for tying tamales)

Instructions

Make the Chicken Broth (if using for masa): In a pot, cover chicken with water and add a pinch of salt. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and

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simmer for 30 minutes, or until chicken is cooked through. Remove chicken and shred for optional addition to mole filling. Reserve broth.

Make the Green Salsa Filling

Roast tomatillos, ancho chile, and mulato chile directly over a burner or under a broiler until blistered. In a blender, combine roasted peppers, garlic, onion, cilantro, chicken broth, and salt. Blend until smooth.

Prepare the Masa

In a large bowl, beat lard (or oil) with salt until creamy. Gradually add masa harina and mix until well combined. Slowly add hot broth or chicken broth, a little at a time, until the masa reaches a soft, pliable consistency that holds its shape when pinched. You can test the consistency by dropping a small ball of masa dough into a glass of cold water. If it floats, the masa is ready.

Assemble the Tamales

Spread a thin layer of masa onto a softened banana leaf. Add a spoonful of your chosen filling green salsa in the center. If using mole, you can also add some shredded chicken. Fold the banana leaf over the filling to create a rectangle or pocket shape. Tie the ends of the tamale with string or twine to secure.

Steam the Tamales

In a large pot, arrange a steamer basket or rack. Add a few inches of water and bring to a boil. Place the tamales upright in the steamer basket, leaving space between them. Cover the pot and steam for 1-1.5 hours, or until the masa is cooked through and easily separates from the banana leaf. Add more water as needed throughout steaming.

Serve

Let the tamales cool slightly before unwrapping. Enjoy them on their own or with your favorite salsa or crema.

Tips

- You can find banana leaves in Latin American grocery stores.
- If you don't have avocado leaves, you can omit them or substitute with a bay leaf.
- Leftover tamales can be refrigerated for up to 5 days or frozen for up to 3 months. Reheat by steaming for 20-30 minutes.

Photograph; Tamales amarillo from Genos Tamales in Oaxaca City



TLAYUDAS

The tlayuda, a colossal Oaxacan staple, is more than just a giant tortilla. It's a canvas of history, culture, and culinary ingenuity, deeply woven into the fabric of Oaxacan cuisine. Its journey through time reflects the resourcefulness and resilience of the indigenous people of the region.

The very name "tlayuda" speaks volumes. Derived from the Nahuatl word "tlao-li" meaning "shelled corn," with the suffix "uda" denoting abundance, the name itself signifies the centrality of corn and the generous nature of this dish. While a definitive origin story remains elusive, theories point to its roots in pre-Columbian times. The Zapotec and Mixtec people, who have inhabited Oaxaca for millennia, likely developed the tlayuda as a practical solution. Imagine farmers returning from long days in the fields, famished and needing a meal that was both satisfying and portable. The large, sturdy tortilla served as a perfect base, capable of holding a bounty of readily available ingredients like beans, vegetables, and meats.

The Florentine Codex, a 16th-century record of Mesoamerican life compiled by Spanish monks, depicts women preparing folded tortillas overflowing with various fillings. This suggests that the concept of a loaded tortilla dish existed well before the Spanish arrival.

The Spanish conquest undoubtedly influenced Oaxacan cuisine. The introduction of new livestock like pigs and chickens expanded the protein options for the tlayuda. Additionally, the use of lard, a rendered form of pork fat, became more common, adding a new layer of flavor and texture.

Over time, the tlayuda evolved further. Regional variations emerged, reflecting the diverse



Pictured: Tlayudas Chuleta de res marinada from Tlayudas Doña Luchita in Oaxaca City

ecosystems and agricultural practices across Oaxaca. The Valley of Oaxaca, known for its dry climate, uses asiento, a type of unrefined lard, which adds a distinct richness to the dish. In contrast, the coast incorporates fresh seafood like shrimp and fish into their tlayudas.

Today, the tlayuda reigns supreme as a street food icon. Vendors set up stalls, their comales (griddles) sizzling with freshly pressed tortillas. Customers can choose from a dizzying array of toppings, from traditional ingredients like cecina (thinly sliced, dried

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beef) and queso Oaxaqueño (string cheese) to more contemporary options like chorizo and chapulines (grasshoppers). The vibrant salsa roja, a fiery blend of chilies, adds a burst of flavor and heat.

Oaxacan-style tlayuda

Ingredients

For the Tlayuda Base:

2 large corn tortillas

1/2 cup asiento (rendered pork fat - you can substitute vegetable oil or avocado oil)

For the Beans

1 can (15 oz) black beans, drained and rinsed

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 small yellow onion, diced

1 teaspoon minced garlic

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

For the Toppings

1 cup shredded Oaxaca cheese

1 cup shredded lettuce or cabbage

1/2 cup crumbled queso fresco (or feta cheese)

1/2 cup chopped tomatoes

1/4 cup chopped red onion

Chopped fresh cilantro

Lime wedges

Hot sauce (optional)

Instructions

Make the Beans

Heat olive oil in a skillet over medium heat. Add the diced onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes.

Add the minced garlic, cumin, salt, and pepper, and cook for another minute.

Stir in the black beans and mash them slightly with a potato masher, leaving some texture. Heat through for a few minutes.

Assemble the Tlayudas

Preheat your oven to 425°F (220°C). Spread a thin layer of asiento (or oil) on each tortilla.

Top each tortilla with a layer of the black bean mixture.

Add shredded Oaxaca cheese, lettuce or cabbage, queso fresco, chopped tomatoes, and red onion.

Bake the tlayudas for 5-7 minutes, or until the tortillas are crispy and the cheese is melted.

Serve

Garnish with chopped fresh cilantro, lime wedges, and hot sauce (if desired).

Tips

- You can use pre-made refried beans instead of making your own.
- Get creative with your toppings! Other options include shredded chicken, chorizo, avocado, crema, or salsa.
- If you don't have a pizza stone, you can bake the tlayudas on a baking sheet.
- Heat the tortillas directly over a stovetop flame for a few seconds before assembling for extra smokiness (be careful not to burn them).

Pictured: Tlayuda con Cecina from Tlayudas El Negro in Oaxaca City



MOLES

Oaxaca, a state in southwestern Mexico, is famous for its seven unique moles (pronounced MO-lay), all rich and complex sauces traditionally served with meats like chicken or turkey. Here's a breakdown of each:

Mole Negro (Black Mole)

This is the most renowned Oaxacan mole. Its dark, almost black color comes from a blend of dark chilies, like ancho and pasilla, as well as dark chocolate. The mole negro has a complex flavor profile that is both spicy and slightly sweet, with hints of chocolate and nuttiness.

Mole Rojo (Red Mole)

While mole negro may be Oaxaca's claim to fame, mole rojo is actually considered the original mole sauce, originating from the neighboring state of Puebla. Oaxaca's version uses different chilies than Puebla's, resulting in a slightly smokier flavor. This mole is also typically less sweet than mole negro.

Mole Amarillo (Yellow Mole)

This vibrant yellow mole gets its color from achote, a paste made from annatto seeds. It also incorporates saffron and other spices, resulting in a light and slightly sweet sauce. Unlike many other moles, mole amarillo is not spicy.

Mole Verde (Green Mole)

As the name suggests, this mole is colored green thanks to the use of fresh tomatillos, poblano peppers, and a generous amount of fresh herbs like cilantro and parsley. Mole verde has a bright, fresh flavor that is herbaceous and slightly tart. It is often served with lighter meats like fish or chicken.

Mole Coloradito (Little Red Mole)

This mole is another red variety, but uses a different set of chilies than mole rojo, resulting in a brighter red color. It also incorporates plantains or bananas, lending a touch of sweetness



Picutred: (top) Enchilada con Cecina in Mole Rojo from Fonda Sofi, (bottom) Tasajo Asado (with enchilada and red mole) from Las Quince Letras Restaurante in Oaxaca City

MOLE NEGRO

Here's a glimpse into an authentic Oaxacan mole negro recipe with amounts, keeping in mind the variations that exist from family to family:

Ingredients

Dried Chiles (Roughly 8-10 oz total):

5-10 mulato chiles, stemmed, seeded, torn into pieces (seeds reserved)

1-2 chilhuacle negro chiles (or cascabel chiles), stemmed, seeded, torn into pieces (seeds reserved)

3-4 pasilla negro chiles, stemmed, seeded, torn into pieces (seeds reserved)

Nuts and Seeds (around 1 cup total)

½ cup almonds (whole or slivered)

½ cup peanuts (roasted)

1/3 cup sesame seeds

Spices

½ cinnamon stick

1 whole nutmeg

2 allspice berries

3 whole cloves

Aromatics

½ white onion, unpeeled

2 whole garlic cloves, unpeeled

Vegetables

1-2 roma tomatoes

1 plantain (optional)

Other Ingredients

Vegetable oil or lard (around ½ cup, divided)

3 cups chicken broth

1-2 discs Mexican chocolate (around 3-3.5 oz)

¼ - ⅓ cup raisins (soaked in hot water)

1 tablespoon brown sugar (or to taste)

Salt to taste

Instructions

Note: Traditionally, the chiles would be toasted over an open flame until almost black. If this is not possible, a broiler or dry pan can be used.

Toasting the Chiles and Spices

Toast the dried chilies (seeds reserved) in a pan or under the broiler until darkened and fragrant. Watch closely to avoid burning. Toast the almonds, peanuts, sesame seeds, and spices in a separate pan until fragrant.

Preparing the Aromatics and Vegetables

Roast the onion and garlic cloves directly on the stovetop over medium heat until softened and slightly charred. Boil or steam the tomatoes until softened. If using a plantain, peel and cube it, then fry in oil until golden brown.

Soaking and Grinding

Soak the toasted chilies and their reserved seeds in hot water for at least 30 minutes, until softened. Grind the softened chilies, nuts, seeds, spices, tomatoes, and a bit of soaking liquid (to aid blending) in batches using a blender or molcajete (traditional mortar and pestle) until a smooth paste forms.

Cooking the Mole

Heat oil or lard in a large pot. Add the mole paste and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, for about 10 minutes until the mixture darkens and thickens.

Simmering and Finishing Touches

Add the chicken broth, raisins, Mexican chocolate, and brown sugar. Bring to a simmer and cook for at least 1 hour, stirring occasionally, to allow the flavors to meld. Season with salt to taste. The mole can simmer for several hours for a richer flavor.

Tips:

- This recipe provides a starting point. Adjust the chilies or spices based on your preference for heat and smokiness.
- You can find most ingredients at a Mexican grocery store.
- Mole negro is traditionally served with chicken or turkey, but can also be used with other proteins or vegetables.
- Leftover mole can be stored in the fridge for several days or frozen for longer storage.

MOLE ROJO

Here's a dive into an authentic Oaxacan mole rojo recipe with amounts, remembering variations exist across households:

Ingredients:

Dried Chiles (around 6-8 oz total):

3-4 guajillo chiles, stemmed, seeded, torn (optional: reserve some seeds for heat)

2-3 pasilla chiles, stemmed, seeded, torn (optional: reserve some seeds for heat)

1-2 ancho chiles, stemmed, seeded, torn (optional: reserve some seeds for heat)

1-2 chipotle chiles (for smokiness, adjust based on spice preference)

Nuts and Seeds (around ½ cup total)

¼ cup peanuts (roasted)

¼ cup sesame seeds

Spices

½ cinnamon stick

1 whole clove

½ teaspoon dried thyme

½ teaspoon dried Mexican oregano

Aromatics

½ white onion, roughly chopped

2 whole garlic cloves, peeled

Vegetables

1 roma tomato, roughly chopped

1/2 white onion, sliced (for frying)

1 corn tortilla, toasted until slightly charred

Other Ingredients

Vegetable oil (around ½ cup, divided)

4 cups chicken broth

2-3 tablespoons tomato paste

2-3 tablespoons piloncillo (unrefined Mexican cone sugar) or dark brown sugar (to taste)

Salt to taste

Instructions

Toasting the Chiles and Spices

In a dry pan or under the broiler, toast the dried chilies (seeds reserved if using) until darkened and fragrant,

watching closely to avoid burning. Toast the peanuts, sesame seeds, cinnamon stick, clove, thyme, and oregano in a separate pan until fragrant.

Preparing the Aromatics and Vegetables

Sauté the chopped onion and garlic cloves in hot oil over medium heat until softened. In a separate pan, fry the sliced onion until golden brown. Boil or steam the chopped tomato until softened.

Soaking and Grinding: Soak the toasted chilies and their reserved seeds (if using) in hot water for at least 30 minutes, until softened. Grind the softened chilies, nuts, seeds, spices, fried onion, tomato, a bit of soaking liquid, and the toasted tortilla in batches using a blender or molcajete (traditional mortar and pestle) until a smooth paste forms.

Cooking the Mole

Heat oil in a large pot. Add the mole paste and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, for about 10 minutes until the mixture darkens and thickens.

Simmering and Finishing Touches

Add the chicken broth, tomato paste, piloncillo or brown sugar, and bring to a simmer. Cook for at least 1 hour, stirring occasionally, to allow the flavors to meld. Season with salt to taste. The mole can simmer for several hours for a richer flavor.

Tips:

- This recipe provides a base. Adjust the chilies or spices based on your preference for heat and smokiness.
- Piloncillo can be found at some Mexican grocery stores. Brown sugar is a good substitute.
- Traditionally served with chicken or turkey, mole rojo can also be enjoyed with other proteins or vegetables.
- Leftover mole can be stored in the fridge for several days or frozen for longer storage.

MOLE AMARILLO

Here's a dive into an authentic Oaxacan Mole Amarillo recipe with quantities, remembering variations exist between households:

Ingredients:

Chiles (around 3 oz total):

2-3 guajillo chiles, stemmed, seeded (optional to reserve some seeds for heat)

1 (optional) ancho chile, stemmed, seeded (for a deeper color)

Other Dried Ingredients:

½ cup achiote paste (made from annatto seeds)

Vegetables:

1 white onion, quartered

3 garlic cloves, unpeeled

3 tomatillos, husked and rinsed

1 small tomato, chopped (optional)

Aromatics:

2 tablespoons lard or vegetable oil

Spices:

1 teaspoon ground cumin

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

¼ teaspoon ground cloves

Pinch of black pepper

1 teaspoon dried Mexican oregano

Salt to taste

Thickener (optional):

2 teaspoons masa harina mixed with 2 tablespoons water

Garnish (optional):

Sliced white onion, Mexican crema, chopped fresh cilantro

Instructions:

Rehydrate the Chiles: In a small pot, cover the guajillo chiles (and ancho chile, if using) with hot water. Let them sit for at least 30 minutes, until softened.

Toast the Aromatics: While the chilies soften, heat the lard or oil in a pan over medium heat. Add the

onion quarters and cook until softened and slightly golden. Add the garlic cloves and cook for another minute.

Blend the Sauce: Transfer the softened chilies, their soaking liquid (depending on desired spice level), toasted onion and garlic cloves, tomatillos, chopped tomato (if using), achiote paste, spices (cumin, cinnamon, cloves, pepper, oregano) to a blender. Blend until a smooth sauce forms.

Cook the Mole: In the same pan used for toasting the aromatics, heat the blended sauce over medium heat. Simmer for 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally, to allow the flavors to meld and the sauce to thicken slightly.

Thicken the Mole (Optional): If you prefer a thicker mole, whisk together the masa harina with water to form a slurry. Gradually add the slurry to the simmering mole, whisking constantly, until the desired consistency is reached. Simmer for a few more minutes to cook out any raw flour taste.

Season and Serve: Season the mole amarillo with salt to taste. Serve hot over chicken, pork, vegetables, or even with traditional Oaxacan tamales. Garnish with sliced white onion, Mexican crema, and chopped fresh cilantro (optional).

Tips:

Adjust the amount of chilies depending on your preferred level of heat.

If you can't find achiote paste, you can substitute with ground annatto seeds (around 1-2 teaspoons).

Masa harina is not traditionally used in Oaxacan mole amarillo, but it's a common thickener and readily available.

Leftover mole amarillo can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for several days or frozen for longer storage.

MOLE VERDE

Here's a dive into an authentic Oaxacan mole verde recipe with quantities, remembering that variations exist from household to household:

Ingredients

Vegetables

1 pound tomatillos, husks removed
2-3 poblano peppers, roasted, seeded, and chopped (adjust for spice preference)
1 small white onion, chopped
3 cloves garlic, chopped
1 large zucchini or chayote squash, cubed
1 bunch cilantro, chopped
(Optional) 2-3 sprigs fresh epazote (yerba santa)

Seeds and Nuts

½ cup pepitas (pumpkin seeds), toasted
¼ cup sesame seeds, toasted

Spices

½ teaspoon dried oregano
¼ teaspoon ground cumin
Salt and black pepper to taste

Other Ingredients

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
4 cups chicken broth
1 avocado, halved, pitted, and peeled (optional)
(Optional) 1 tablespoon crema Mexicana

Instructions

Roasting Vegetables: Roast the tomatillos and poblano peppers directly on a stovetop burner or under a broiler until softened and slightly charred. This adds depth of flavor.

Blanding the Sauce

In a blender, combine the roasted tomatillos, poblano peppers, onion, garlic, cilantro, epazote (if using), pepitas, sesame seeds, oregano, cumin, and a little chicken broth for easier blending. Blend until a

smooth, thick sauce forms.

Cooking the Mole

Heat oil in a large pot or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the blended sauce and cook for 5-7 minutes, stirring constantly, to allow the flavors to meld.

Simmering and Finishing Touches

Pour in the chicken broth and bring to a simmer. Add the zucchini or chayote squash and cook for about 15 minutes, or until tender. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Optional Thickeners

For a thicker mole verde, you can: Mash half of an avocado and stir it into the pot in the last few minutes of cooking. Reserve some of the cooked vegetables before blending, then mash them and return them to the pot for a thicker consistency.

Serving

Enjoy your mole verde with shredded chicken, pork, or turkey. Traditionally served with white rice, it also pairs well with corn tortillas or warmed plantains. For an extra touch, garnish with a dollop of crema Mexicana and a sprinkle of fresh cilantro.

Tips

- Adjust the amount of poblano peppers based on your desired heat level.
- Epazote adds a unique flavor, but it's not always readily available. You can omit it or substitute with a pinch of dried thyme.
- Leftover mole verde can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 3 days or frozen for longer storage.

MOLE COLORADITO

Here's an authentic Oaxacan Mole Coloradito recipe with amounts, capturing the essence of Oaxaca's rich culinary tradition:

Ingredients

Dried Chiles (around 4 oz total):

4 ancho chiles, stemmed, seeded, and torn into pieces
2 guajillo chiles, stemmed, seeded, and torn into pieces

Aromatics

1 white onion, quartered
2 cloves garlic

Other Vegetables

1 ripe roma tomato, quartered
1 small plantain (ripe), peeled and cubed (optional)

Nuts and Seeds (½ cup total)

¼ cup sesame seeds
¼ cup almonds (whole or slivered)

Spices

1 cinnamon stick, broken in half
1 teaspoon dried oregano
½ teaspoon ground cumin

Other Ingredients

2 tablespoons vegetable oil or lard
2 cups chicken broth
2 tablespoons raisins
2 tablespoons sugar (or to taste)
1 ounce Mexican chocolate (bittersweet or semi-sweet), chopped
Salt to taste

Instructions

Toasting the Chiles: Heat a dry pan or skillet over medium heat. Add the ancho and guajillo chiles and toast for a few minutes, pressing occasionally with a spatula, until fragrant and slightly darkened. Be

careful not to burn them.

Sautéing the Aromatics and Vegetables

In a separate pot with heated oil, sauté the quartered onion and garlic cloves over medium heat until softened and translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the cubed plantain (if using) and cook for another 2-3 minutes until lightly golden brown.

Blending the Ingredients

Transfer the toasted chilies, along with the sautéed vegetables, nuts, seeds, spices, and ½ cup of chicken broth to a blender. Blend until a smooth paste forms, adding more broth as needed for better blending consistency.

Cooking the Mole

Heat the remaining oil in a large pot or Dutch oven over medium heat. Pour in the blended mole paste and cook, stirring constantly, for about 5 minutes until the mixture thickens and becomes fragrant.

Simmering and Finishing Touches

Add the remaining chicken broth, raisins, sugar, and chopped Mexican chocolate. Bring to a simmer, then reduce heat and cook for at least 30 minutes, stirring occasionally, to allow the flavors to meld. Season with salt to taste. The mole can simmer for up to an hour for a richer depth of flavor.

Tips:

- Adjust the amount of sugar or chilies depending on your desired level of sweetness and spice.
- For a smoother texture, you can strain the mole after blending.
- Mole Coloradito pairs beautifully with chicken, turkey, or even vegetables like roasted cauliflower or zucchini.
- Leftover mole can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days or frozen for longer storage.

MOLE CHICHILO

Here's a dive into an authentic Oaxacan mole chichilo recipe with quantities, remembering variations exist across households:

Ingredients

Chiles (around 4 oz total):

3 guajillo chiles, stemmed, seeded, roughly chopped
1 chilhuacle negro chile (or substitute cascabel chile), stemmed, seeded, roughly chopped (optional for smokiness)

Other Aromatics

2 cloves garlic, unpeeled
½ medium white onion, roughly chopped
1 avocado leaf, rinsed and dried (imparts a unique Oaxacan flavor)

For the Masa Dough (Chochoyotes)

1 ½ cups masa harina (corn flour dough)
½ cup warm water
½ teaspoon salt

For the Sauce

2 tablespoons lard or vegetable oil
2 cups beef broth
1 cup water
4 dried corn tortillas, torn into pieces
½ cup chopped fresh epazote (or substitute a teaspoon dried epazote) - a key Oaxacan herb
1 tablespoon Mexican oregano
½ teaspoon ground cumin
Salt and black pepper to taste

Garnish (Optional)

Sliced red onion
Chopped fresh cilantro

Instructions

Toasting the Chiles and Aromatics: In a dry pan over medium heat, toast the guajillo chiles and optional chilhuacle negro chile until fragrant and darkened slightly. Watch closely to avoid burning. Toast the garlic cloves, onion, and avocado leaf in the same pan until softened and lightly charred.

Preparing the Masa Dough

Combine masa harina, warm water, and salt in a

bowl. Mix well until a soft dough forms. Knead briefly until smooth. Roll the dough into small balls (about the size of marbles) and make a deep indentation in each with your thumb (for faster cooking).

Cooking the Chiles and Aromatics

In a pot of boiling water, cook the toasted chiles, garlic, onion, and avocado leaf for 10 minutes, or until the chilies soften. Remove from heat and let cool slightly.

Blending the Sauce

Transfer the softened chile mixture along with ½ cup of the cooking liquid to a blender. Blend until a smooth sauce forms. Set aside.

Cooking the Sauce

Heat lard or oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add the chopped tortillas and cook, stirring constantly, until lightly toasted.

Simmering the Sauce

Pour the blended chile sauce into the pot with the tortillas. Add beef broth, water, epazote, oregano, cumin, and salt and pepper to taste. Bring to a simmer and cook for 30 minutes, or until the flavors meld and the sauce thickens slightly.

Adding the Chochoyotes

Gently drop the masa balls (chochoyotes) into the simmering sauce. Cook for 10-15 minutes, or until they float to the surface and are cooked through.

Serving

Serve hot with your desired protein (traditionally beef) and garnish with sliced red onion and chopped fresh cilantro, if desired.

Tips:

Adjust the chilies based on your spice preference. The chilhuacle negro adds smokiness, so omit it for a milder flavor.

If you can't find epazote, substitute with a teaspoon of dried oregano.

Leftover mole chichilo can be stored in the fridge for several days or frozen for longer storage.

MOLE MANCHAMANTEL

Here's a dive into an authentic Oaxacan Mole Manchamantel recipe with amounts, remembering variations exist between households:

Ingredients

Dried Chiles (around 2 oz)

3 ancho chiles, stemmed, seeded, and torn into pieces

Fruits (around 1 ½ cup total)

1 cup fresh pineapple, chopped

½ cup ripe plantain, peeled and diced (optional)

Other Aromatics and Vegetables

½ white onion, chopped

3 cloves garlic, minced

Nuts and Spices

¼ cup raw peanuts

¼ cup almonds

1 small cinnamon stick

2 whole cloves

1 black peppercorn

Meat (optional)

4 oz chorizo sausage, diced (or substitute with pancetta)

Wet Ingredients

2 tablespoons vegetable oil or lard

2 cups chicken broth

2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro

Salt and black pepper to taste

Instructions

Toasting the Chiles and Spices: Heat a dry pan over medium heat. Toast the ancho chiles, turning occasionally, until softened and fragrant (about 5 minutes). Watch closely to avoid burning. In a

separate pan, toast the peanuts and almonds until golden brown. Grind the toasted chiles, nuts, cinnamon stick, cloves, and peppercorn in a molcajete (traditional mortar and pestle) or blender with a little water until a coarse paste forms.

Sautéing the Aromatics and Meat (if using)

Heat oil or lard in a large pot over medium heat. If using chorizo, cook until rendered and browned. Add the onion and cook until softened and translucent (about 5 minutes). Add the garlic and cook for another minute, until fragrant.

Simmering the Base

Pour the ground chile paste into the pot and cook, stirring constantly, for about 5 minutes until fragrant. Add the chicken broth, apple cider vinegar, and bring to a simmer. Reduce heat and simmer for 30 minutes, allowing the flavors to meld.

Adding Fruits and Finishing Touches

Add the chopped pineapple and diced plantain (if using) to the simmering mole. Cook for an additional 15 minutes, or until the fruit softens slightly. Stir in chopped cilantro and season with salt and black pepper to taste.

Tips

- Adjust the amount of chiles depending on your spice preference.
- You can substitute vegetable broth for chicken broth for a vegetarian option.
- Mole Manchamantel is traditionally served with chicken, turkey, or pork. It also goes well with rice or vegetables.
- Leftover mole can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 3 days or frozen for longer storage.

MEMELAS

The story of memelas begins with maize (corn), the cornerstone of Mesoamerican diets for millennia. Archaeological evidence suggests corn cultivation in Oaxaca as early as 7000 BC. Indigenous Oaxacans likely developed techniques for grinding corn into masa dough, the foundation of memelas.

Memelas are believed to be a pre-Hispanic invention. Unlike their close cousin, the tortilla, memelas are thicker and often oval-shaped. Traditionally, they were cooked on a comal, a flat griddle heated over a wood fire. The simplicity of their preparation – masa dough pressed and cooked – made them a versatile food source. They could be enjoyed plain or dressed up with readily available ingredients like beans, squash, and chili peppers.

The arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century introduced new ingredients to Oaxaca, including pork, cheese, and different varieties of chilies. These additions likely influenced the evolution of memela toppings. Memelas transformed from a basic sustenance dish to a platform for showcasing the state's diverse flavors.

Today, memelas are a ubiquitous street food in Oaxaca. They are particularly popular for breakfast or as a satisfying afternoon snack. Vendors often specialize in memelas, offering a variety of toppings to suit every palate. From the classic combination of black bean paste, cheese, and salsa to more adventurous options like cecina (dried beef) or chapulines (grasshoppers), memelas are a testament to Oaxacan culinary creativity.

Memelas transcend their role as mere food. They are a symbol of Oaxacan identity, a link to the region's rich cultural heritage. The act of preparing and sharing memelas fosters a sense of community and tradition. As Oaxaca's cuisine gains international recognition, memelas are finding their way onto menus worldwide, carrying a taste of Oaxaca's unique



Pictured: Memelas (Huitlacoche, Nopalitos con queso, and Champinones) from La Guerita in Oaxaca City

culinary spirit.

Here's an authentic memelas recipe with Oaxacan proportions, capturing the essence of this delicious street food:

Ingredients

Masa

2 cups prepared masa harina (or nixtamalized corn dough)

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Pictured: Special from 'Somebody feed Phil', salsa morita, beef, and tender egg from Memelas Doña Vale in Oaxaca City

1 ½ teaspoons salt
¾ cup warm water (more or less, depending on consistency)

Toppings (Choose your favorites)

¼ cup asiento (pork rind lard, optional substitute: bacon drippings)
2 cups cooked black beans, mashed slightly
¾ cup queso fresco, crumbled
½ cup salsa roja (Oaxacan red salsa, recipe not included but readily available online)

Other options

Shredded lettuce, sliced avocado, crema

Mexicana

Instructions

Make the Masa Dough: In a large bowl, combine masa harina and salt. Gradually add warm water, mixing with your hands until a soft, slightly sticky dough forms. If the dough feels dry, add a little more water by tablespoons. Knead for 5 minutes until smooth and elastic. Cover the dough with a damp cloth and let it rest for 30 minutes at room temperature.

Prepare the Toppings

Heat asiento (or bacon drippings) in a small skillet over medium heat. Once hot, reduce heat to low and simmer for 5 minutes. If using black beans, mash them slightly with a fork, leaving some texture. Crumble queso fresco. Prepare your chosen salsa and any other toppings you like.

Form and Cook the Memelas

Divide the dough into 12 equal balls. Heat a griddle or large cast-iron skillet over medium heat. Using a tortilla press or your palms, flatten each dough ball into a thin oval shape, about ¼ inch thick and 3-4 inches wide.

Cooking the Memelas

Place a memela on the hot griddle. Cook for 1-2 minutes per side, or until lightly browned and slightly puffed. You can gently press down on the memela with a spatula to create a small indentation in the center.

Assemble and Enjoy

Brush the cooked memela with a little hot asiento (or bacon drippings). Top with mashed black beans, queso fresco, and your desired salsa. Enjoy immediately!

Tips

- Look for asiento at Latin American grocery stores. If unavailable, substitute with bacon drippings for a similar flavor.
- You can adjust the amount of black beans and cheese to your preference.
- Oaxacan memelas are traditionally served for breakfast or as a snack.
- Leftover memelas can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 days. Reheat them in a skillet over medium heat until warmed through.

TETELAS

Terelas (pronounced te-TEL-as), small, savory turnovers filled with various ingredients, are a beloved street food and cultural staple in Oaxaca, Mexico. Their history intertwines with the rich culinary heritage of the region, reflecting the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Oaxacan people.

While the exact origin of terelas is unknown, food historians believe they emerged sometime during the Pre-Hispanic era (before the arrival of the Spanish). Oaxaca has a long history of maize cultivation, and the corn dough used for the terelas likely originated from indigenous groups like the Zapotecs and Mixtecs. These civilizations revered corn as a sacred crop, using it for various purposes, including the creation of tortillas, the base for terelas.

The fillings for terelas are believed to have been influenced by the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century. New ingredients like cheese, pork, and spices were introduced, enriching the traditional Oaxacan cuisine. Oaxacans incorporated these ingredients into their terelas, creating a wider variety of fillings. Additionally, techniques like frying in lard, a practice brought by the Spanish, may have become the preferred method for cooking terelas.

Throughout history, terelas have served as a convenient and affordable food option for Oaxacans. Street vendors have traditionally played a significant role in their popularity, selling them fresh and hot from portable stalls or carts. Terelas were perfect for people on the go, offering a satisfying and flavorful meal at a reasonable price.

Here's an authentic Oaxacan tetela recipe with amounts, capturing the essence of Oaxaca's street food magic:



Pictured: Tetelas pasta de frijol, crema, queso fesco and quesillo from Itanoní in Oaxaca City

Ingredients

Masa Dough

- 2 cups masa harina (preferably stone-ground)
- 1 ¼ cups warm water
- ½ teaspoon salt

Filling

- 1 ½ cups cooked black beans (or 1 can, drained and rinsed)

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1 tablespoon vegetable oil
¼ cup chopped white onion
1 clove garlic, minced (optional)
¼ teaspoon dried oregano
Salt and pepper to taste
½ cup shredded Oaxaca cheese (or Quesillo)
(Optional) A few hojas santa leaves (cleaned and torn into small pieces)

Instructions

Make the Masa Dough: In a large bowl, combine masa harina, warm water, and salt. Mix well using your hands until a soft, slightly sticky dough forms. If the dough feels dry, add a tablespoon of warm water at a time until it reaches a workable consistency. Knead the dough for a few minutes until smooth. Cover the dough with a damp cloth and let it rest for at least 30 minutes.

Prepare the Bean Filling

Mash the cooked black beans with a fork or in a food processor until they have a slightly chunky consistency. You can leave some whole beans for texture.

Sauté the Aromatics

Heat oil in a skillet over medium heat. Add chopped onion and cook until softened and translucent, about 5 minutes. If using garlic, add it towards the end of cooking and saute for another minute. Season with oregano, salt, and pepper.

Combine Filling Ingredients

In a bowl, combine mashed beans, sauteed aromatics, and shredded cheese. If using hojas santa, gently fold them into the mixture. Taste and adjust seasonings as needed.

Form the Tetelas

Divide the masa dough into 12-15 equal balls. On a lightly floured surface, flatten each ball into a thin disc using your palm or a tortilla press. You can use a plastic bag cut in half between the dough and the press to prevent sticking.

Fill and Fold

Place a spoonful of the bean filling in the center of each dough disc. Fold the dough over the filling to form a half-moon shape, pinching the edges to seal tightly.

Cooking the Tetelas

Heat a griddle or cast iron skillet over medium heat. Add a thin layer of oil or lard. Carefully place the tetelas on the hot griddle, leaving some space between them. Cook for 2-3 minutes per side, or until golden brown and crispy.

Serve Hot

Enjoy your Oaxacan tetelas hot off the griddle. You can serve them with salsa, crema Mexicana, or simply enjoy them on their own!

Tips

- Look for stone-ground masa harina for the most authentic flavor and texture.
- If you can't find hojas santa, you can simply omit them or substitute with a small piece of fresh epazote leaf.
- Leftover tetelas can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 days or frozen for longer storage.

Pictured: A lady cooking on a comal at Tacos del Carmen street food stand in Oaxaca City



EMPANADA



Empanadas, crescent-shaped pastries filled with savory ingredients, are a ubiquitous presence throughout Mexico, and Oaxaca is no exception. While the exact origin of empanadas is debated, their presence in Oaxaca reflects a fascinating culinary journey that blends indigenous traditions with European influences.

The origins of the empanada can be traced back to Iberia, the Spanish and Portuguese peninsula.

Moors, who occupied parts of Iberia for centuries, are credited with introducing similar pastries filled with spiced meats. When Spanish conquistadors arrived in Mexico in the 16th century, they brought these pastries with them.

In Oaxaca, the Spanish empanada encountered a rich culinary landscape shaped by indigenous civilizations like the Zapotecs and Mixtecs. These groups had mastered the art of maize cultivation and used corn dough for various purposes, including the creation of tamales. The Spanish dough, typically made with wheat flour, offered a new option for Oaxacan cooks.

The fillings for Oaxacan empanadas reflected a fusion of ingredients. The Spanish introduced new proteins like pork and chicken, which became popular fillings. However, Oaxacans also incorporated their own ingredients like huitlacoche (corn smut fungus), squash, and chapulines (grasshoppers), a pre-Hispanic delicacy. This unique blend of European and indigenous ingredients continues to define Oaxacan empanadas today.

Empanadas likely gained popularity in Oaxaca due to their portability and versatility. They were perfect for travelers and laborers, providing a satisfying and convenient meal. Street vendors began selling empanadas, further increasing their popularity throughout the region.

The types of empanadas found in Oaxaca vary depending on the region and occasion. Some popular varieties include:

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- Empanadas de amarillo: Filled with yellow mole, a rich and savory sauce.
- Empanadas de mole negro: Featuring the famous black mole of Oaxaca.
- Empanadas de viento: Baked or fried empanadas with air pockets inside, filled with various savory ingredients.
- Empanadas de cecina: Packed with cecina, a thinly sliced, dried meat.
- Empanadas de chapulines: A unique Oaxacan specialty filled with grasshoppers.

Today, empanadas remain an essential part of Oaxacan cuisine. They are enjoyed for breakfast, as a midday snack, or even as a main course. From street vendors to high-end restaurants, empanadas offer a delicious and affordable way to experience the region's vibrant flavors. Their presence stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Oaxacan cuisine, where generations of cooks have blended tradition and innovation to create a culinary masterpiece.

Here's a delicious and authentic Oaxacan empanada recipe with amounts, capturing the essence of Oaxaca's flavors.

Ingredients

Masa Dough

- 2 cups masa harina (corn flour)
- 1 ½ teaspoons salt
- 1 ½ cups warm water (more or less as needed)
- ¼ cup vegetable shortening

Filling (choose one or create your own):

Mole Negro Filling

- 1 cup cooked mole negro (recipe above or store-bought)
- ½ cup shredded Oaxaca cheese (or Quesillo)
- ¼ cup cooked, shredded chicken (optional)



Pictured: Memelas Doña Vale, owned by the legendary Valentina Hernández known as Doña Vale and made famous from Netflix Street Food: Latin America and Somebody Feed Phil S12 E2 located in the Central de Abatos de Oaxaca in Oaxaca city

Yellow Mole with Chicken Filling

- 1 cup cooked mole amarillo (see recipe online or use a good quality store-bought version)
- ½ cup shredded cooked chicken
- ¼ cup chopped poblano peppers (roasted and peeled)
- ¼ cup chopped green olives

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Other Ingredients

1 large egg, beaten for egg wash
Vegetable oil for frying

Instructions

Make the Masa Dough

Combine masa harina and salt in a large bowl. Gradually add warm water, mixing with your hands until a soft, pliable dough forms. If the dough feels dry, add more water a tablespoon at a time. Knead for about 5 minutes until smooth and elastic. Cover the dough with a damp cloth and let it rest for 30 minutes at room temperature.

Prepare the Filling

Choose your desired filling recipe and ensure all ingredients are cooked and cooled. If using mole negro, you can shred some Oaxaca cheese to add pockets of melty goodness.

Assemble the Empanadas

Divide the dough into 12-15 equal balls. On a lightly floured surface, roll each dough ball into a thin circle, about 4-5 inches in diameter. Place a spoonful of your chosen filling in the center of the circle.

Folding and Sealing

Fold the dough circle in half over the filling, forming a semicircle. Press the edges together firmly to seal, using a fork to crimp the edges for a decorative touch.

Frying the Empanadas

Heat enough vegetable oil in a large skillet over medium heat to reach 350°F (175°C). Carefully place a few empanadas at a time into the hot oil and fry for 2-3 minutes per side, or until golden brown and crispy. Drain on paper towels to remove excess oil.

Brushing and Serving

Brush the fried empanadas with the beaten egg for a beautiful sheen (optional). Serve warm and enjoy the taste of Oaxaca!



Pictured: Rosy from Taco Rosy located in the Mercado Benito Juárez in Oaxaca City

Tips

- You can pre-make the dough and filling ahead of time. Store the dough in an airtight container in the fridge for up to 2 days.
- Leftover empanadas can be stored in an airtight container in the fridge for up to 3 days or frozen for longer storage. Reheat them in a preheated oven at 350°F (175°C) for a few minutes until warmed through.
- Feel free to experiment with different fillings! Other popular Oaxacan options include cecina (thinly sliced dried beef), squash blossoms with cheese, or black beans with chorizo.
- Traditionally, Oaxacan empanadas are baked instead of fried. If you prefer baking, preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C), brush the empanadas with egg wash, and bake for 20-25 minutes, or until golden brown and crispy.

NIEVES

There are two main types of nieves (ice cream) particularly popular in Oaxaca, and neither have specific measurements set in stone. Here's a breakdown of both with approximations for an authentic Oaxaca experience:

1. Nieve de Leche Quemada (Burnt Milk Ice Cream)

This nieve features a unique caramelized or even burnt milk flavor.

Ingredients (approximate amounts):

4 cups whole milk

1 cup sugar

1 cinnamon stick

1 whole clove

2-3 egg yolks (optional, for a richer texture)

For serving (optional): crimson preserves (like cactus fruit preserves) or another tart fruit jam

Instructions

In a heavy-bottomed saucepan, heat the milk, sugar, cinnamon stick, and clove over medium heat. Stir occasionally to prevent scorching.

Traditional Method: Here comes the Oaxacan twist! You can achieve a deeper caramelized flavor by letting the milk mixture simmer and reduce until it reaches a light amber color. Be watchful to avoid burning.

Alternatively, for a slightly burnt taste, some Oaxacan recipes call for cranking up the heat and letting the milk scorch the bottom of the pan slightly.

Alternative Method: If you're concerned about burning the milk, you can simply simmer and reduce until the sugar dissolves and the mixture thickens slightly.

Remove from heat and let cool slightly. Discard the cinnamon and clove.

If using egg yolks, whisk them together in a bowl. Slowly whisk in some of the cooled milk mixture to temper the yolks, then whisk the yolk mixture back into the remaining milk.

Pictured: Front, Nieve de leche quemada with tuna



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Heat the milk mixture again over medium heat, stirring constantly, until it thickens slightly and coats the back of a spoon. Don't let it boil. Strain the mixture into a container and chill thoroughly.

Churn the mixture in an ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's instructions. Serve plain or with a dollop of tart preserves for a flavor contrast.

2. Nieve de Fruta (Fruit Ice Cream)

This type of nieve uses fresh or frozen fruit for a refreshing and vibrant ice cream. Here's a basic recipe with some Oaxacan flair:

Ingredients (approximate amounts):

2 cups fresh or frozen fruit (such as mangoes, strawberries, peaches, or guanábana, a tropical fruit common in Oaxaca)

1 cup water

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar (adjust based on the sweetness of your fruit)

1 lime, juiced (optional)

For serving (optional): Toasted pepitas (pumpkin seeds), a drizzle of agave nectar, or a sprinkle of ground chile (such as guajillo) for a sweet-spicy kick

Instructions

If using fresh fruit, puree it in a blender. If using frozen fruit, thaw it slightly and then puree.

In a saucepan, combine the fruit puree, water, sugar, and lime juice (if using). Heat over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the sugar dissolves and the mixture thickens slightly.

Let the mixture cool completely, then chill thoroughly.

Churn the mixture in an ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Serve plain or with your chosen toppings for an Oaxacan touch.



Pictured: Menu of Nieve options at Nieves Chagüita located in the Mercado Benito Juárez in Oaxaca City