

A close-up photograph of a traditional Mexican dish served in a dark, charred tortilla shell. The shell is filled with a vibrant green soup, likely a vegetable-based broth. In the center of the soup, there is a cluster of small, round, yellow corn kernels. The soup is garnished with fresh green herbs and other vegetables. The background is slightly blurred, showing a wooden table and other dishes, including a bowl of red sauce and a plate of meat.

ANCIENT DISHES &
WHERE TO EAT THEM

OAXACA

BY THE GOURMET ARCHAEOLOGIST

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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.

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ANCIENT DISHES AND WHERE TO EAT THEM OAXACA

Oaxaca's culinary scene is a vibrant tapestry woven with threads of ancient traditions, indigenous ingenuity, and contemporary influences. It's a place where complex flavours dance on your tongue, fresh ingredients burst with life, and every bite tells a story of the region's rich cultural heritage.

Oaxacan terrain ranges from mountains to valleys and coasts, creating diverse microclimates that foster a remarkable variety of ingredients. Tropical fruits, unique herbs, and an abundance of chilies contribute to the distinct flavour profiles.

Seventeen indigenous groups like Zapotecs and Mixtecs call Oaxaca home, each with their own distinct cooking traditions and specialties.

Oaxaca is the undisputed king of mole, a complex sauce that has transcended culinary boundaries. Made with a base of chiles, spices, nuts, and sometimes even chocolate, mole comes in a kaleidoscope of varieties, each boasting its own unique flavour. The smoky depth of mole negro, the vibrant zest of mole Amarillo, and the nutty richness of mole coloradito are just a few examples of the culinary artistry showcased in these sauces.

While mole steals the spotlight, Oaxaca's culinary repertoire extends far beyond. Tlayudas, giant tortillas piled high with beans, cheese, meats, and vegetables, are a hearty and flavourful option. Memelas, smaller and thicker tortillas filled with savory ingredients, offer a delightful street food experience. Enfrijoladas and entomatadas, tortillas bathed in black bean or tomato sauce respectively, are comforting and satisfying meals.

Oaxaca's abundant local ingredients play a starring role in its cuisine. Fresh fruits like mango, pineapple, and tejocote find their way into refreshing nieves (sherbet-like treats), while corn, a staple crop, takes center stage in tamales and various other dishes. Local herbs and spices add depth and complexity to flavours, while unique ingredients like chapulines (grasshoppers) and tasajo (dried beef) offer



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adventurous options for those seeking a truly Oaxacan culinary experience.

Oaxacan cuisine traditional techniques have been passed down through generations. From the stone grinding of corn for masa dough to the slow simmering of moles in clay pots, these methods imbue the food with a unique character and authenticity. Witnessing these techniques used in local kitchens offers a deeper appreciation for the cultural significance of Oaxacan cuisine.

I hope you enjoy Oaxaca, its ancient dishes, and the people who make them, cheers!



MAIZE

Maize, also known as corn, traces its beginnings to the southern reaches of Mexico amongst the verdant valleys and sun-drenched mountains. This fertile region provided the perfect stage for a wild grass called teosinte to eventually become maize.

Generations of indigenous peoples nurtured and cultivated teosinte, selecting the largest, most flavourful kernels for planting. Through a slow and deliberate process of selective breeding, these ancient peoples slowly transformed the plant into the current form we know today.

The exact location where maize originated within southern Mexico is still debated, although the Balsas River valley and Tehuacan Valley are considered leading contenders. Regardless of the precise birthplace, the journey of maize from wild grass to global agricultural mainstay began in the heart of Mesoamerica, forever linking its legacy to the land and people of southern Mexico.



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AVOCADOS

Avocado's origins lie in south-central Mexico and Guatemala. Archaeological evidence points towards the Nahuatl people, who called the fruit "huacatl," a word hinting at its testicular shape and possible aphrodisiac properties. Later, Spanish conquistadors adopted the name, morphing it into "aguacate," closer to the name we recognize today.

Indigenous peoples nurtured and revered the avocado tree. They cherished its shade, feasted on its creamy fruit, and even carved its pits into tools and ornaments.

SQUASH

The squash plant most likely originated in the valleys of Mesoamerica, specifically the region encompassing Mexico and Guatemala. Archaeological evidence from sites like Teotihuacan in Mexico suggests cultivation could have started as early as 5,600 years ago. The wild ancestor of the squash, known as tecomate, gradually transformed through selective breeding by indigenous peoples into the diverse squash varieties we enjoy today.

CHILI PEPPER

The fiery allure of chili peppers has captivated palates for millennia, but pinpointing their exact birthplace remains a bit of a culinary mystery. Mexico boasts the highest variety of chili pepper species (over 40), suggesting it as a center of domestication and diversification. Excavations across Mexico have unearthed chili seeds and processing tools dating back 7,500 years, indicating early cultivation. The Nahuatl word "chili," the root of "chili," originated in Mexico, supporting its role as the source of the global spread.

AMARANTH

The amaranth plant most likely originated in the highlands of Mesoamerica, specifically the region encompassing southern Mexico and Guatemala. Archaeological evidence indicates its cultivation as early as 6,700 years ago by indigenous peoples, making it one of the earliest domesticated crops in the Americas. Archaeological findings in these regions, including charred seeds and grinding tools, suggest extensive use of amaranth by ancient civilizations like the Aztecs and Maya.



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CHIA PLANT

The chia plant probably originated in the valleys of central and southern Mexico, likely originating in the region encompassing the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guatemala. Archaeological evidence suggests its cultivation dates back as early as 5,600 years ago, placing it among the earliest domesticated crops in Mesoamerica.

While the exact birthplace within this region remains debatable, the Tehuacan Valley in Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca stand out as potential candidates. Ancient civilizations like the Aztecs, Maya, and Olmecs revered chia seeds for their nutritional value, incorporating them into their diet and religious ceremonies.

AGAVE PLANT

The Agave plant, known for its role in producing tequila, mescal, and other spirits, has its roots firmly planted in the arid and semi-arid regions of the Americas. While the exact origin point is still debated, the strongest evidence points to Mexico, particularly the states of Jalisco, Oaxaca, and Michoacán, as its possible birthplace.

BEANS

The bean, a culinary star in countless dishes worldwide, can trace its ancestry back to the

valleys of Central and South America.

Archaeological remains like tools and charred beans excavated in Mexico and Guatemala reveal extensive cultivation as early as 8,000 years ago, making it one of the earliest domesticated crops in the Americas. The region boasts the highest variety of wild and cultivated bean species, suggesting it as a center of domestication and diversification. Throughout Mesoamerican history, beans held paramount importance, featuring in religious rituals, offerings, and daily meals, further solidifying their deep-rooted connection to the region.

SWEET POTATO

Identifying the origins of the sweet potato in Mexico is difficult. Despite the uncertainty, the strong case is for the Yucatán Peninsula. Studies suggest a specific wild relative, *Ipomoea trifida*, native to this region, played a crucial role in the sweet potato's domestication. Archaeological findings, like charred sweet potatoes in Belize, indicate cultivation as early as 5,000 years ago in the Yucatán and Central America. Mayan myths and indigenous names like "camote" further cement the connection between the Yucatán and the sweet potato's early history.

COCOA

While it's certain that Mexico played a crucial

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role in shaping the history and culinary significance of cocoa, pinpointing its exact origin within the country remains difficult. However, Southern Mexico and Guatemala Borderlands are possible locations. Archaeological excavations across this region have unearthed pottery sherds and grinding tools used for processing cacao beans dating back as far as 5,300 years ago, suggesting early cultivation and utilization. The Nahuatl word "cacahuaatl" and Mayan term "kakaw" for cocoa beans share linguistic roots, hinting at a shared cultural and geographic origin in this region. While the full picture is still emerging, genetic studies of wild cacao trees point towards potential centers of diversification within this area.

PAPAYA

Papaya is native to southern Mexico and Central America. Its domestication likely occurred in these regions thousands of years ago. The fruit was then introduced to other parts of the world by Spanish explorers in the 16th century.

Oaxaca is one of the main papaya producers in Mexico, and it's known for its Maradol papaya, a variety with excellent flavour and quality.



MISCONCEPTION: Columbus wasn't the first European to encounter many of the plants later associated with his voyages. Several, like tomatoes, potatoes, and corn, were already known and traded within existing networks throughout the Mediterranean and North Africa.



Mesoamerica, stretched from southern Mexico through Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. A region where diverse peoples, like the Aztecs, Maya, and Zapotec, carved empires and painted masterpieces long before Columbus arrived.

ZAPOTEC PEOPLE

The Zapotec people are one of the oldest and most important Mesoamerican civilizations, with a history dating back over 3,000 years. The Zapotecs are indigenous to the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, where their ancestors built the city of Monte Albán, one of the largest and most important cities in Mesoamerica before the rise of the Aztecs.

The Zapotec civilization reached its height between 500 BC and 500 AD, during which time they built a vast empire that stretched from the Pacific coast to the Gulf of Mexico. The Zapotecs were skilled farmers, engineers, and architects, and built complex irrigation systems, temples, and tombs. They were also skilled artisans, and they produced beautiful pottery, jewelry, and other objects.

The Zapotec civilization began to decline in the 7th century AD, and it was eventually



conquered by the Mixtecs in the 11th century. However, the Zapotec people continued to live in Oaxaca, and they still make up a significant portion of the population today.

MONTE ALBÁN

Monte Albán is a large pre-Columbian archaeological site in the Santa Cruz Xoxocotlán Municipality in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. The site is located on a low mountainous range rising above the plain in the central section of the Valley of Oaxaca, where the latter's northern ETLA, eastern Tlacolula, and southern Zimatlán and Ocotlán (or Valle Grande) branches

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meet. The present-day state capital Oaxaca City is located approximately 9 km (6 mi) east of Monte Albán.

Monte Albán was founded around 500 BC by the Zapotec people, who were one of the earliest and most important civilizations in Mesoamerica. The site reached its height between 500 BC and 500 AD, during which time it was the capital of a major regional polity that exerted a dominating influence over the Valley of Oaxaca and across much of the Oaxacan highlands.



Monte Albán is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most important archaeological sites in Mexico. The site is home to a variety of structures, including temples, pyramids, plazas, and tombs. The most notable structure at Monte Albán is the Great Plaza, which is a large, rectangular plaza surrounded by temples and other structures.

The site is also home to a number of important artifacts, including sculptures,



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ceramics, and jewelry. These artifacts provide a glimpse into the Zapotec culture and way of life.

MITLA

Mitla is a pre-Columbian archaeological site located in the Tlacolula Valley in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. It is best known for its elaborate palaces and temples decorated with intricate geometric mosaics. Mitla was the most important religious center in the Zapotec civilization during the Postclassic period (900-1521 CE).

The Zapotec people began to settle in the Mitla area around 1000 BCE. Over time, they built a complex of temples, palaces, and other structures. The Zapotec civilization reached its height between 500 BC and 500 AD, and Mitla became one of the most important cities in southern Mesoamerica.

In the 11th century, the Mixtec people conquered the Zapotec and took control of Mitla. The Mixtec continued to build and expand the city, and they added their own unique architectural style to the existing structures.

The Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in



Mitla in 1521. The Spanish were impressed by the city's wealth and beauty, but they also saw it as a pagan stronghold. They destroyed many of the city's temples and palaces, and they converted the remaining structures into churches and monasteries.

Despite the destruction caused by the Spanish, Mitla remains an important archaeological site. It is one of the best-preserved examples of Zapotec and Mixtec architecture.



COMAL

The comal is a traditional Mexican cooking tool that is used to cook tortillas, tamales, and other dishes. It is a flat, round griddle that is made of clay or cast iron. The comal is heated over an open fire or on a stovetop, and it is then used to cook food by direct contact.

The origin of the comal can be traced back to the pre-Hispanic era, when it was used by indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica to cook their food. The comal was an essential tool for making tortillas, which were a staple food for many Mesoamerican cultures.

The comal was also used to cook other dishes, such as tamales, enchiladas, and quesadillas. It was also

used to roast vegetables and meat.

CAZUELA

The cazuela, a traditional Mexican clay pot, plays a vital role in the country's cuisine. Cazuela's thick clay walls retain heat evenly, making it ideal for slow cooking stews like mole poblano or barbacoa. This gentle simmering allows flavours to meld and intensify, creating rich, complex dishes. While excelling at stews, the cazuela can also bake tortillas for tlayudas, crisp them for chilaquiles, or cook rice dishes like arroz con pollo. Its heat distribution ensures even cooking for various methods. The porous clay absorbs and releases moisture, creating a slightly smoky flavour that complements many Mexican dishes. This subtle

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eartheness adds depth to stews, roasts, and even baked goods. Cazuelas have been used in Mexican kitchens for centuries, passed down through generations. They represent a connection to culinary heritage and traditional cooking methods.

MANOS AND METATE

These humble stone tools, hailing from ancient times, continue to play a vital role in preparing traditional dishes. The metate, the larger of the two, serves as a grinding platform. Typically made of volcanic rock like basalt, it can be flat, concave, or trough-shaped depending on the region and purpose. Its rough surface provides the grip needed for grinding. Archaeological evidence suggests metates have been used in Mesoamerica for at least 7,000 years, predating even agriculture. They were essential for processing wild grains and seeds, laying the

foundation for early food preparation. While primarily used for grinding corn into masa (corn dough) for tortillas and tamales, the metate can also handle various ingredients like chiles, spices, herbs, and nuts.

The mano, meaning "hand" in Spanish, is a smaller, elongated stone used for grinding against the metate. It comes in various shapes and sizes depending on the specific task, with rounded ends for efficiency and smoother sides for finer grinding.

MOLCAJETE

A molcajete is no ordinary mortar and pestle, it is a volcanic rock that blends ingredients with rhythmic vigor, infusing dishes with earthy textures. Carved from basalt, a porous volcanic rock, the molcajete boasts a rough, pitted interior. These textured walls grip

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ingredients efficiently, allowing for the rhythmic grinding and mashing that characterizes its use. Its natural insulation also retains heat, further enhancing the flavour development of its culinary creations.

OLLAS

Ollas are built for heat, thick clay walls and rounded bottoms, ollas excel at slow cooking. Heat distributes evenly, creating a gentle simmer that coaxes out rich flavours from beans, stews, and soups. Dishes like birria, a slow-cooked lamb stew infused with chiles and spices, simmer to perfection in ollas, their tender meat practically falling off the bone. The porous clay allows steam to circulate, preventing dishes from drying out. This gentle moisture management preserves the natural juices and flavours of ingredients, creating succulent results. While slow cooking is their forte, ollas can also handle boiling rice, beans, and lentils. Their versatility makes them indispensable in any Mexican kitchen.



TIP: Best place to buy clay dishes is at the Thursday Tlacolula Market in Tlacolula



ANCIENT DISHES

The Zapotec people, whose ingenuity and deep connection to the land developed dishes that continue to tantalize taste buds today. While attributing specific origins in a culinary landscape shaped by centuries of exchange can be complex, certain dishes proudly proclaim their Zapotec heritage, each bite a testament to their rich lineage.

The undisputed protagonist of the Zapotec culinary stage is maize. This versatile grain, known as corn in other parts of the world, served as the foundation of their diet. Their mastery of its transformation is evident in the iconic **tlayudas**, oversized corn tortillas that serve as canvases for an explosion of flavours. Shredded meats, Oaxaca cheese, beans, vegetables, and salsas are found

on their crispy surface, a testament to Zapotec resourcefulness and love for vibrant combinations.

No exploration of Zapotec cuisine is complete without a nod to **tamales**. These steamed pockets of masa, filled with savory or sweet delights like beans, vegetables, or meat, showcase the Zapotec capacity for culinary innovation. Each bite, whether from a simple bean-filled tamal or a decadent creation studded with pork belly ("chicharrón"), bursts with flavour and warmth, a comforting reminder of Zapotec home cooking.

For the adventurous palate, **chapulines**, crispy fried grasshoppers seasoned with lime and chili, offer a uniquely Zapotec experience. Often enjoyed as a snack or sprinkled on tlayudas and guacamole, these tiny insects become a surprising source of protein and a conversation starter on

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any Oaxacan food pilgrimage.

Memelas, smaller and thinner corn tortillas served warm with various toppings, offer a portable and flavourful delight.

Oaxaca's claim to **mole** fame owes much to Zapotec traditions. The complex, dark mole negro, made with chiles, chocolate, spices, and nuts, holds a special place in their culinary repertoire, while other regional varieties like Amarillo and colorado also carry their fingerprint.

Another pre-Hispanic dish is **tetelas**. They are triangular-shaped corn masa harina dough that's filled with black beans and cheese and cooked on a comal.



TAMALES

Zapotec people in Oaxaca played a crucial role in shaping the tamale into what it is today. They perfected techniques for grinding maize into masa, developed diverse fillings like beans and meat, and adopted banana leaves as a flavourful and practical wrapping.



Restaurant: Tamales Doña Berta
Location: Located inside the Mercado Benito Juárez at Flores Magón 212, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Tamale Negro (pictured above), there are other options, but I'm not sure what they are
Note: This one is the most traditional type of tamales found in Oaxaca and you buy it from a couple of grandmothers at a very small food stand just inside the Benito Juárez Market

Restaurant: Tamales Geno Suc Mercado la Merced
Location: Located inside the Mercado la Merced, Av. José María Morelos 1522A, Ruta Independencia, Centro, 68000 Centro
What to order: Tamale Amarillo (top pictured above, middle tamale). Other options include Rojas, Mole Totomoxtle, Mole Hojade Plátano, Frijol (pictured above, right tamale), Chepil (pictured above, left tamale) and Dulce

Restaurant: Tamales Doña Mari
Location: C. de Manuel García Vigil 120, Ruta Independencia, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez,
What to order: Tamale Salsa Verde (pictured above left tamale), other options include Rajas con queso (pictured above, middle tamale), traditional mole (pictured above, right tamale), and on weekends, Amarillo, Hoja de plátano, and Solo fin de semana
Note: Outside food stand

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY TLAYUDAS

- Restaurant:** Tlayudas La Chinita (outside food stand)
- Restaurant:** Las Tlayudas de Mina y Bustamante (outside food stand)
- Restaurant:** Tlayudas "Los Agachados" Rosa y Jose (outside food stand)

NOTE : After the Spanish arrival in the 16th century, European ingredients like cheese and spices were incorporated into tamale recipes

TLAYUDAS

Tlayudas are a traditional Oaxacan dish that is often referred to as the "Oaxacan pizza". They are made with a large, thin tortilla that is topped with a variety of ingredients, including refried beans, asiento (pork lard), lettuce or cabbage, avocado, meat (usually shredded chicken, beef tenderloin or pork), Oaxaca cheese, and salsa. The tlayuda is thought to have originated with the Zapotec people, who traditionally cooked tlayudas over an open fire.



Restaurant: Tlayudas Doña Luchita
Location: Av. de la Independencia 1503, Ruta Independencia , Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Tlayudas Chuleta de res marinada (Tlayudas with a marinated chop)

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY TLAYUDAS

Restaurant: Tlayudas La Chinita (outside food stand)
Restaurant: Las Tlayudas de Mina y Bustamante (outside food stand)
Restaurant: Tlayudas "Los Agachados" Rosa y Jose (outside food stand)

Restaurant: Tlayudas El Negro
Location: Vicente Guerrero 1029, Zona Feb 10 2015, Obrera, 68080 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Tlayuda con Cecina (Tlayuda with meat that has been salted and dried)

MOLES

Oaxaca's nickname, "Land of the Seven Moles," is due to the region's deep connection and culinary mastery of this complex, delectable sauce.

Archaeological evidence even suggests moles existed in the region before the Spanish arrival. Unlike other regions with one or two signature moles, Oaxaca boasts seven distinct regional varieties, each with its own unique flavours and ingredients. The seven moles of Oaxaca include moles Negro, Rojo, Amarillo, Verde, Coloradito, Estofado and Chichilo.

Each mole's unique character comes from the abundance of indigenous ingredients grown in Oaxaca, from fiery chiles and fragrant herbs to rich nuts and sweet chocolate. This reliance on local produce ensures freshness and authentic flavours.

While mole is often associated with enchiladas or other meat dishes, its versatility extends far beyond. It can be used in soups, stews, marinades, dips, and even desserts, showcasing its incredible range.

SEVEN MOLES OF OAXACA

Here's a detailed breakdown of the key ingredients in each of the seven Oaxacan moles:

1. Mole Negro: Ground chocolate (dark, unsweetened), chili negro (pasilla, chilhuacle), tomatoes, onions, garlic, almonds, peanuts, sesame seeds, bread (white or tostada), plantains, cinnamon, cloves, anise, black pepper, allspice, cumin, sometimes coriander, raisins, piloncillo (unrefined brown sugar), and sometimes dried fruits like apricots or prunes.

2. Mole Rojo: Guajillo chiles, ancho chiles (roasted for smokiness), sometimes chiles de arbol or chipotle for extra heat. tomatillos, tomatoes, garlic, onions, spices like cumin, oregano, thyme, bay leaf, and piloncillo or dried fruits like raisins or prunes.

3. Mole Amarillo: Tomatillos, roasted poblano chiles, sometimes green serrano chiles for extra heat, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, sometimes pine nuts or peanuts, cumin, coriander, cloves, achiote seeds, garlic, onion, epazote, and hoja santa (optional, adds unique anise-like flavour).

4. Mole Verde: Green tomatillos, serrano chiles, fresh cilantro, epazote, pepitas (pumpkin seeds), sometimes sunflower seeds or peanuts, roasted poblano chiles, garlic, onions, oregano, and cumin,



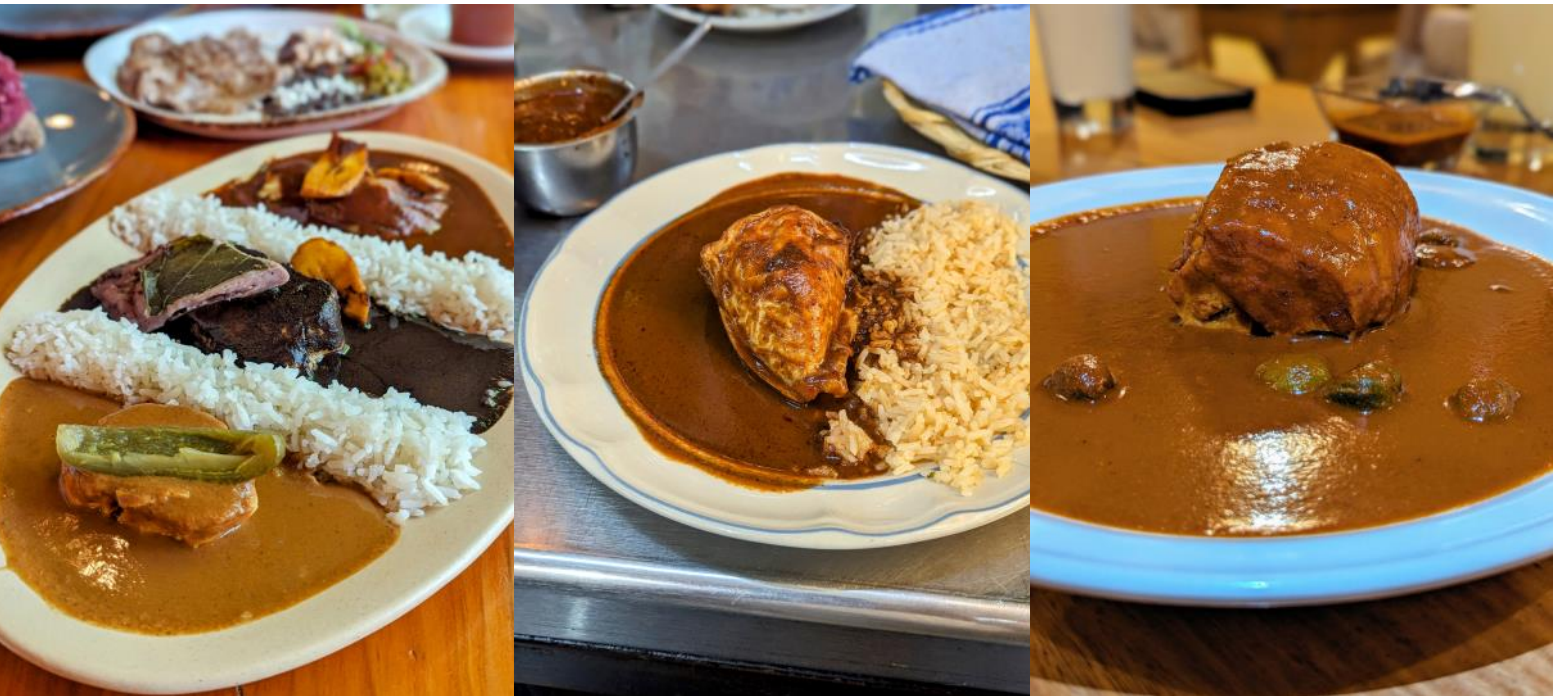
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black pepper.

5. Mole Chichilo: Beef broth (sometimes chicken or pork is used), ancho chiles, guajillo chiles, chipotle chiles for an added smoky heat, cloves, cinnamon, anise, oregano, thyme, achiote seeds, capers, olives, and raisins (optional).

6. Mole Manchamantel: Pineapple chunks, raisins, sometimes prunes or dried apricots, ancho chiles, chorizo oil or lard for additional richness and smokiness, garlic, onions, cumin, cloves, cinnamon, black pepper, epazote, and hoja santa (optional).

7. Mole Coloradito: Mashed plantains (add sweetness and thicken the sauce), guajillo chiles, ancho chiles, pasilla chiles, almonds, peanuts, sometimes sesame seeds, cinnamon, cloves, black pepper, cumin, and allspice.



Restaurant: Las Quince Letras Restaurante

Location: C. de Mariano Abasolo 300, Ruta Independencia, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Mole Trio (Mole Negro, Mole Coloradito, Mole Estofado Almendrado)

Note: If you are there on a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, you can order the Trilogía de moles indígena (indigenous mole trilogy which includes a black sequeza mole, green mole (Verde) and yellow mole (Amarillo))

Restaurant: Comedor Típico La Abuelita

Location: Located in the Mercado 20 de Noviembre, 20 de Noviembre 512, Oax Re Benito Juárez, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Coloradito con arroz y pechuga (Coloradito mole with rice and chicken breast)

Restaurant: La Casa del Tío Güero

Location: C. de Manuel García Vigil 715, Ruta Independencia, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Mole amarillo

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY MOLES

Restaurant: Los Muchitos Comida Vegana (Vegan)

Restaurant: Ancestral Cocina Tradicional

Restaurant: Levadura de Olla Restaurante

Restaurant: Lonchería El Paraíso (food stand located in the Mercado Benito Juárez)

CHAPULINES

Chapulines have been enjoyed by Oaxacans for centuries. Archaeological evidence suggests their consumption as far back as 3000 BCE. They are woven into the fabric of Oaxacan cuisine, appearing in various dishes like tlayudas (large tortillas), guacamole, and even blended into salsas, adding a unique savory crunch and earthy flavour. Before you get them as a filling or topping on a dish, you should try them on their own.



Restaurant: Chapulines Doña Jose

Location: Located in the Mercado Central de Abasto at Módulo Q 19, 68090 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Pick your spice level and size of chapuline for sampling

Restaurant: Any Chapuline stand in the Mercado Municipal Alarii (also known as the Zaachila Market)

Location: Located in Zaachila, Oaxaca

What to order: You pick your spice level and size of chapuline

Note: Go on a Thursday, this is the big market day

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY CHAPULINES

Market: 20th November market (Mercado 20 de Noviembre)

Market: Benito Juárez Market (Mercado Benito Juárez)

Market: Tlacolula Market (located in Tlacolula)

Market: Zaachila Market (located in Zaachila)

MEMELAS

Oaxaca's memelas aren't just miniature tlayudas. They are thick, fluffy corn tortillas with a slightly raised edge, like a miniature crater waiting to be filled with goodness. Freshly made masa, slightly thicker than a regular tortilla, cooked on a sizzling comal (griddle) until lightly charred and pleasantly chewy. Traditionally, a smear of unrefined pork lard (asiento) adds richness, followed by a layer of refried black beans, crumbly Oaxacan cheese, and maybe chopped onions and salsa.



Restaurant: La Guerita
Location: Located in the Mercado de Meced, at Av. José María Morelos 1522A, Ruta Independencia, Centro, 68000 Centro
What to order: The Huitlacoche (pictured above top right), Nopalitos memelas (pictured above bottom). Other options include Champiñones, Medula de res, Lengua de res, Tinga de pollo Cochinita pibil, Papas con chorizo and others.

Restaurant: Memelas Doña Vale
Location: Located in the Mercado Central de Abastos de Oaxaca, at Cosijoeza, Central de Abasto, 68090 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Salsa de Morita with prime rib
Note: This food stall was highlighted in Netflix Street Food: Latin America and seen on Somebody Feed Phil. Other ordering options include Salsa de tomate memela, and Especial de Phil memela (memela salsa morita, and tasajoy Huevo tierno)

Restaurant: Memelas San Agustín
Location: C. de Manuel Fernández Fiallo 309, Zona Feb 10 2015, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Nopalitos memelas
Note: Outside food stand

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY MEMELAS:

Restaurant: Memelas De Gio
Restaurant: Memelitas Santa Rosa
Restaurant: Tacos Del Carmen

TETELAS

Tetelas are a traditional Oaxacan dish consisting of triangle-shaped corn tortillas stuffed with a variety of fillings, such as refried beans, cheese, meat, or vegetables. They are a popular street food and can also be found in restaurants and homes throughout the state. Tetelas are made with fresh masa, which is a dough made from corn that has been soaked in lime water and ground into a paste. The masa is then shaped into triangles and filled with the desired filling. The filled tortillas are then cooked on a comal (griddle) until golden brown. Tetelas can be topped with a variety of sauces, such as salsa, mole, or crema.

Restaurant: Itanoní

Location: Av Belisario Domínguez 513, Reforma, 68050 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Tetela Clásica con Quesillo (Bean paste, cream and fresh cheese. Low Mixtec triangles, made with high altitude corn.

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY
TETELAS:

Restaurant: Barbacoa Obispo
Cocina Rural



Oaxaca is a haven for foodies, boasting a diverse and delicious culinary scene steeped in tradition and local ingredients. Here are some of the most common dishes you'll find in this vibrant Mexican state.



COMMON
DISHES &
WHERE TO
EAT THEM

MOLOTES

Molotes are small, pre-cooked bolillos (white bread rolls) that are soaked in various sauces, then sprinkled with toppings. They are typically bite-sized, making them perfect for enjoying on the go or sharing with friends. Molotes can be bathed in a variety of sauces, but the most common is Salsa roja, a spicy tomato-based sauce, often with guajillo chilies for a smoky kick. Once soaked in the sauce, molotes get a generous sprinkle of toppings that may include, Oaxacan cheese, chopped onions, and additional salsa.

Restaurant: La Garnachería

Location: Vicente Guerrero 700,
Zona Feb 10 2015, Centro, 68000
Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Molotes de Plátano
Fritos

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY

MOLOTES:

Restaurant: Garnachas Istmeñas
Sicarú

Restaurant: Las Quince Letras
Restaurante



CHILI RELLENOS

Chilis rellenos are a popular dish throughout Mexico, but they are especially beloved in Oaxaca. Oaxacan style chili rellenos are made with poblano peppers, which are roasted and peeled before being stuffed with a mixture of shredded chicken, cheese, and spices. The peppers are then dipped in a batter and fried until golden brown. Chiles rellenos are often served with a tomato sauce or mole sauce.



Restaurant: Comedor Leo
Location: Located in the 20 de Noviembre Local # 300-301, Oax. De Benito Juárez, 20 de Noviembre, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Chili Rellenos

Restaurant: La Torta Gigante
Location: Located in the 20 de Noviembre Local # 300-301, Oax. De Benito Juárez, 20 de Noviembre, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Chile Relleno Torta

Restaurant: La Casa del Tío Güero
Location: C. de Manuel García Vigil 715, Ruta Independencia , Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Chili en nogada de picadillo de cerdo o pollo

Notes: While the dish itself is relatively young, its roots stretch back to pre-Hispanic times. The poblano pepper, a native to Puebla, Mexico, was a staple in Aztec cuisine, and the use of nuts like walnuts in sauces dates back to Mesoamerican civilizations. The Spanish conquest in the 16th century introduced new ingredients like spices, dairy, and wheat, which laid the groundwork for the creamy walnut sauce, notice all the colours of the Mexican flag

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY CHILI RELLENOS:

Restaurant: Tacos Del Carmen

Restaurant: La Flor de Oaxaca

Restaurant: Casa de la Abuela

Restaurant: Comedor Típico La Abuelita

GARNACHAS ISTMENAS

Garnachas istmeñas are small, deep-fried corn tortillas, typically about 3-4 inches in diameter and slightly thicker than regular tortillas. Common toppings include, tasajo, thinly sliced, marinated beef, curtido, a pickled mixture of cabbage, carrots, and onions, queso fresco, crumbled fresh cheese adds a creamy and salty touch, salsa, a spicy red salsa made with tomatoes, chilies, and spices.



Restaurant: La Garnachería

Location: Vicente Guerrero 700, Zona Feb 10 2015, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Garnachas Istmeñas

Restaurant: Las Quince Letras Restaurante

Location: C. de Mariano Abasolo 300, Ruta Independencia, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Garnachas Istmeñas

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY GARNACHAS ISTMENAS:

Restaurant: Garnachas Istmeñas Sicarú

Restaurant: Garnachas Istmeñas

Restaurant: La Garnachería Istmeña

Restaurant: Terraza Istmo

PIEDRAZOS

Piedrazos are hard, toasted bread chunks served with a tangy and spicy pickled vegetable medley. The bread, often called pan de agua (water bread), is toasted until rock-hard, earning its namesake "piedras" (stones). The vegetables are a mix of onions, carrots, potatoes, and sometimes even jalapenos, all soaked in a flavourful brine made with vinegar, chiles, spices, and sometimes, fruit like pineapple or apple.



Restaurant: El Pocito

Location: Calz. Cuauhtémoc 112-201, Trinidad de las Huertas, 68080 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Piedrazos

Note: Go to their stand across the street. You can pick from 3 different levels of spiciness.

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY PIEDRAZOS:

Restaurant: El Piedrazo

Restaurant: Piedrazos Olguita

ENTOMATADAS

The foundation of entomatadas lies in the tomato sauce. Unlike some versions, Oaxacan entomatadas often use fresh, ripe tomatoes roasted or boiled, creating a richly flavoured and slightly smoky base. They might be blended to a smooth consistency or retain some texture for a rustic feel. Spices like garlic, cumin, and oregano and chili are often added, depending on the recipe.

Thin corn tortillas are dipped in the tomato sauce, and unlike enchiladas with a softer filling, entomatadas often use tortillas that are lightly fried or warmed on a comal (griddle) for a delicate char and slight textural contrast.

Restaurant: Fonda Rosita

Location: Located in the Mercado de Meced, Av. José María Morelos 1522A, Ruta Independencia, Centro, 68000 Ejido del Centro

What to order: Entomatadas

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY ENTOMATADAS:

Restaurant: Comedor Típico La Abuelita

Restaurant: El Típico

Restaurant: Fonda Sofi

Restaurant: Fonda San Diego



ENFRIJOLADAS



The heart of enfrijoladas lies in the rich black bean sauce. Unlike some versions, Oaxacan enfrijoladas often use dried black beans soaked and cooked with aromatics like epazote (a herb with a unique flavour), garlic, and sometimes chiles for a subtle smoky touch. Some recipes might even include toasted avocado leaves for an earthy depth. The resulting sauce is smooth, creamy, and packed with black bean flavour

Restaurant: Emperatriz Comedor

Location: Santos Degollado 104A, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Enfrijolada Con tasajo

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY ENFRIJOLADAS:

Restaurant: Yu Ne Nisa

Restaurant: La Panadera y el Chef

Restaurant: Restaurante Arugula

Restaurant: Restaurante Taniperla Oaxaca

Restaurant: Fonda Florecita

CHILAQUILES

Oaxacan chilaquiles typically use dried and toasted corn tortillas, unlike some versions that use fresh tortillas. This creates a distinct smoky aroma and a slightly chewy texture that contrasts beautifully with the other components.

While you'll find both red (salsa roja) and green (salsa verde) versions, Oaxacan chilaquiles tend to favor verde. This salsa is often made with tomatillos, chiles de árbol, and cilantro, resulting in a bright, tangy, and slightly spicy flavour. Red salsas, when used, might incorporate chiles like guajillo or pasilla for a richer, smokier character.

Restaurant: Fonda Florecita

Location: Calle Morelos Mercado La Merced Int 37 Zona del Pan, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Chilaquiles verdes con carne

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY CHILAQUILES:

Restaurant: Qué Chilaquiles

Restaurant: Las Chilmoleras

Restaurant: Catedral Restaurant

Restaurant: Comedor Chabelita



TACO

Unlike the flour tortillas common in northern Mexico, Oaxaca uses thin, handmade corn tortillas. They are often slightly charred on a comal (griddle) for a smoky flavour and subtle crunch. You'll find a wide range of fillings, from classic meats like barbacoa (braised beef) and carnitas (fried pork) to more adventurous options like chapulines (grasshoppers) and tasajo (dried, salted beef). Vegetable fillings like squash blossoms, huitlacoche (corn smut), and nopales (cactus paddles) are also popular, especially for vegetarian options.



Restaurant: Puesto de Barbacoas Carmelita
Location: Zaachila Market in Villa de Zaachila
What to order: Taco Barbacoa

Restaurant: Taquería Tacomer
Location: Av. de la Independencia 1505B, Ruta Independencia, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Try the Al Pastor, Bistec, Costilla, and Chorizo tacos

Restaurant: Tacos De Cazuela Iguanas Ranas
Location: Vicente Guerrero 718, Zona Feb 10 2015, Centro, 68000 Oaxaca de Juárez
What to order: Try the tasajo, barbacoa and chicken tinga tacos

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY TACOS:

Restaurant: Tacos del Carmen

Restaurant: Taco Rosy

Restaurant: Taquería La Flamita Mixe

Restaurant: Lechoncito de Oro

ENCHILADA

In Oaxaca, enchiladas are more than just tortillas bathed in sauce - they're a vibrant tapestry of regional influences and personal touches, offering a truly diverse culinary experience. Standard is with shredded chicken, however other options include, barbacoa (braised beef), tlaxudo (shredded beef cooked in maguey leaves), chapulines (grasshoppers) are vegetarian options flourish with ingredients like squash blossoms, huitlacoche (corn smut), and nopales (cactus paddles).

Restaurant: Fonda Sofi

Location: 20 de Noviembre 228, puestos 7 y 8, Oax Re Benito Juarez, Centro, Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Enchilada con cecina

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY CHILAQUILES:

Restaurant: Fonda Florecita

Restaurant: Cabuche

Restaurant: Comedor Típico La Abuelita



EMPANADA



Empanadas Oaxaqueñas are a type of empanada that originated in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. They are made with a dough that is filled with a variety of ingredients, such as chicken, beef, cheese, or vegetables. The empanadas are then fried or baked until golden brown.

Empanadas Oaxaqueñas are typically served with a salsa or sauce, such as mole or salsa verde. They can be enjoyed as an appetizer, main course, or snack.

Restaurant: Fonda Florecita

Location: Calle Morelos
Mercado La Merced Int 37
Zona del Pan, Centro, 68000
Oaxaca de Juárez

What to order: Empanada flor de clabaza

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY CHILAQUILES:

Restaurant: Empanadas del Carmen

Restaurant: Yu Ne Nisa

Restaurant: Casa Oaxaca Reforma

NIEVES



Nieves in Oaxaca are closer to sherbet or sorbet than ice cream. They usually have less milk fat, resulting in a lighter, airier texture and an intense focus on the natural flavours of their ingredients.

Oaxaca takes advantage of its abundant fruits, offering nieves in a kaleidoscope of flavours. From classic options like mango, pineapple, and strawberry to more local delicacies like tejocote (Mexican hawthorn), tuna (prickly pear cactus), and ciruela (Mexican plum), you'll find something to tantalize your taste buds. Some flavours go beyond fruit, reflecting the region's culinary heritage. Try leche quemada (burnt milk) nieves, with a smoky and caramel-like sweetness, or horchata nieves, inspired by the creamy rice-based drink.

Restaurant: Nieves Chagüita

Location: Located in the Mercado Benito Juárez at Oax. De Benito Juárez, Centro, 68000

What to order: Nieve de leche quemada with tuna

Note: Order 2 flavours and they will put them in one dish, the small size is pictured

OTHER LOCATIONS TO TRY

NIEVES:

Restaurant: La Oaxaqueña Nevería

Restaurant: Nieves Mariana

Restaurant: Glotomania

RESTAURANTS AND MARKET LIST WITH DISHES

MARKETS

Mercado Benito Juárez

Food stand: Tamales Doña Berta

- Tamale negro

Restaurant: Nieves Chagüita

- Nieve de leche quemada con tuna

Restaurant: La Torta Gigante

- Chili relleno torta

Mercado de Meced

Restaurant: Tamales Geno

- Tamales (amarillo (yellow one) and mole totemoxtle (green one))

Restaurant: Fonda Florecita

- Chilaquiles verdes con carne
- Empanada flor de clabaza

Restaurant: Fonda Rosita

- Entomatada

Restaurant: La Guerita

- Memaleas (huitlacoche, nopalitos con quesillo, and champinones)

Mercado 20 de Noviembre

Restaurant: Comedor Chabelita

- Platillo mixto de carnes (tasajo, cecina enchilada de puerco, chorizo, guacamole y frijoles)

Restaurant: Comedor Leo

- Chili rellenos

Restaurant: Comedor Típico La Abuelita

- Coloradito con arroz y pechuga

Restaurant: Fonda Sofi

- Enchilada con cecina

Central de Abatos de Oaxaca

Restaurant: Memelas Doña Vale

- Salsa de morita with prime rib
- Salsa de tomate
- Special from Phil (salsa morita, beef, and tender egg)

Restaurant: Chapulines Doña Jose

- Chapulines Doña Jose

Thursday Zaachila Market

- Chapulines

Restaurant: Puesto de Barbacoas Carmelita

- Taco barbacoa

RESTAURANTS

Restaurant: Tamales Doña Mari

- Tamale salsa verde, other options include rajas con quesillo and traditional mole

Restaurant: Tlayudas Doña Luchita

- Tlayudas chuleta de res marinada

Restaurant: Tlayudas El Negro

- Tlayuda (corn tortilla, cabbage, cheese) con cecina

Restaurant: Las Quince Letras

- Mole trio (mole negro, mole coloradito, mole estofado almendrado)

OAXACA MEXICO

- Garnachas istmeñas

Restaurant: La Casa del Tío Güero

- Mole amarillo

Food stand: Memelas San Agustín

- Nopales memelas

Restaurant: Itanoní

- Tetelas pasta de frijol, crema, queso fresco and quesillo

Restaurant: La Garnachería

- Molotes de Plátano Fritos
- Garnachas Istmeñas

Restaurant: La Casa del Tío Güero

- Chili en nogada de picadillo de cerdo o pollo

Restaurant: El Pocito

- Piedrazos

Restaurant: Emperatriz Comedor

- Enfrijolada con tasajo

Restaurant: Taquería Tacomer

- Al Pastor, Bistec, Costilla, Chorizo tacos

Restaurant: Tacos De Cazuela "Iguanas Ranas"

- Tacos tasajo, barbacoa, chicken tinga

NOTES: