

THE FOOD OF OUR NEIGHBORS

BY CHERYL BEERS

“The true cook ... is the perfect blend, the only perfect blend, of artist and philosopher. He knows his worth: He holds in his palm the happiness of mankind, the welfare of generations yet unborn.”—Norman Douglas, British writer (1868–1952)

Having Mexico as a neighbor is a food lover’s dream come true. The natural bounty of the land combined with the diversity of culture and heritage have created a varied and complex cuisine that has become appreciated for much more than the ubiquitous taco.

Three distinct groups have each left a mark on modern Mexican cuisine: native peoples, the descendants of the Spanish, and Mestizos—the result of intermarriage of the first two. The melding of cultures contributed to the melding of foods and food preparation techniques often referred to as *mestizaje*, or “mixing.”

The holy trinity of Mexican cookery is comprised of corn, beans and a seemingly infinite variety of chiles. The Spanish contributed domestic animals, sugar and cheese. Having traveled the globe, the Spanish also brought with them a fusion of Christian, Muslim and Jewish culinary traditions, which contributed to the development of distinct regional cuisines. The principal regional cuisines of Mexico are:

- Puebla—Spanish-influenced, use of complex mole sauces aided by the spice trade.
- Yucatan—Land of the Maya, fruit-based sauces spread over chicken or pork and baked in banana leaves. European influenced cuisine.
- Veracruz—Mediterranean influenced. Fish topped with tomatoes, capers and olives.
- Oaxaca—Famous for the seven moles of Oaxaca.

The traditional Mexican diet is a good example of a diet based more on plant foods and less on animal products—an eating pattern often recommended for disease prevention. It’s not uncommon to find meat, chicken and fish used sparingly, with plenty of fruits and vegetables used creatively as extenders. The result is as delicious as it is healthful. The importance of fruits, vegetables, grains and beans is evident when the traditional Latin American diet is expressed in food pyramid format (see illustration).

Unfortunately, acculturation often results in reduced consumption of rice, beans and traditional fruits and vegetables and increased consumption of salad dressings, butter, margarine and sweetened beverages. The diets of newly arrived immigrants in the United States have been shown to be far superior nutritionally to the diets of those who have lived here a generation or two.

Perhaps with more widespread availability and appreciation of Mexican cuisine beyond the familiar taco, Mexican Americans—as well as the rest of us—will find it easier to resist the pressure of American fast-food culture.

