

BURT WOLF

TRAVELS & TRADITIONS

OAXACA, MEXICO



About 10,000 years ago people living in the Near East figured out how to grow their food rather than just hunt and gather. It was our biggest technical breakthrough and it began our shift from hunting-gathering to farming. About 2,500 years later, it happened again when someone in southeastern China solved the puzzle. And then a third time when the Zapotec Indians worked it out around 3,500 BC in southern Mexico. Almost every farming community in the world can trace their history back to one of these original sites.

Another technical achievement of almost equal importance was the independent invention of a system of writing that could represent ideas and sounds as well



as objects. And that appears to have happened only twice. First, just before 3000 BC when the Sumerians developed their cuneiform writing and again in 600 BC when the Zapotecs developed their own system. Two of the most important developments in human history and the Zapotecs of Oaxaca were the only culture to develop both independently.

Today, there are over four hundred thousand Zapotecs living in and around Oaxaca. But Oaxaca is also the home of 15 other cultural and linguistic groups, which makes this region the most culturally diverse state in Mexico.

Oaxaca City

The city of Oaxaca was conquered by the Spanish in 1529 less than 40 years after Columbus arrived in the New World. At an altitude of 5,000 feet above sea level it has a mountain climate that produces warm days and cool nights.



The Spanish put a great deal of thought into the design of the towns they built in their New World colonies. The British, the French and the Dutch put up what-



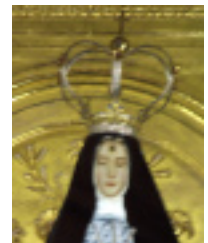
ever they could, as fast as they could, but the Spanish recreated the finest structures of Madrid, Barcelona and Seville. You need to look all the way back to the ancient Romans to find a society that worked as hard to reproduce its hometown art and architecture in its colonies.

The *zócalo* is the center of the city and the place where the community likes to hang out. If you stand at the center of the *zócalo* and look towards the cathedral, you will be looking north. The streets of Oaxaca run along a north-south grid that was laid out by the Spanish. Today the *zócalo* is the social center of Oaxaca—a good place to stop for a drink in one of the cafes that line the square, get your shoes shined or listen to an outdoor concert.

The Basilica

A few blocks from the *zócalo* is the *Basilica De Nuestra Senora de la Soledad*. Legend has it that in 1620 a donkey carrying a large box suddenly appeared on this spot and dropped dead. Inside the box was a statue of the Virgin of Solitude, which was taken as a sign that a Basilica should be built there. And so it was.

People come to the Basilica, purchase a little ribbon with a small replica of their afflicted area and pray for relief. Now, years ago I might have questioned the cause and effect relationship between the prayers and the cure, but some of our most recent research indicates that in many cases belief can be as strong as medicine. Inside the Basilica, over the altar, is the Virgin of Solitude, the patron saint of Oaxaca. She is considered to possess the power to heal.



Santo Domingo Church

The most outstanding church in Oaxaca is Santo Domingo. Its construction began in 1552. The architectural style is known as Baroque. Baroque was the re-



sult of two forces that shaped Europe and its colonies starting in the 1500s. It was a time when the kings of Europe were consolidating their power and wanted to show their strength by building huge palaces. It's when Louis XIV built Versailles. It was also the time of the reformation when Protestants were preaching against the outward glitter of the Roman Catholic Church. Catholicism responded with even more glitter. When something is described as Baroque, it is clearly over the top.

Next to the church was the Dominican Monastery, which is now the state cultural museum. The monks' cells have been turned into display areas for works of art that represent Oaxaca's historical periods—ancient jewelry, alabaster utensils, statues, and costumes.

Monte Albán

At the edge of the present city of Oaxaca is Monte Albán—a group of mountains in the heart of a great valley. It was the urban center of the Zapotec nation and was occupied for more than 1200 years starting in 500 BC. Their craftsmen leveled the tops of the mountains and carried up enormous amounts of material so they could build their city as close to the sun god as possible. And they did it all without pack animals or wheels.



During its golden age, 25,000 people lived here. Sixteen square miles of terraced land descended to the valley floor. The priests and rulers lived at the top, the peasant farmers on the bottom and the middle class in the middle.

The great plaza at the top covers 8 acres and has the remains of over a dozen huge buildings. The sides of some of the building were covered with high steps that are rather narrow. The shape gave them more height for fewer stones. When steps are low and flat, you need more of them. When they're high, there is

much less construction (and they help you reach your target heart rate faster).



My guide, Don Victor Gonzalez said, "This space was used for great processions and plays that presented the mysteries of their religion. You can see the number of steps all over. There must have been tremendous crowds."

The buildings are oriented toward the points of the compass and based on observations by Zapotec astronomers. They even had their own observatory in the

WHERE TO EAT

The state of Oaxaca is considered to be the gastronomic center of Mexico. It's divided into seven regions, each with its own cooking style. Fortunately, you can taste all of them in the capital city.

The cooking techniques of Oaxaca have been preserved for a thousand years and that is what gives the food its unique flavor. Like most Mexican cuisine, Oaxaca's food is a blend of native Indian and Spanish influences.

LOS PACOS

A restaurant famous for its *mole*, which is a puree of ground spices, herbs and dried chilies thickened with bread, pumpkin seeds or corn. Oaxaca is known as the land of the seven moles, one for each of the districts.

SUCURSAL SANTO DOMINGO
 CONSTITUCIÓN 104
 OAXACA, OAX. C.P. 68000
 MÉXICO
 TEL: [52] (9) 516 1704
 FAX: [52] (9) 514 0735
 E-MAIL: LOSPACOS@INFOSEL.NET.MX

1254 MARCO POLO ~ COCINA DEL MAR

The restaurant Marco Polo specializes in seafood cooked in an adobe oven. They bake seafood, vegetables and fruits, all with a pleasant woody flavor throughout that comes from the oven.

PINO SUÁREZ 806
 OAXACA, OAX. C.P. 68000
 MÉXICO
 TEL: [52] (9) 513 4308
 E-MAIL: MACG@PRODIGY.NET.MX

THINGS TO DO

SEASONS OF MY HEART COOKING SCHOOL

Cooking lessons and guided tours by renowned authority on Oaxacan cuisine, Susana Trilling.

A.P. POSTAL 42, ADMON. 3
OAXACA, OAX. C.P. 68101
MÉXICO
TEL./FAX.: [52] (9) 518 7726
E-MAIL: SEASONS@SPERSAOAXACA.COM.MX
WWW.SEASONSOFMYHEART.COM

ALFARERÍA DOÑA ROSA

The village of San Bartolo Coyotepec is known for its black pottery, especially the glossy black developed by the Real de Nieto family.

BENITO JUAREZ NO. 24
SAN BARTOLO COYOTEPEC
OAXACA, OAX. C.P. 71256
MÉXICO
TEL/FAX: [52] (9) 551 0011
E-MAIL: DNOJNCA@PRODIGY.NET.MX

THE BUG IN THE RUG

Visit the workshop of Isaac Vásquez to see traditional weaving techniques: wool is spun, dyed using natural pigments and woven into colorful rugs.

DOMICILIO PART. AV. HIDALGO, NO. 30
TEOTITLÁN DEL VALLE, OAX. C.P. 70420
MÉXICO
TEL: [52] (9) 524 4122

ARTESANIAS DE BARRO

The hand-painted whimsical clay figures of Isaura Aguilar. Her daughter Josephina maintains the family tradition.

PROLONGACIÓN DE MORELOS 428
OCOTLÁN, OAX. C.P. 71510
MÉXICO
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shape of an arrowhead pointing towards the spot where the sun sets. The Zapotecs had developed a 365-day calendar that was so accurate that improvements on it were only made during the past 50 years.

The area that has been excavated represents less than one percent of the total site. The potential for archaeological discoveries in Oaxaca is enormous.

The 2000-Year-Old Tree

In the center of the nearby town Santa Maria del Tule is a huge cypress tree, 126 feet high, with a circumference of 174 feet. It is probably the widest tree in the world. Like anything that's 2,000 years old, it's having a few health problems, but it's so loved by the people of Mexico that they moved the Pan American Highway off to the side of the valley so the fumes would not hurt the tree.

Mitla

About 30 miles east of Oaxaca City is the town of Mitla, which was an important Zapotec center, often described as the "Vatican of the Zapotecs." The high priests lived here in magnificent palaces.

The central archeological site is known as the columns group. It's built around two large patios. At the



north end of the patio is a long structure with a stonework frieze. In Tomb #2, there is a large round stone called "The Column of Life." According to local custom, if a man hugs this stone the space between his hands will indicate the years of life he has left.

The Craft Villages

The Spanish colonists needed the local production of thousands of things: furniture, pottery and clothing. These things were too expensive to import so European craftsmen taught techniques to the native artists who quickly mastered the skills, but the final result always showed a blending of both European and native Indian aesthetics. As a result the towns around Oaxaca are like craft shops.

San Bartolo Coyotepec

The village of San Bartolo Coyotepec is known for its black pottery. They're still using a technique that was developed 2000 years ago. The pottery with a matte finish is traditional and waterproof, but the most famous is the glossy black, which unfortunately is not waterproof. But it looks great. Sometimes we go for beauty over function.



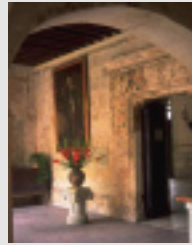
WHERE TO STAY



In 1976, the federal government of Mexico declared the historical center of Oaxaca a Zone of National Monuments. One of those national monuments was the Convent of Santa Catalina, which was built by the Dominican Order in 1576. For almost three hundred years it followed its founders instruction to receive poor and virtuous girls who wished to become nuns and devote their lives to God.

In 1861, however there were drastic changes throughout Mexico. The Reform Laws of the new republic were enforced and the property of the Church nationalized. The nuns and their students left the convent.

In 1975 the property was turned into one of the most beautiful hotels in Mexico. Named the Camino Real it is a perfect example of the how ancient, colonial and modern Mexico can be blended together.



CAMINO REAL OAXACA
CALLE 5 DE MAYO NO. 300
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MÉXICO
TEL: [52] (9) 516 0611
FAX: [52] (9) 516 1007
WWW.CAMINOREAL.COM/OAXACA

Ocotlán

About a forty minute drive from Oaxaca City is the town of Ocotlán where the painter, Rodolfo Morales was born. Morales earned a considerable fortune from his paintings and used a considerable portion of it to fund a local museum. It's the perfect spot to get a look at an unusual collection. The museum also contains a room devoted to the locally produced clay dolls of the Aguilar family. Most of the images are drawn from traditional rural life, but urban figures are creeping in.



dye that the English used on their red coats during the American Revolutionary War. The colored wool is then woven into carpets using traditional Oaxacan designs, but they will make any pattern you suggest.

Teotitlán del Valle

The town of Teotitlán del Valle is famous for its weaving. My favorite spot is called Bug in the Rug where they agreed to teach me how to make one, a rug not a bug. First the wool, which has just arrived from the sheep, is placed on a card and combed so the fibers all go in one direction. Then the carded wool is spun into strands. Natural dyes are used to give the strands color. Their most famous dye is made from crushed cochineal bugs. This is the same

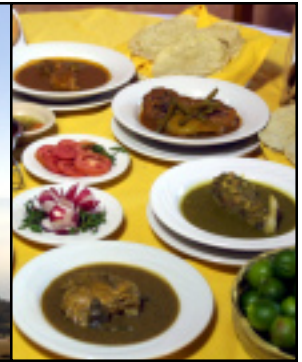


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MEXICO TOURISM BOARD
TOLL-FREE: 1-800-44-MEXICO
WWW.VISITMEXICO.COM

OAXACA HANDBOOK: MOUNTAIN CRAFT REGIONS, ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES, AND COASTAL RESORTS
BY BRUCE WHIPPERMAN
(MOON TRAVEL HANDBOOKS, 2000)

SEASONS OF MY HEART: A CULINARY JOURNEY THROUGH OAXACA, MEXICO
BY SUSANA TRILLING
(BALLANTINE BOOKS, 1999)



TRAVELS & TRADITIONS

RECIPES FROM

OAXACA, MEXICO

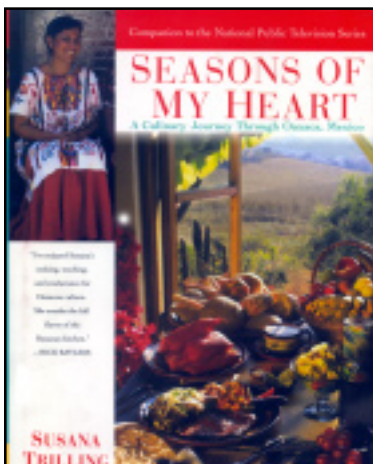
Flan de Coco Coconut Ginger Flan

Makes 12 servings

- ¾ cup sugar or enough to coat bottom of the pan*
- 1½ cups milk and 2 cans (12 ounces each) sweetened coconut milk; or 2 cups milk, 1 cup unsweetened fresh or canned coconut milk, and 1 can (12 ounces) sweetened condensed milk*
- 5 egg yolks*
- 6 whole eggs*
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract*
- 3 pieces crystallized ginger (1½ - 2 inches long), finely chopped*
- 1 cup sliced almonds, toasted*

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Bring one quart of water to a boil.

In a thin sauté pan, cook the sugar over medium heat until it is brown and bubbly. (Do not stir while it is cooking, or you will get spun sugar and a big mess.) Watch the pan closely and lift the pan off the burner if the sugar is cooking quickly or unevenly. Shake the pan to distribute the melting sugar. When the sugar is completely caramelized, pour the hot mixture into the bottom of a 3-quart flan mold, Bundt pan, loaf pan or individual molds. Rotate the mold(s) in your hands, using potholders, so that the sugar syrup covers the entire bottom of the pan. Set aside. Please be careful, because the



sugar is extremely hot, and it can burn your skin.

In a medium mixing bowl, combine the milk, sweetened coconut milk, (or unsweetened coconut milk and sweetened condensed milk), egg

yolks, eggs, vanilla, and ginger and whisk well. Pour the batter over the caramelized sugar in the mold, making sure to evenly distribute the crystallized ginger. Top with the sliced almonds.

Place the flan into another pan a bit larger. Add the hot water to the large pan around the flan mold. Cover with a lid or thin foil so that both pans are covered completely (bain-marie). Bake the flan for 1 hour or until a knife inserted in the middle comes out clean. Remove the flan from the water bath and chill it in the refrigerator for at least 3 hours. To serve, loosen the sides with a knife and flip the flan mold over onto a platter. Garnish with flowers or fresh fruit and serve.

Hint: It is better to make this a day ahead and chill it until it is as icy cold as possible, so that the flavors have time to blend.



Chocolate de Agua Hot Chocolate Made with Water

Makes 4 cups

4-5 ounces first-class Mexican chocolate (depending on your preference), broken pieces

In a 2-quart *jarra* or saucepan, bring 4 cups of water to a boil. Just before it starts boiling, add the chocolate pieces. Remove the pan from the heat. With a *molinillo* or a wire whisk, whip the chocolate continually until the pieces melt. When the chocolate has a thick layer of foam on top, serve in ceramic bowls or mugs.

Hint: You can make chocolate con leche by substituting milk for the water and increasing the chocolate to 6 ounces.



ALL RECIPES APPEAR COURTESY OF SUSANA TRILLING. EXCERPTED FROM "SEASONS OF MY HEART, A CULINARY JOURNEY THROUGH OAXACA, MEXICO" (BALLANTINE BOOKS, 1999, ISBN 0-345-42596-0)

Mole Coloradito Oaxaqueño Oaxacan Coloradito Mole

Makes 8 servings

Seasoning ingredients for chicken stock:

- 7 pounds chicken parts (including necks, backs, and feet), or 2 whole chickens, cut up*
- 2 large white onions, each studded with 1 whole clove*
- 4 celery ribs with leaves, or 1 large celery heart with leaves*
- 1 large head of garlic*
- 4 carrots, peeled and thickly sliced*
- 2 bay leaves*
- 2 chile de árbol or chile japonés*
- 6 black peppercorns*
- 2 sprigs of thyme, or 1/4 teaspoon dried*
- 2 whole allspice*
- Salt to taste, approximately 2 tablespoons*

Ingredients for mole

- 1½ chickens (about 4½ pounds), cut into 8 servings, reserving the back and neck for stock*
- 18 chiles anchos (about 9 ounces), stemmed and seeded*
- 21 chiles guajillos (about 4½ ounces), stemmed and seeded*
- 2 black peppercorns*
- 2 whole cloves*
- 1 whole allspice*
- 1 piece of Mexican cinnamon stick, about 1 inch long*
- ½ small head garlic, cloves separated*
- 1 small white onion, quartered*
- 1 pound ripe tomatoes (2 medium to large round or 8-10 plum), quartered*
- 1 sprig fresh marjoram or Oaxacan oregano or ½ teaspoon dried*
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon sunflower or vegetable oil*
- ½ ripe plantain, sliced*
- ½ bolillo or French roll, sliced*
- 1 tablespoon raisins*
- 5 whole, unpeeled almonds*
- 3 tablespoons lard, sunflower or vegetable oil*
- ½ cup sesame seeds*
- 2 bars Mexican chocolate (3 ounces each), or to taste*
- Salt to taste*

In a heavy 8-quart stockpot, heat 6 quarts water and the seasoning ingredients to a boil. Add the chicken pieces and lower heat to simmer. Cover and cook the chicken for about 35 to 45 minutes or until the meat is tender and the juices run clear when the dark meat is pierced with a fork. Remove the chicken, strain, and reserve the stock.

Bring 2 quarts of water to boil. On a 10-inch dry comal, griddle or in a cast-iron frying pan over low heat, toast the chiles on both sides, for about 10 minutes, toasting the chiles anchos a bit slower and longer than the chiles

guajillos, because of their thicker skins. Toast them on both sides until their skins start to blister and they give off their aroma. Remove the chiles from the comal or pan, place them in a medium bowl, and cover with the hot water. Soak the chiles for 20 minutes, turning to soften them. Puree in the blender, using as little of the chile water as possible, about 1 cup. Pass the puree through a sieve or food mill to remove the skins.

On the comal, toast the peppercorns, cloves, allspice and cinnamon stick. Quickly grill the garlic and onions, turning them often until they become translucent. Cool them, then puree the spices, onion and garlic in a blender with ½ cup of the reserved stock. Set aside.

In an 8-inch cast-iron frying pan, over medium heat, cook tomato pieces and marjoram or oregano with no oil and cook until condensed, 10 to 20 minutes. First they will give off their juices, then they will dry out. Puree the tomato mixture in a blender, then pass the mixture through a sieve or food mill.

In a medium frying pan, heat 2 tablespoons of oil over medium heat and fry the plantain slices and bread slices until brown, about 12 minutes. Remove them from the pan. Add more oil (if needed) and fry the raisins until they are plump, about 3 minutes. Remove them from the pan. Fry the almonds until light brown, about 4 minutes. Remove them from the pan. Place the plantain, bolillo, raisins and almonds in a blender with 1½ cups of the reserved broth and blend until smooth. Wipe out the frying pan and put over low heat. Add 1 teaspoon of oil and the sesame seeds and fry until brown, about 10 minutes, stirring constantly. Cool the seeds and grind in a molcajete or spice grinder.

In a heavy 6-quart stockpot, heat 1 tablespoon of lard over high heat until smoking. Add the chile puree a little at a time stirring constantly. It will splatter about a bit, but keep stirring. Lower heat to medium and after about 20 minutes, or when chile puree is thick, add the tomato mixture and continue to cook, about 15 minutes, stirring to keep the mole from sticking or burning. Add the onion and ground spices mixture and stir well. Add the pureed plantain mixture and ground sesame seeds, stirring constantly, about 10 minutes. Add 4½ to 5 cups of the reserved broth to thin out the sauce, then add the chocolate, stirring constantly. When the chocolate dissolves, add the salt. Let it cook down for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. The more time it has to cook the better.

Return the chicken pieces to the broth and heat through. Add more broth to the mole if needed. The mole should be thick enough to just coat a spoon, no more. Place a piece of chicken on a serving plate and ladle a large spoonful of mole on top. It should completely cover the meat. Serve with corn tortillas.