

# Beyond the Burrito: Foodways of Mexico

by CLAUDIA ALARCÓN

**T**HE IDEA ORIGINATED with Gail Sanders, Program Coordinator of LLILAS's Mexican Center, as she was planning events for the Mexico 2010 series to celebrate the dual anniversaries of the bicentennial of Mexican independence from Spain in 1810 and the centennial of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Gail thought there might be something LLILAS could do to explain the rich history of Mexican cuisine and to educate people on what really constitutes Mexican food, to dispel the misconception that it is all burritos and enchilada plates. Anthropology professor Brian Stross, who has led a graduate seminar on the topic of foodways, suggested a former student, a native of Mexico City and longtime Austin resident who had become a professional food writer. That would be me.

When I was a student at UT, the concept of studying food as a serious topic met with some skepticism, except from Stross, who through his encouragement helped launch my food-writing career. Today, foodways is considered a legitimate area of study, and many colleges offer courses and even degrees on the subject. Organizations like Slow Food International, the James Beard Foundation, and the Oxford Symposium are at the forefront of this movement.

Gail and I met in the summer of 2009 to discuss the possibility of organizing a series of lectures on the history of Mexican cuisine, and as soon as we started talking we knew we had something special in the works. Because of my connections in the world of food writing and research, Gail encouraged me to run with it in organizing the series. I had met many foodways scholars at conferences and events, so we came up with a list of potential speakers on our first meeting. The idea was to have representation of multiple disciplines and viewpoints to explore lesser known aspects of Mexico's rich culinary history,

from pre-Columbian times to the present day. My A list of speakers was ambitious: culinary historian Rachel Laudan, legendary cookbook author and researcher Diana Kennedy, historian Jeffrey Pilcher from the University of Minnesota, and Iliana de la Vega, a renowned chef and culinary instructor at the Culinary Institute of America in San Antonio. Our timing was right, and all agreed to participate. The result was the speaker series *Foodways of Mexico: Past, Present, and Future*.

I agreed to be the opening speaker in November 2009 with a presentation titled "A Brief History of Tamales," based on my research that will be published in book form by UT Press in fall 2012. In this talk, I offered some little-known aspects of the history of tamales, along with a few anecdotes, to open the door into their fascinating world. Ask any Mexican and they will tell you: one can hardly celebrate a special occasion without the presence of tamales, from baptisms to first communions, birthdays, and weddings. Although they may appear at first glance to be a humble, common item, tamales are really one of Mesoamerica's oldest foodstuffs, with roots that reach deep into the past. They possess a complex connection to Mesoamerican mythology, rituals, and festivities, and are represented



Iliana de la Vega.

in Maya art and hieroglyphics, as well as in Maya and Aztec codices. Because of their constant representation as an offering and association with depictions of the maize god of their complex myths, I propose that tamales may have been used as representations of the body of the maize god and also may be interpreted as a symbolic human sacrifice. As such, they have been offered in rituals for deities, for the dead, and at feasts for special occasions since pre-Hispanic times. Clearly, these ritual uses carry through to today, and tamales remain an important cultural link between the ancient and modern beliefs of the peoples of Mesoamerica.

The next lecture in the series, in February 2010, featured prize-winning historian Rachel Laudan, a tireless researcher who straddles the culinary and academic worlds, having been scholar in residence for the International Association of Culinary Professionals and winner of the Sophie Coe Prize of the Oxford Symposium of Food and Cookery. After living in Guanajuato for a number of years, she and husband Larry—a world-renowned philosopher of science and frequent visiting professor at the UT School of Law—moved to Mexico City in 2010. Her thesis that Mexican cuisine is shaped by the cuisine of medieval Islam has been much discussed by leaders of the Mexican culinary community, including chefs, food photographers, historians, anthropologists, and restaurateurs. In her lecture, “Transplanted Cuisines: Migrants in the Making of Mexican Cuisine,” Laudan showed how the usual story that authentic Mexican cuisine is just a fusion of Spanish and indigenous traditions is much too simple, and revealed how the French, Germans, Italians, Africans, English, Chinese, Japanese, Americans, and Lebanese, among others, have played key roles in its development. Her extensive research leads to insights into the origin of mole, pan dulce, chamoy, and other dishes and traditions that are considered iconic Mexican, begging the question “What can really be considered authentic Mexican food?” Read more on Laudan’s research and musings on Mexican culture and cuisine on her blog at <http://www.rachellaudan.com/>.

Thanks to my friendship with Tom Gililand, owner of beloved Austin restaurant

Fonda San Miguel, I was able to meet Diana Kennedy in 2003, when I published a review of her book *From My Mexican Kitchen*. No one has done more to introduce the world to the authentic cuisine of Mexico than Diana Kennedy. She has been an indefatigable student of Mexican foodways for more than fifty years and has published several classic works on the subject, including *The Cuisines of Mexico* and *The Art of Mexican Cooking*. She has been recipient of the highest honor given to foreigners by the Mexican government, the Order of the Aztec Eagle, and also has received numerous awards from gastronomic institutions throughout the world. Her latest book, *Oaxaca al Gusto: An Infinite Gastronomy* (UT Press, 2010), won the Cookbook of the Year Award from the James Beard Foundation in May 2011. It was on one of her visits to Austin during the pro-

Another ardent student of Mexican cuisine and traditions, Chef Iliana de la Vega has won international acclaim for her modern interpretations of Mexican food, especially the cuisines of Oaxaca. Formerly the chef at the highly regarded Oaxaca-based restaurant El Naranjo, she and her family now reside in Austin and run a trailer incarnation of El Naranjo in downtown Austin, with a full-service restaurant in the works. De la Vega is also chef-instructor at the Culinary Institute of America in San Antonio, where she teaches on Mexican and Latin American cuisines. Because we felt it was important to explore the cuisine in historic eras in Mexico, we asked her to focus her lecture on the watershed moments in Mexican gastronomy that gave rise to a distinct culinary identity. In her presentation, “The Culinary Birth of a Nation: Gastronomy and the Making of Mexican Identity” in November 2010, she talked about the evolution of Mexican cuisine from pre-Hispanic times to the classic dishes that were created in the convents and palaces of the colonial cities of Puebla and Oaxaca (and the myths that accompany such dishes), and how they became an essential part of Mexico’s culture. She also touched on the evolution of the cuisine through the turbulent era of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, including the essential role of the *soldaderas*, and concluded with a look forward at contemporary Mexican food, including the recent designation by UNESCO of Mexican cuisine as the first to be included in its Intangible Cultural Heritage list. “Mexican cuisines are my passion and my life. I have been studying and teaching them for years,” says de la Vega. “Food is a key component of any culture, and in Mexico we have deep roots in this field; food is very important for us. It was an honor to be invited to present with LLILAS at UT; it was a great experience. The most important part was to realize how many people attended, the auditorium was overfilled, and the people were engaged and had many important and interesting questions.” When asked to explain why it is important to study the foodways of Mexico, de la Vega does not hesitate with an answer. “Perhaps the obvious is that we are neighboring countries. I have seen that in the USA people know

## THE USUAL STORY THAT AUTHENTIC MEXICAN CUISINE IS JUST A FUSION OF SPANISH AND INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS IS MUCH TOO SIMPLE

duction of the book that we were able to host her as a guest speaker. More than 200 people attended her April 2010 “chat” on the “Unknown Gastronomy of Mexico,” an informal presentation of some of her extensive collection of slides taken during her years of culinary research throughout Mexico. These photos revealed a wealth of regional ingredients, dishes, and traditions that are seldom, if ever, known by outsiders. A fierce environmentalist, Kennedy pointed out how many of these fruit, vegetables, and herbs are becoming extinct due to devastation in their natural habitat, standardization of crops by multinational agribusiness, and introduction of foreign cuisines. She also mentioned how many of Mexico’s important ingredients, such as vanilla and hibiscus flowers, are now imported from foreign countries instead of grown in Mexico, economically devastating a large portion of the rural population.



De la Vega lectured on the evolution of Mexican cuisine from pre-Hispanic times to the classic dishes such as mole.

more about Asian cuisines than Mexican,” she says. “But also for the Mexican American population to understand the cultural and historical importance of our background is enlightening. All of us [immigrants] that live in this country [USA] should always be very grateful, as it is our home now. But we can contribute a lot to its greatness if we understand the value of our own history and past; we should be very proud of it!”

For the last lecture in the series, we invited Jeffrey Pilcher, a professor of history at the University of Minnesota who has long studied the history of Mexico through its food. He is the author of several books on the subject, including the award-winning *¡Qué viven los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (1998) and *The Sausage Rebellion: Public Health, Private Enterprise, and Meat in Mexico City* (2006). He is currently interested in the globalization of Mexican cuisine, hence his March 2011 lecture, “Planet Taco: The Globalization of Mexican Food.” Mexican food has joined Chinese and Italian as one of the three most popular ethnic varieties in the United States, although many people know that the tacos and burritos they eat are no more representative of the cuisines of Mexico than chop suey and pizza are of Chinese and Italian. Moreover, the American version of Mexican food has spread around the world,

to the chagrin of Mexicans who find Tex-Mex wherever they travel. Pilcher’s insightful and at times controversial lecture followed the history of Mexican and Mexican American food from the “chili queens” of San Antonio and the taco shops of southern California to contemporary global versions spreading throughout the world.

“You might conclude at first glance that the *Foodways of Mexico* lecture series is ‘just’ about food,” says Charlie Hale, director of LLILAS. “If so, guess again! This brainchild of Claudia Alarcón has it all: an engaging topic that draws large crowds from both the university and the community, and provides them with educational content at many different levels. In the first year of the series, we learned about Mexican history, national and ethnic identities, migration, *mestizaje*, politics, and globalization, all through the prism of Mexican cuisines. The *Foodways* series has been a resounding success for LLILAS and certainly is a ‘keeper.’ We are already hard at work on an exciting program for year two. Stay tuned!” ☀

---

*Claudia Alarcón is a professional food writer based in Austin and a graduate of the University of Texas.*

#### UT-FULBRIGHT VISITING PROFESSOR IN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND POLICY

LLILAS and the Fulbright Commission of Brazil are pleased to announce the University of Texas-Fulbright Visiting Professorship in Environmental Sciences and Policy, which brings an eminent Brazilian scholar to UT Austin for one semester each academic year from 2011 through 2015.

The visiting professor will be hosted by LLILAS, and the Brazil Center will assume a coordinating role in the program. In addition to the Fulbright Commission, the program is supported by five different units within UT, including: the Office of the President, the Jackson School of Geosciences, the LBJ School of Public Affairs, the McCombs School of Business, and the School of Law. The program is a testimony to the strong cross-university interest in Environmental and Brazilian Studies and to LLILAS’s leading role in bringing these diverse constituencies together, while attracting prominent Latin American scholars to the UT campus.

Dr. Oswaldo dos Santos Lucon of the Universidade de São Paulo was the first UT-Fulbright Visiting Professor in Environmental Sciences and Policy, here during the 2011 spring semester. Dr. Lucon taught the course Energy and Climate Change: Policies and Challenges, which provided an overview of the ongoing initiatives in emerging economies and developing countries that address challenges posed by climate change.

(See related stories pp. 22 and 26.)