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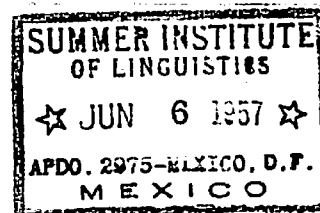
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Mixteco Woon-ling

Mixteco Food  
by  
Ruth Mary Alexander



The mainstay of the Mixteco diet is the tortilla, a flat corn cake. Without tortillas, the people feel that they have nothing to eat. Black beans and squash are also important to them. The seasonings that are used most are salt, chili peppers, and garlic. These play an important part in their enjoyment of their food.

To make the tortilla (staā), dried corn (nunī) is boiled in water (ndute) to which ashes (yaā) have been added. During the last few minutes of boiling, lime (caca) is also added. When the corn is soft, it is washed and then the women grind it on stones made for that purpose. The stone (yōsō) slopes a little away from the worker. She kneels in front of it and grinds the corn with another round stone (<sup>nda yōso</sup>nda yōso) shaped something like a rolling pin without handles. She then takes the dough (ñujen) and pats it into round, flat cakes and cooks it on a round clay griddle (jīyo) placed over their wood fire. There are two types of tortillas. For one kind, the corn is ground fine and then patted thin and round. These may be eaten soft, or they may be set beside the fire and heated until they are crisp (tīcasūn). The tortillas sometimes made for children are ground coarser and are thicker and more of an oval shape (staā xehndé). These satisfy the hunger better, they say, even though the same amount of corn is used. Tortillas are also made of wheat (staā trigú), using the same method described above. Those made of corn are preferred as a steady diet, however.

Fresh corn is also used, when it is available, for making tortillas (staā ndixi). These are thick and shaped like a

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triangle with rounded corners. They are made in the same way as dried corn tortillas, except that the corn does not need to be boiled.

The ground corn dough may be cooked in a different way, also. It is wrapped in corn husks or leaves and boiled to make tamales (suu). Chili, garlic, and a little bit of meat may be put into the middle of the tamales (tícōo). Sometimes the leaves of coriander (ciládrú) are also added.

Chili sauce (nducháhá) is made by grinding the chili peppers (yaha) by the use of a stone dish *cohō yuú* and pestle made for that purpose. Tomatoes, either the red ones (tánana cuehé) or little green ones with husks (tánana soō), garlic (ájú), onions (tácuun), and mint are ground along with the chili peppers and salt is added. Then it may either be cooked or eaten as it is.

One of their favorite foods is a type of hominy (ndujē). The corn is boiled with ashes. The skins come off, and then the corn is put into a large clay pot (quēsi) with water, salt (ñíí), and mint (mīnu). It is cooked all night. A large potful of chili sauce is also prepared. The hominy is put into a bowl made from half a gourd shell (ñajín) or a clay bowl (cohō). Chili sauce and a few chunks of meat (cūñu) are put on top of this, and it is all eaten with great relish.

Except for the two types of grinding stones and the clay griddle used for cooking the tortillas, the only cooking utensils used are clay pots. The food is usually boiled.

Black beans (nduchi jnúún) are cooked with chili, salt, garlic, and fat (xēhen) if it is on hand, and are then wrapped in tortillas

and eaten, or put into gourd or clay bowls and eaten with a tortilla used as silverware.

There are two kinds of squash (yáquin) grown in this area. One kind has a dark green rind and is orange inside (yáquin íñú). This tastes somewhat like pumpkin. The Mixtecos cut it into manageable pieces and boil it without salt. According to these people, the addition of salt spoils the taste of either kind of squash. The more common kind of squash has a shell with light and dark green stripes (yáquin tánduyú). When seen whole, it somewhat resembles a striped watermelon. The inside, however, is a very pale green. This is cooked with the addition of ground corn dough. Sometimes this squash is cooked before it is ripe, in which case chili is also added to it.

Greens of various kinds are also eaten. Some kinds are eaten raw (nduva), others are cooked (yuva). These are cooked with salt and chili. Cactus leaves (vihndē) may also be ground in the same way that chili peppers are, and added to the greens.

There is another way, too, of preparing cactus leaves. The thorns are burned off, and then the leaves are cut into small pieces and boiled with salt. Before this is eaten, chili sauce is added.

Fresh ears of corn (ndixi itu) and chayotes (naña), which are green, squash-like vegetables with thorny skins, are boiled just as they are. Potatoes (tácuftá) may also be cooked this way, or they may have ground corn and salt added to them and be cooked in chili sauce. Onions are boiled with salt. Green beans (ndíchi) are cooked with corn dough and salt. The husks of husk tomatoes

are removed, and the tomatoes are either cooked by themselves or added to other food. Mushrooms (jihī) are sometimes found. These are cut up small and either cooked by themselves or with other food. Red tomatoes are eaten only in chili sauce. Avocados (tīchi) are either eaten as they are, sometimes with salt, or else ground up in chili sauce.

Green fruit is cooked. Sometimes crude brown sugar (panélá) is added, but this is not necessary. All other fruit is eaten raw, and not as a part of the meals. It is considered as a sweet. The same word is used to refer to fruit as is used for candy (jeē vixí). Peaches (ndehē cuaán or ndehē traxnú), pears (pérá), apples (manzáná), and cherries (ndehē tājnúún), all of them very small, are grown in this area. There are also a type of pomegranate (tichíhló), cactus fruit (chāquán), berries (neñu), and a small, apple-like fruit (tānúu). Other kinds of fruit can be bought, and bananas (ndica) are the commonest of these.

When honey (ndūxi) is obtained, it is put into a gourd bowl, and a little bit of tortilla or a finger is used to dip it up. The honey of a little wild bee (ndūxi yocō) is eaten in the comb, sometimes with the little bees inside.

Although each family has goats and some have oxen, the people drink very little milk (léchú). Goats are never milked and the cows give milk for only a very few weeks after a calf is born. When there is milk, cheese (quésú) is made. Milk is allowed to sour and then is cooked. This is then ground in the same way that corn is, and the small round cakes of cheese are formed. These are then wrapped in corn leaves.

A drink called atole (tóli), which is common throughout Mexico, may also be made with milk. Finely ground corn dough is added and this is boiled. If there is no milk, the corn dough is cooked in water. A drink made from squash is also called "tóli" by these people. The green squash and corn dough are cooked together in enough water to make a drink. No salt is added to atole.

A drink that is very common to the Mixtecos is pulque (ndixi yávu). The juice (ndixi yavu) of the maguey cactus (yavu), otherwise known as the century plant, is gathered and fermented. Every family has its maguey plants. It is the custom to offer pulque to any visitor. During times when food is scarce, it helps to alleviate their hunger, partly by filling their stomachs with something else, and possibly partly also by dulling their sense of hunger through intoxication. However, the cause of much of their poverty can be traced to pulque.

Eggs (ndivē) are boiled and eaten in that way. More often, though, they are eaten raw by drunk people, who eat them in order to sober up. Eggs are considered a luxury and very few are eaten. Most of them are sold to those who re-sell them in larger centers.

Meat is eaten only infrequently. Goat meat and mutton are most common, pork is eaten, especially toward the end of the year, and beef is only rarely eaten. Chickens and turkeys are occasionally eaten, also. Meat may be boiled along with chili, garlic, salt, and mint, or it may be barbecued (ijnu). This is done only by men, and the following method is used. A hole is dug. Pine wood is put into the hole and rocks put on top of the wood. The wood

is set on fire and burns until it becomes coals. Some of the long leaves of the maguey plant are cooked. Raw maguey leaves are filled with ground corn dough and placed on the rocks over the coals. The meat is put on this and covered with the cooked maguey leaves. All of this is then covered with dirt and is left all night. In the morning the meat is taken out and eaten. The people like to eat coriander leaves with their meat.

The only eating utensils the Mixtecos of this area have are their gourd or clay bowls, tortillas, and their fingers or occasionally a broken piece of gourd or squash rind. The last three of these are used in place of silverware, and they serve nicely. At the end of a meal, each one who has eaten says, "Cútahū-yō", meaning "We are thankful", to each of the others with whom he has eaten.

This by no means mentions all that these Mixtecos eat. There are other delicacies, too. For example, grasshoppers (tīca) are roasted and thought to be very tasty. The area represented is that of San Esteban Atatláhuca, in the mountains of Oaxaca. In other areas, the diet changes in accordance with what can be grown in each area. This does, however, give some idea of how the Mixtecos of one area eat.