

Oaxaca: Savoring the Flavors of Home

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relatively flat area of mountainous Oaxaca state around the capital, Oaxaca city. There are more than 60,000 immigrants from these two regions alone in Los Angeles, says Gaspar Rivera Salgado, an assistant professor of sociology and American studies at USC and an advisor to two local Oaxacan groups. The largest concentrations, according to Rivera, are in the central city neighborhoods of Pico-Union, Koreatown and South-Central, and on the Westside from Mar Vista to Santa Monica.

Rivera is from Tecomaxtlahuaca in the Mixteca Baja region of Oaxaca. Mixtec immigrants are primarily farm workers and concentrate in agricultural areas, he says. Additional indigenous communities represented here are Triquis, who began to immigrate in the mid '90s, and Mixes.

"What distinguishes the Zapotecs from other indigenous groups is they are the entrepreneurs. They love business," Rivera says.

Fernando Lopez, founder of the Guelaguetza restaurants and of the newspaper *El Oaxaqueño*, is a Zapotec from Matatlan. His wife, Maria, is also Zapotec, but from Mitla, and they speak different Zapotec languages. Fernando came here in 1993, Maria in 1994.

"We saw a lot of Oaxacan people in this area, and we tried to bring the food to them. We thought the people would be happy to eat their food again," says Maria Lopez. Fernando Lopez and a sister, Soledad, opened the first Guelaguetza on West 8th Street near downtown Los Angeles in 1994. Oaxacans flocked here for a taste of home, as Maria predicted, and also to socialize with other immigrants.

In 1996, Soledad opened another Guelaguetza on Palms Boulevard near Sepulveda, where she cooks in her own style. This restaurant gained national attention when Martha Stewart filmed the making of black mole tamales, enchiladas and chicken with black mole sauce there in February for her television show.

On the Westside, Oaxacan restaurants had already become mainstream places to eat out, like corner Chinese and Thai, inspiring hot debates about their merits and urging Westsiders to delve more thoroughly into the cuisine.

The downtown Guelaguetza restaurant was so popular with Oaxacans that Fernando Lopez realized he needed more space. Two years ago, he opened a larger Guelaguetza on Olympic Boulevard in a building that formerly housed a Korean restaurant.

On the outside, at least, the building remains traditionally Korean, with a tiled roof and dramatically upsweeping eaves. But this cavernous Guelaguetza in the heart of Koreatown is a magnet for Oaxacans, who gather there to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, or just to relax in familiar surroundings. Well before noon on Sundays, the restaurant is jammed with families. Vendors stroll from table to table, offering bouquets or the women. A smartly dressed trio sings almost nonstop.

"This is a landmark place for Oaxacans to congregate, a place to go and sort of feel at home," Rivera says. "One of the wonders of this restaurant is that it has almost created a sense of Oaxaca here in the heart of Los Angeles."

The food has to be good. "Oaxacans are very tough customers," Rivera says. "They demand something traditional." And they want



The Montalvo family eats at Guelaguetza on West Olympic Boulevard. Oaxacans demand traditional dishes made with authentic ingredients.

GENARO MOLINA / Los Angeles Times

The Building Blocks of a Distinctive Cuisine

Many of the distinctive ingredients required for Oaxacan dishes are available here, either imported from Oaxaca or produced locally.

• **Asiento**—This soft, pale brown paste, made from the fat used for frying *chicharrones*, is an important Oaxacan condiment. Look for it in refrigerator cases in Oaxacan delis.

• **Avocado leaves**—The leaves of a fragrant Mexican avocado tree add an anise-like flavor to black beans, *barbacoa* and other dishes. Dried leaves are occasionally available in Oaxacan shops.

• **Black beans**—The black bean is a basic accompaniment to Oaxacan meals.

• **Cecina**—Thinly sliced pork either plain (*cecina blanca*) or marinated with red chile (*cecina enchilada*). Oaxacan meat shops sell *cecina* both ways.

• **Chapulines**—Tiny grasshoppers that thrive in the *milpas* (cornfields) in Oaxaca, sun-dried and fried to a dull red color, they're a popular snack.

• **Chepil**—The small leaf of a bushy plant, fresh *chepil* is often added to tamales or rice. Dried *chepil* is more likely to be available here.

• **Chilacayota**—The pulp of this large green and white squash is shredded and added to a sweet drink called *agua de chilacayota*. Oaxacan growers raise *chilacayota* in California. It can be found at some farmers markets.

• **Chile de agua**—A fresh green chile with orange markings, similar to the Anaheim chile in shape but shorter. It is often available in Oaxacan shops.

• **Chile chilhuacle**—A squat, dark dried chile that is essential to Oaxacan black mole. It is brought here from Oaxaca.

• **Chile costeño**—A small dried red chile, Oaxacan *costeño* can be found at some shops here.

• **Chile pasilla de Oaxaca**—Also known as *pasilla mixe*, this dark dried chile has a pleasant smoky taste. In Oaxaca it is sometimes stuffed. Like *chile chilhuacle*, it is a specialty item

markets and delis.

The long menus at the Guelaguetzas serve as guides to the dishes you would find not only here but also in Oaxaca city. These include several types of mole, enchiladas with mole sauce and



Avocado leaves, used as an herb



A chilacayota squash

available only in Oaxacan stores.

• **Chocolate**—Chocolate shops in Oaxaca grind cacao beans with sugar and flavorings such as almonds, cinnamon and vanilla to produce chocolate for use in moles and to combine with milk or water as a hot drink. One leading brand sold here is Mayordomo.

• **Chorizo**—Small, round sausages that retain their shape when cooked. They are seasoned differently from the crumbly Mexican chorizo sold in most markets.

• **Clayuda**—Also called *tlayuda*, this is a giant thin corn tortilla baked on a clay griddle. Clay-



Chapulines: tiny grasshoppers

udas are chewier than ordinary corn tortillas and keep for weeks. Look for them in Oaxacan shops.

• **Flor de calabaza**—Fresh squash flowers appear in many Oaxacan dishes, including soups and large tortilla turnovers called *empanadas*.

• **Hierba santa**—A large, anise-scented leaf used in a variety of Oaxacan dishes. The fresh leaves occasionally appear in Mexican markets.

• **Mole pastes**—In Oaxaca, cooks may prepare their own mole seasonings and take them to a mill for grinding, but they also use premixed pastes, which they season to taste. Oaxacan-style mole pastes can be purchased here.

• **Quesillo**—A flavorful string cheese formed into long ribbons that are wrapped in a ball. American-made versions available in supermarkets may look the same, but they lack the flavor of the Oaxacan original. Bakeries, delis and Oaxacan markets usually have Oaxacan *quesillo*.

• **Queso**—The Oaxacan version of *queso fresco*, a crumbly, soft cheese used as a garnish and in dishes such as *chiles rellenos*. Shops that carry *quesillo* usually have Oaxacan *queso* too.

• **Tasajo**—Thinly sliced, salt-cured beef.

Barbara Hansen

zuela, a Oaxacan sweet bread that contains a layer of chocolate. This shop also stocks Oaxacan herbs such as *hierba de conejo* (rabbit herb), used to season black beans; dried *chepil*, which is added to tamales; and Oaxacan thyme, which is considered more fragrant than the usual thyme.

The store even has cacao flowers, one of the components of *tejate*, a foamy cocoa-colored drink typically sold in markets in Oaxacan towns. Almost all Oaxacan bakeries sell *pan de yema*, a light, anise-scented egg bread for dipping in hot chocolate.

Place names that represent loyalty to the homeland crop up frequently in the Los Angeles Oaxacan community. Tlapazola restaurant in West Los Angeles is named for San Marcos Tlapazola, the hometown of the owners, Celerino Cruz, who is the chef, and his brother, Samuel. The inventive cuisine there has made the restaurant so popular it is crowded even on weeknights.

The ruins of the Zapotec capital provided the name for Monte Alban restaurant in Santa Monica. Murals on the walls surround diners with scenes of Mexico, including motifs that represent Monte Alban and other ruins at Mitla. A few blocks east is Juquila restaurant, named for a town with an image of the Virgin that is widely venerated. On Dec. 8, thousands of worshippers flock there for a festival in her honor.

El Texate restaurant in Santa Monica calls to mind the drink, usually spelled *tejate*, that it serves on the weekends. Hanging on the walls are photographs of Benito Juarez, the Zapotec who became president of Mexico.

The state of Oaxaca is divided into seven regions, thus a restaurant and a nearby bakery in Pico-Union called Las Siete Regiones de Oaxaca. Dolls in regional costumes decorate one wall of the restaurant. Panadería Antequera, a tiny bakery in Santa Monica, carries the Spanish colonial name for Oaxaca city.

In the next block is Artesanías Oaxaqueñas, which stocks many items related to the Day of the Dead, the November holiday when Oaxacans set up special altars with foods for their departed relatives and throng into cemeteries for elaborate celebrations.

The Guelaguetzas are named for Oaxaca's most important cultural festival, an extravaganza of regional dancing, music and food that takes place on two Mondays in the month of July. This year, immigrants from 50 Oaxacan communities will stage a similar festi-

What's on the Menu

• **Agua de chilacayota**—A sweet brown drink that contains strands of the *chilacayota* squash, bits of fresh pineapple and lime peel.

• **Barbacoa**—Goat or lamb cooked in a red chile sauce flavored with avocado leaves.

• **Chilaquiles**—Tortilla pieces that are fried, then mixed with tomato-chile sauce. In Oaxaca, torn-up *clayudas* are sometimes used.

• **Chocolate**—Hot chocolate is made with either water or milk and is served with a sweet, anise-seasoned bun called *pan de yema*.

• **Clayuda**—A large, thin, chewy corn tortilla that is seasoned with *asiento*, then coated with black bean purée and topped with *quesillo* and vegetables, or with *cecina* (chile-marinated pork), *tasajo* (cured beef) and/or *chorizo*.

• **Empanada**—Not the familiar pastry turnover but a large, handmade corn tortilla folded around a filling such as *huilacoche*, squash flowers with *quesillo* or chicken with mole *amarillo*, then grilled.

• **Entomatadas**—Folded tortillas that are fried, then dipped in a tomato-chile sauce.

• **Enfrijoladas**—Folded tortillas that are fried, then dipped in a sauce made of black beans seasoned with chiles and avocado leaves.

• **Horchata con tuna y nuez**—A white drink made from ground rice or almonds, topped with chopped pecans, diced cantaloupe and cactus fruit marmalade.

• **Memela**—Flat, oval cake of corn masa that is pinched up at the edges, spread with *asiento* and sprinkled with cheese. *Memelas* are often topped with tomato sauce or black beans.

• **Mole**—Oaxaca is known as the land of the seven moles, but there are many more, taking into account variations from cook to cook. Moles served in restaurants here include:

• **Mole negro**—The leading Oaxacan mole, black mole is composed of chiles, nuts, seeds, bread, bananas, raisins, tomatoes, chocolate and other ingredients.

• **Mole amarillo**—A yellow mole seasoned with cumin and cloves and thickened with masa.

• **Mole coloradito**—A slightly sweet orange mole.

• **Mole estofado**—A slightly sweet mole made without chiles.

• **Mole rojo**—A red version of mole *negro* that is not as dark because the proportions are different and the chiles are not toasted.

• **Mole verde**—Green mole, colored and flavored with fresh ingredients such as tomatillos, green chiles and the leaf *hierba santa*.

• **Nicuatole**—A pudding that is similar to flan but based on corn and coated with cerise coloring. Instead of caramel syrup.

• **Pan de yema**—A lightly sweetened bun or round loaf seasoned with anise and topped with sesame seeds.

• **Tamales**—Oaxacan tamales are often, but not always, wrapped in banana leaves. A favorite filling is chicken in black mole. For *chepil* tamales, the tiny *chepil* leaf is mixed into the dough. Tamales are also made with

specialties include hand-shaped oval or round *memelas* and *empanadas*, which resemble giant quesadillas. Then there are fried or grilled meats such as *cecina*, a thin cut of pork marinated with red chiles, and salted, thinly sliced beef

All of these are available at res-