

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

APPRECIATIONS; Of Memories and Mole

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Published: March 31, 2005

Not long ago, I was standing in the chill of a Napa Valley winery, wondering about the analogies of oenology. Several tasters were considering the wine in their glasses. What were their noses telling them? Did they detect the oak -- obvious -- or the blackberry, a little less obvious, or the traces of almond? I remembered some of the more far-fetched comparisons I have read -- the wine that called to a reviewer's mind a suspicion of wet dog or a vintage that suggested saddle leather. Why stop there? Was it terrier or retriever? A hunter-jumper saddle or a cutting-horse rig?

I thought of those analogies the other night at a popular Oaxacan restaurant called Guelaguetza on the edge of Koreatown in Los Angeles. We had ordered several of the moles -- thick, complex sauces -- on the menu, including a dense red coloradito, a brick-colored rojo and one called, simply, black. A three-piece band in white suits played near the entrance. Near the back, where we sat, a large-screen TV broadcast a Spanish-language version of "American Idol." The roar of the crowd in the restaurant was nearly opaque.

Then I took a bite of the black mole, stolen on the end of a tortilla from my wife's plate. It was a sudden infusion of silence. I tried to understand what I was tasting, but I had no language for it. I had never tasted so many things at once, so perfectly blended, all of them floating on what felt like a charred residue, a mouthful of mourning.

I took another bite and suddenly could not help thinking of a time when I was little and the town oiled the gravel road in front of our house. Workers laid the new oil and set out kerosene warning lamps -- dark metal globes with a guttering, smoky flame on top, which were somehow beautiful in the night. Nothing in life should ever taste like that scene, and nothing that tastes like that scene should be worth eating. But so that mole tasted to me at that moment in Guelaguetza: wonderful, tragic, impossible, and burdened by a profound grasp of reality. VERLYN KLINKENBORG