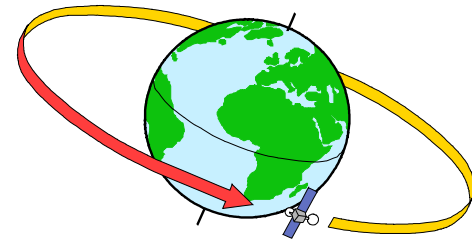


# Puebla in the Global Gastronomic Geography



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## Introduction

In 1872, Narciso Bassols published a cookbook, *La Cocinera Poblana (The Puebla Cook)*. With nearly two thousand recipes as well as essays on pastries, confections and sweets, this became the standard Mexican cookbook ( think *Joy of Cooking*). The eighth edition was published in 1913. It recorded a cuisine that included:

- “dry soups” of rice sauteed in fat and cooking in aromatic liquids.
- meat simmered or stewed or ground or made into meat balls.
- Sauces (moles, adobos, pipians, manchamanteles) aromatized and thickened by nuts, spices and chiles.
- Cane sugar turned into lightly sweetened fruit drinks syrups, pastes and confections with eggs, nuts, and fruits.

This Poblano Cuisine was central to Mexican culinary history.

It was also central to what Octavio Paz, Mexico’s Nobel Laureate, called “the global gastronomic geography.”

Understanding something about the global gastronomic geography from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century is the key to understanding the Poblano Cuisine.

To do that we will start small, with one particular dish, mole poblano, and follow the thread that leads from mole to the global gastronomic geography of the period when it was created.

## Mole: Distinguishing Legend and History

Although Puebla has many famous dishes, none has provoked more interest than mole poblano (mole from Puebla), one of the most famous dishes of Mexico. Recipes vary but usually include cinnamon, cloves, peppercorns, anise, coriander, chocolate, a variety of chiles, almonds, pumpkin seeds, raisins, bread and tortillas toasted, ground and combined into a harmonious whole.

The legend of the creation of this dish is repeated time and again. In 1680 Sister Andrea de la Asunción, a nun in the Dominican Santa Rosa Convent in Puebla, combined Old World spices with New World chocolate and chiles to make a new mestizo dish for a visiting dignitary.

The fact is that this story did not appear in print until 12 December 1926 when it was printed in the national newspaper *Excelsior*. It is a legend, not real history.

But like most legends this one does have an element of truth. And that truth has to do with the convent kitchens.

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Rafael Heliodoro Valle, *Anales del mole de guajolote* (Puebla: Museo Amparo, 1991).

A 1939 essay that explores these legends and opts for an indigenous origin for mole.

Rachel Laudan and Jeffrey Pilcher. "Chiles, Chocolate, and Race in New Spain: Glancing Backward to Spain or Looking Forward to Mexico," *Eighteenth Century Life* 23 (1999), 59-70.

## The Convent Kitchens

Few convent kitchens are as breathtaking as the one in the Santa Rosa convent in Puebla. But they all share certain features.

- When they were built they were absolutely up to the minute, equipped just like their equivalents in Spain and Italy: beehive ovens for bread, tiled bench stoves for cooking delicate dishes, clay and pottery vessels.
- They were backed up by a series of large storerooms and pantries that housed the ingredients and that were subject to careful inventory,
- They turned out meals for the nuns, usually simple meals but of Spanish ingredients: wheat bread, wine, etc.
- They turned out meals for the convent servants, simple meals of indigenous ingredients: tortillas, etc. .
- They turned out take out meals, sweets and desserts for patrons, special festivals, and paying customers.

Who were the nuns who ran these kitchens, that acted as a combination of the modern test kitchen, food service operation, and major caterer?

Loreto López, Rosalva and Ana Benítez Muro, *Un Bocado Para Los Ángeles: La Cocina en Los Conventos [A Bite for the Angels: Cuisine in the Convents]* (México: Clío, 2000).

A beautifully illustrated account of convent cuisine with modern versions of convent recipes.

## Nuns and Convents

Nuns (with few exceptions) had to be of Spanish origin, had to be able to read and write, and had to bring a dowry with them. Their prime duty was to sing the praises of god.

But they also taught children, created beautiful works of embroidery, and organized the kitchens. Some convents were stricter than others. But in many, the nuns had their own apartments, their own African or indigenous servants, and could receive visitors.

Thus becoming a nun was an appealing option for many women at a time when marriage was the leading alternative. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, one of the leading poets and intellectuals of the seventeenth-century Spanish-speaking world, entered a convent after five successful years at court. One convent cookbook is attributed to her (probably wrongly) but she was certainly an expert cook and her poetry is full of references to cooking.

For the nuns, the processing in the kitchen was simultaneously a metaphor of spiritual transformation and a very practical business that added value to the wheat, sugar, eggs, etc. from their haciendas and thus provided income for the convent.

So what were the convents doing in Mexico?

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Listen to any recording of Mexican baroque music. Wonderful.

Loreto López, Rosalva. *Los Conventos de Mujeres y el Mundo Urbano de la Puebla de los Ángeles del Siglo XVIII [The Convents and the Urban World of Puebla in the Eighteenth Century]* (México: Colegio de México, 2000).

## Convents and the Spiritual Conquest of the Americas

The convents played an important role in what historians call the spiritual conquest of Mexico. The military conquest of Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) by Cortés between 1519 and 1528 was an astounding feat. But even more astounding was the ability of the Spaniards by the end of the sixteenth century to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity and to create a network of towns across the Americas from Cordoba in the south (now in Argentina) to Saltillo in the north.

Using experience they had gained as they drove the Moors out of southern Spain (a process that ended in 1492), and directed by a series of royal decrees, the Spanish “explored and populated” New Spain.

Puebla de los Angeles was founded in 1531. After Havana and Mexico City it was one of the first cities founded in the New World. The planners drew inspiration from the Classical and Christian tradition: Plato’s *Republic*, Saint Augustine’s *City of God*, Thomas More’s *Utopia*. It was a “city of Spaniards” apart from the “pueblos of the indios.”

The poblanos obtained permission from the Spanish crown for one convent after another. Convents were a measure of the wealth and prestige of a city and after Mexico City and Lima, Puebla had more than any other city in the Americas.

And into Puebla, as in to other cities of the Americas, the Spaniards brought their cuisine.

## The Culinary Conquest of the Americas by Hapsburg Cuisine

The Spaniards who arrived in New Spain complained that there was “neither flour nor wine in the land.” Their own cuisine was the Haute Cuisine of the day. I call it Hapsburg Cuisine because it was the Hapsburg Dynasty that ruled Spain.

Because the Hapsburgs ruled much of Europe (Sicily and southern Italy, the Low Countries, and Austria with effective control of Burgundy and much of what is now Germany) Hapsburg Cuisine was spread widely across Europe. Countries such as France and Germany tried to imitate it.

Charles V of Spain ordered that no ship should sail to New Spain without plants and seeds. So the ships that landed in New Spain off loaded sacks of wheat seed, fruit trees in enormous wooden chests, cattle, pigs, sheep and goats and cookbooks by the catalan Rupert de Nola by Francisco Martínez Montañó.

Mijares, Ivonne. *Mestizaje Alimentario: El Abasto en la Ciudad de México en el Siglo XVI [Alimentary Mixing: The Provisioning of Mexico City in the Sixteenth Century]* (México: UNAM, 1993).

Gitlitz, David M. and Linda Kay Davidson, *A Drizzle of Honey: The Lives and Recipes of Spain's Secret Jews* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999).  
A fascinating account of Jewish food in Spain and New Spain that includes the most extensive collection of Hapsburg recipes.



## The Roots of Hapsburg Cuisine in Moorish (Islamic) Cuisine

Hapsburg Cuisine was so sophisticated because it derived from the cuisine of the "Moors" who ruled southern Spain from 756 to the late fifteenth century. And that cuisine in turn derived from an Islamic Cuisine was created for the rich between the 8th and 13th centuries in cities such as Cairo, Damascus and, above all, Baghdad. Certain general features occurred everywhere (though of course there were regional variations).

- Rice cooked pilau/pilaf style by first sautéing in fat or oil and then adding an aromatic liquid. It was often a main dish rather than an accompaniment.
- Wheat bread usually leavened.
- Lamb or goat, stewed or simmered, ground, pounded, made into meatballs.
- Sauces aromatized by nuts, spices or herbs, thickened by the same plus bread.
- Cane sugar used in lightly sweetened fruit drinks, syrups, jams, pastes, and confections of sugar with eggs, nuts, and fruits.

Hapsburg Cuisine made few modifications in this. The chief was perhaps the incorporation of pork as a signal that it was a Christian cuisine.

## The Eastward Stretch of Islamic Cuisine

As the Spanish were conquering Mexico, Islamic Cuisine was also expanding eastward. The Mughals conquered northern India, introducing Islamic Cuisine there.

Most of the dishes that we now think of as Indian

- pilaus
- aromatic stews such as koormas, thickened with nuts and spices
- sweet confections
- lightly sweetened fruit drinks

were introduced at that time. It was these dishes that caused Octavio Paz to wonder about the global gastronomic geography.

Indian merchants traded across Southeast Asia, regularly using the major trading port of Manila that was the entrepot between the Indian Ocean, the China Sea and the Pacific.

## **Puebla in the *Global Gastronomic Geography***

**To the East:** The road led to Mexico City and to Acapulco. From Acapulco from 1582 on one or more galleons sailed every year to Manila which the Spanish had captured in 1575.

The galleons went with silver, plants and cooking techniques that transformed Filipino food.

They returned with china, silk, spices and other luxuries. They also returned with “chinos,” the name for any Asian. In the colonial period, between 40 and 50,000 Asians lived in New Spain. One at least, an Indian girl baptized Caterina de San Juan, lived in Puebla giving rise to the story of the China Poblana.

### **To the West:**

The road led to Veracruz, the main Atlantic port, where ships went regularly to Havanna and Seville.

They carried silver and returned with laws and decrees, provisions for the well-to-do, and people (Spanish Christians and converso Jews and Moors, North and West Africans). About 5,000 Africans in the bishopric of Puebla by the middle of the seventeenth century.

**To the North:** The road led to the silver mines of Guanajuato and Zacatecas, the source of fabulous wealth.

**To the South:** Oaxaca, a rich and prosperous city.

The global gastronomic geography ran in a chain about 20 to 30 degrees north all round the globe and Puebla was a key link in that chain.

## Creating the Criollo Cuisine of Puebla

The nuns of Puebla could thus draw on the resources of the global gastronomic geography. At first they attempted to clone Hapsburg Cuisine in the New World, adopting little of the indigenous cuisine apart from certain ingredients that either they consumed in a different way (chocolate), or that fit into existing culinary categories (fruit, chiles, or turkey that stood in for peacock). Thus New Spain had a two-tier cuisine, Hapsburg Cuisine for the Spanish and the Maize Cuisine for the indigenous.

Unfortunately we do not know a great deal about the Maize Cuisine. The culture that had produced the pyramids had obviously produced a sophisticated cuisine, at least for the wealthy. The lengthiest reports come in the Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* which was composed in the late sixteenth century. Although he includes long lists of dishes, he says little about basic techniques of making salsas, for example. But what is clear is that the Spanish followed military and spiritual conquest with culinary conquest.

By the eighteenth century, criollos (Spaniards born in New Spain) were beginning to set themselves apart from Peninsulares (Spaniards from Spain) and create a distinctively Mexican cuisine. Just how this occurred and how the nuns and other made use of indigenous, African and Asian elements is only just beginning to be explored.

Juárez López, José Luis. *La Lenta Emergencia de la Comida Mexicana [The Slow Emergence of Mexican Food]* (México: Porrúa, 2000).  
The political, social and intellectual problems of creating a distinctively Mexican food.

## Sweets

One of the great traditions of Mexico are its sweets that derive from Islamic Cuisine. The tradition is particularly strong in Puebla. Many were made in the convents. Others were made by guilds and in the household.

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Guerrero Ferrer, Adriana. *La Dulcería en Puebla [Confectionary in Puebla]* (México: Conaculta, 2000).

A social history of sweet making in Puebla with recipes.

Compare Maria Grammatico and Mary Taylor Simetti, *Bitter Almonds* (New York: Morro, 1994), the story of sweet making in a Sicilian convent.

## **From New Spain to Modern Mexico**

Between the eighteenth century and the present, the world's gastronomic geography was transformed.

Northern Europe developed its own Cuisine, Western Cuisine, based on sauces that used fats, flour and meat juices, and sweet dishes that used sugar in combination with fats, flour, and eggs. With the expansion of the West, this became the fastest growing cuisine on the global scale.

Mexican cuisine continued to evolve after Independence from Spain. The first half of the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of specifically Mexican cookbooks. The second half was the time when the French version of Western Cuisine became fashionable among the well-to-do. Following the Revolution, in the 1930s Mexican intellectuals struggled to reunite the country. They suggested that a long tradition of fusion went right back to the beginning of New Spain. Mexican Cuisine, on this interpretation, had twin roots in indigenous and Spanish cooking.

As I have attempted to suggest, I think the story is more complicated (and much more interesting). So do many Mexican scholars. I have tried to sketch the outlines of what that story might be. But there's a lot of work to be done. And, luckily, a lot of Mexican historians and gastronomic scholars are getting on with that work.

