

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICA AND ITS FOOD

In the 15th century the wealthy classes of Europe depended on the East to supply luxury items such as spices, silks, and porcelain. The trade was done through a chain of merchantmen, which started in Alexandria and Damascus and finished in Venice and Florence. By the time the goods reached their final destinations, their prices were so inflated by the profits of all the middlemen that finding new and less expensive ways of getting these goods was a constant preoccupation. As the main trade route to the East was dominated by the Ottoman Turks, a search also began for an alternative route.

The incentive was strong. During the Middle Ages, food—especially meat and game—was hardly palatable without strong seasoning. Meat was butchered in early November, salted to preserve it, and consumed throughout the winter. Salting was the only way of preserving food and tolerance for saltiness was amazingly high, as food historians found when they recreated medieval dishes from recipes of that time; the results were impossible to eat. Spices were used in large quantities, to mask the salt as well as the rotting of the meat. Sugar did not then exist, so all sweet foodstuffs were made with honey and, again, generously spiced. Such practices, however, were confined to wealthy households as spices were very expensive.

Spain and Portugal, the most powerful maritime nations at the end of the 15th century, were also looking for a new route to the Orient. The discovery of such a route would lead to a monopoly in the very lucrative spice trade, and could also be used as a vehicle for spreading the Christian faith. Both nations were deeply

Catholic, a fact that would play a significant role in the fate of the countries they “discovered.”

Believing that the Earth was round, scholars thought that westward travel would eventually lead to the east. With that in mind, Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) set sail in August 1492 with the blessing and sponsorship of Queen Isabella of Spain. On October 12 he arrived in the Bahamas. Mistakenly believing that he had reached the Indies, he called the natives Indians. From this time forward Spain began its program of colonizing in earnest: expeditions went north towards Mexico and south towards the Andes. The men who went into these places in search of wealth and fame were called *conquistadores* (conquerors). The Conquest of the Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in Peru is deeply controversial, mainly because of the atrocities perpetuated by the *conquistadores* in the name of their king and the Catholic Church.

The continents of North and South America became known to Europeans as the “New World,” a term first used by Amerigo Vespucci (1451–1512), an Italian explorer. Ironically, it is he, rather than Columbus, who gave his name to the new continent.

The Mayas: *Central America and the Caribbean*
The areas now known as Honduras and Guatemala were once home to the Mayas, creators of the most advanced and sophisticated culture in pre-Conquest America. The Mayas flourished between the 4th and 10th centuries AD, and declined, it is believed, because of civil war, epidemics, and soil exhaustion. Temples and cities were abandoned to forest vegetation and people moved towards the

Yucatan peninsula, where descendants of the Mayas still live.

At its zenith the Mayan culture had amazingly rich and ornate religious architecture, and regular sacrifices were made to the gods in the hope of achieving a good harvest. When the Spaniards arrived, they found only vestiges of this ancient culture, but it endures none the less. Today, the people of the Yucatan peninsula still speak the Mayan language, have a cuisine distinct from the rest of Mexico, and physically look very much like their ancestors.

The Caribbean and Central America were abundant in fruit, wild birds, seafood, and vegetables, including sweet potatoes and cassava, which were unknown to the Spaniards. Maize was the main grain and more than 200 types were already developed by the time of the Conquest. It was eaten in a variety of forms, and its flour was made into a bread similar to the *tortilla* found in Mexico. Meat was very scarce in that tropical climate, but insects such as large spiders, worms, and giant ants were abundant and used in the local cooking. In fact, some types of worm are still regarded as a delicacy in Mexico. Chiles and annatto seed were, and still are, the most common ingredients used for flavoring.

The Aztecs: *Mexico*

The Aztec empire was relatively new when the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortes (1485–1547) arrived in Mexico in 1519. Its creation was made possible by an alliance between three rival tribes about 70 years before the arrival of the Spaniards. The first Aztec emperor, Montezuma I, started his reign in 1440 and expanded his

territory from the central plateau, where Mexico City is today, over 600 miles south to the border of modern Guatemala. When Montezuma II succeeded as the head of the empire in 1502, he started a campaign of conquering and absorbing new lands towards the south and the Pacific. Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, was the central point of the empire, receiving all the taxes collected from the conquered lands, and was also home to the major temples where human sacrifices were carried out.

The Aztec civilization was not as advanced and refined as that of the Mayas, but it was very organized none the less. Agriculture was all important and the land was owned by the community as a whole. Upon marriage, a young man would be granted a plot of land to provide for his family, and it would be given back to the community when he died.

Aztec society had a strict hierarchy, not unlike that found in European cultures. The emperor was at the top, followed by noble families, then priests, warriors, and peasants. Prisoners of war were treated as serfs or used for human sacrifice, which was considered an honor. It was very important to have enough warriors to be sacrificed, so additional grants of land were given to those who could secure prisoners during a war; sometimes wars were fought with the sole purpose of acquiring prisoners for sacrifice.

Religion ruled the life of the Aztecs and was the glue that held the empire together. Apart from the ruling élite, people had no personal wealth and no freedom of thought since intellectual and religious life were one and the same thing, closely guided by the priests

towards war, human sacrifice, and successful harvests. Ceremonial cannibalism was also practiced by the Aztecs and it became the main excuse used by the Spaniards for the massacre of the Aztecs and the destruction of their cities.

The variety of ingredients and cooking techniques found in Mexico was a source of amazement to the Spaniards. Tomatoes, peppers, sweet potatoes, chiles, chocolate, and turkey were among the many novelties the *conquistadores* introduced to Europe. The more bizarre parts of the Aztec diet, such as frogs, worms, spiders, lizards, small dogs, and fungus-infested corn, were not exported.

The Incas: Peru

The Incas were the last in a series of great civilizations that existed in Peru. They arrived in the highlands of southern Peru in the 12th century AD and the city of Cuzco became their administrative and religious center. The empire expanded north to Ecuador and south to Bolivia, spreading into parts of Chile and Argentina. It was ruled by the king of the Incas, who had unlimited powers and was considered the embodiment of God on earth.

Although writing and the wheel were unknown in the Inca empire, it was a highly efficient organization that managed to keep areas of difficult access together under a single ruler. Like the Aztecs, Incas had no private ownership of land, but they worked along more socialist principles. Crops were divided into three, one-third being kept by the farmers, one-third going to sustain the priests and the bureaucracy, and the final third going to the government, who distributed it to widows, the

aged, the debilitated, and nonproductive people. The government also had a policy of storing grain in warehouses for distribution in the event of bad harvests.

The Incas are famous for their irrigation systems, which harnessed water from the Andes and made it possible for the lower valleys near the coast to be cultivated. They also excelled at road building, having the whole empire linked by a complex system of roads and bridges—no mean feat considering the difficulties posed by the Andean mountains. Another of their skills was masonry, but many of their stone buildings were dismantled by the Spaniards and used in the construction of colonial buildings.

The Incas and the cultures that preceded them, such as the Paracas, Chimu, and Mochica, had highly skilled potters and weavers, and their surviving work testifies to their skill. Their highly crafted gold artifacts, however, were all melted down and sent to Spain.

With the conquest of Peru by the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro (1478–1541) and the breaking up of the Inca empire, the civilization fell apart. The complex irrigation systems were abandoned and the Incas who were not exterminated by European diseases or war retreated to the mountains.

The gold and emeralds that had attracted the Spanish to Peru were not the country's only wealth. It also had an abundance of fish and shellfish from the ocean and lakes, plus meat in the form of guinea pigs and dogs, among other foodstuffs. While important, maize would grow only in the lowlands, so it had fewer uses than in Mexico. It was mainly fresh ground and made into a type of porridge. In the Peruvian

highlands, where corn did not grow, potatoes and quinoa were the main foods. Over a hundred different varieties of potatoes were grown, and the Incas even discovered a process of freeze-drying them. Potatoes would be left out at night in the freezing mountain air and in the morning they would be trodden on to extract all their moisture. The process was repeated for a few days until the potatoes were rock hard and free of liquid. The *chuño* or *papa gaca*, as they were known, were then stored and used in soups and casserole dishes, or grated to make flour. The very same technique is still used by the highland people of the Andes.

The Birth of Latin America

The term "Latin America" refers to the eighteen Spanish-speaking republics of the western hemisphere, together with Portuguese-speaking Brazil and French-speaking Haiti. The term "Meso-America" is sometimes used to denote the area covered by Central America and Mexico.

In the 400 years following the Conquest, the influence of the Portuguese in Brazil and the Spanish in the rest of Latin America led to a new race and a different cuisine being born. The introduction of cattle, pigs, wheat, sugar, citrus fruits, bananas, coconut, and rice transformed the cuisines of Mexico and South America, but those new ingredients did not supercede existing ones. Old and new techniques also co-existed; for example, many foods continued to be boiled, or steamed in banana leaves or corn husks. With the arrival of the pig, however, fat became widely available and frying became popular. Indeed, a large percentage of modern Latin American food is fried.

Wheat did not make a huge impact in Mexico, where corn tortillas are still as popular as they were 500 years ago, but it did gain a foothold in the northern region. Wheat became widely used outside Mexico for bread making, and Spanish- and Portuguese-style bread is very popular for breakfast.

Rice was immediately absorbed into the local cuisines and, together with potatoes and corn, quickly became a staple food. With cattle came dairy products, then unknown to the natives, while beef became the major food crop for the southern regions of South America.

The Spanish, having lived under Arab occupation for over 700 years, already had a rich and varied cuisine, and were the major influence on the Spanish-speaking countries throughout the colonial years. In fact, traces of Arab cuisine can still be found in many recipes. The Portuguese influence on Brazilian cooking can be seen in their love of sweets, cakes, and candies, a field in which Brazilian cooks excel. Brazil and the Caribbean share a unique Creole cuisine thanks to the African slaves who were brought into the New World to work on the sugar plantations. With them came a variety of ingredients and flavorings that distinguished their cooking from that found in the rest of Latin America.

The 19th century brought many other influences, including the arrival of Italian, German, Japanese, Chinese, Arab, and other immigrant groups. New foods were incorporated into the already rich local repertoire, creating a cuisine that is greater than the sum of its diverse parts.

MEAT

When the Spanish reached Mexico in 1519, they were amazed to see the variety of wild birds, game, and other sources of meat available to the Aztecs. The turkey was already domesticated and much appreciated, together with a species of small dog that was specially bred for cooking. Insects, lizards, young ducks, rabbits, hare, and deer were all relatively common parts of the diet, and a taste for the exotic continues to this day, with such things as snakes, armadillos, giant ants, and monkeys being eaten with great gusto by many people.

In Peru, the Incas raised llamas, vicuñas, and a type of guinea pig called *cuy* that, even today, still provides more than 50 percent of the animal protein eaten in Peru. The basis of the Inca and Aztec diet at the time of the Conquest was grains and potatoes; meat was reserved for the aristocracy and royalty.

The Spanish introduced chickens, pigs, cattle, sheep, and goats. The pig and chicken became very popular and slowly replaced animals like dogs and lizards on native tables. As with all the other ingredients brought by the *conquistadores*, the new meats were mixed into the local cuisine, adapted into old recipes and became an intrinsic part of the cuisine of Latin America.

Today, with the exception of Argentina and parts of Brazil and Uruguay, which are large producers of beef cattle, beef is still reserved for special occasions. Poultry and pork are the most commonly eaten meats in Latin American countries, and in Peru and Ecuador *cuy* is still the most popular.

The average Argentinian eats one pound of beef a day, and in the southern part of Brazil beef is consumed regularly in great quantities. Uruguay produces and eats large quantities of lamb and beef, and Uruguayans enjoy their meat as much as their Argentinian neighbors.

With the introduction of pork, Latin American cooking underwent something of a transformation. Until then, no fat or oil had been used and food was mostly steamed in corn husks or banana leaves. With the pig came fat, and thus began the love of fried food. Today, in almost all Latin American countries, a large percentage of the food is fried, and oil is used generously in most dishes.

The influences in meat recipes range far and wide. From the Arabs, via the Spaniards, came recipes for meat cooked with fruit, raisins, nuts, and spices like cinnamon. From the Portuguese in Brazil comes a tradition of rich, slow-cooked stews, as well as a love of fried food. Added to this pot of influences were the culinary traditions of African slaves.

Chilies were the major form of seasoning before the Conquest and remain so today, although in countries where there was a greater European influence, such as Argentina, Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay, the food tends to be milder.

With thousands of miles of coastline on the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and the Caribbean Sea, the seafood in Latin America is varied, exciting, and abundant. Apart from Paraguay and Bolivia, which are inland, all the other countries are rich in fish and shellfish. Paraguay makes up for its lack of seafood with very good fresh water fish, like the much-praised dorado fish from the Paraguay River.

The countries richest in seafood are Chile, Peru, and Ecuador. The Humboldt or Peru current from the Antarctic washes the coasts of these countries, providing a variety of fish and shellfish unequalled elsewhere in Latin America. Chile alone has 2,600 miles of coastline and is the country with the largest variety of seafood. In fact, seafood constitutes the main source of protein in the Chilean diet. Many varieties of fish and shellfish are found only in Latin America, while others are common to the tropical or subtropical waters of the world. Chile boasts the famous *pibre*, a type of large sea urchin, and the *congrío*, a conger eel-type of fish; from Peru comes a pink and white scallop called *conchita*, and *corvina*, a relative of sea bass. Also found in Ecuador, *corvina* is widely used for making ceviches.

With the exception of the Caribbean and Bahia in Brazil, fish cookery throughout Latin America is kept simple. The slaves brought from West Africa to work on sugar plantations in the Caribbean and Brazil transformed their local cuisines into something unique from the rest of Latin America. They brought with them spices, vegetables, and flavorings. The similar climactic conditions made it possible for them to produce their native foodstuffs, such as okra, dried shrimp, yams, coconuts, plantains, and dendê or palm oil, in their new homeland.

While white male slaves worked in planting and processing sugar cane, the women did housework and cooked. The African cook, with an almost inbred capacity for making something tasty from very little, was, and still is, a major influence in the cooking of Brazil and the Caribbean. Tropical fish like grouper, dolphin fish or mahi mahi, scad, surgeon or doctor fish, and snapper or vara vara are now found in good seafood speciality shops. More commonly known fishes such as tuna, sardines, and salt cod are widely used in Latin American cuisine and available in most supermarkets. Of all the shellfish, shrimp are the most popular, being a main ingredient in many classic dishes. Crab and lobsters are also very popular, and usually cooked in a very simple way.

Flavorings vary from country to country, annatto oil being used extensively in Caribbean and Ecuadorean cuisines. Dendê or palm oil is the main flavoring for seafood in Brazil and, when used in combination with coconut milk, chilies, and peanuts, makes fish cookery an exciting experience. Citrus juices and salt are also standard flavoring ingredients.

All the olive oil consumed in Latin American countries is imported, mostly from Spain and Portugal, and is therefore rather expensive. Consequently, it tends to be used only when the budget allows and in special recipes.

POULTRY

One of the most popular foods brought to Europe from Mexico was turkey. It reached England around 1524 through Turkish merchants, so it became known as the "turkie cock," later just "turkey." In fact, the turkey has many different names, all wrongly attributing its origins to places like India and Peru. It slowly replaced the traditional festive birds used until then in England and France, such as swans and peacocks, and by the mid-17th century the turkey was already the established meat for Christmas dinner. Around the world it became the bird to use at large gatherings, especially in Latin America where families are usually large. The relatively low price of turkey meat made it accessible to everyone.

Migrating ducks, geese, and other wildfowl passing through Mexico and Central America were a source of game before 1500, and the Aztecs had already domesticated some types of duck, quail, and dove, as well as the turkey. To this day, there are many duck, pigeon, and even grouse recipes in Latin America.

Another bird quickly adopted by Latin Americans soon after the Conquest was the chicken. Together with the pig, the chicken is easily and cheaply raised on scraps, even by the poorest household, and it became the most popular poultry choice throughout the continent. Recipes using turkey or game were easily adapted to chicken, and new methods of cooking introduced by the Spaniards made it a complete and almost instant success. In the countryside, free-range chickens are bought alive in markets and killed at home, just before being cooked, but in city supermarkets the "battery" chicken is now all too common.

The following recipes have exotic and ancient influences: from the Mayan and Aztec cuisines comes the practice of using oily seeds to thicken and enrich sauces, while African slave cookery uses dried shrimp and okra. Chilies are often included and serve to unite all the ingredients and techniques of several very different cultures.

BEANS AND RICE

Beans are a staple food in almost any Latin American country, and they are served, in one form or another, at most meals. Together with maize and potatoes, beans played an important part in the diet of the Mayas and Aztecs in Mexico and Central America, and the Incas in Peru.

Black, red kidney, pink, pinto, haricot, lima beans, and peas are among the pulses native to Mexico or Peru, and were taken by the *conquistadores* back to Europe, where they were readily incorporated into the cuisines of Spain and Portugal before spreading throughout the Continent. In Latin America, it is a common habit to cook large quantities of beans and store them in the refrigerator ready to be used day by day. Cooks take pride in the way they prepare and serve their beans, so canned beans are not commonly used, although I have used them for convenience in many of the recipes in this book.

Rice was introduced to the New World in the 16th century and was immediately integrated into the local diet. Together with beans, it makes a "complete protein" and is the dietary basic in much of Latin America where long-grain white rice is the variety used most frequently. Rice recipes vary from country to country, but the final result has one common characteristic: tender, fluffy and separate grains.

TORTILLA DISHES

Tortillas are flat breads made from corn or wheat flour. Before the Spaniards introduced wheat to the Americas in the late 15th century, maize or corn was the main grain used to make breads. Corn has very little gluten, so it is difficult to make it into a leavened bread. As a result, the people of Mexico and Central America shaped corn dough into thin, unleavened cakes and cooked or toasted them briefly on a hot pottery griddle.

The Spaniards called the Mexican bread *tortilla*, the same name used for a popular round potato omelette found in Spain. With the integration of ingredients brought by the *conquistadores* into the local cuisine, wheat tortillas appeared, especially in the northern part of Mexico. The new leavened bread never replaced the tortilla in the Mexican diet, and many of the dishes tasted by the *conquistadores* are still very popular today.

Tortillas are the basis of numerous Mexican dishes, as well as being served as bread. The fillings used with them vary little; it is how the dish is assembled or cooked that makes for the variety.

VEGETABLE DISHES

When visiting a local farmer's market, it is interesting to see how many vegetables believed to be of local origin actually come from Latin America. Tomatoes, peppers, chiles, green beans, corn, avocados, all types of potatoes, to name just a few, are all "imports" but now form an integral part of many different cuisines.

Vegetables are also an important part of the Latin American diet, and in poor areas are the only foodstuff affordable. Root vegetables, such as potatoes and cassava, are favorites and have given rise to many recipes. Cassava or manioc is restricted to Brazil since it is one of the few Brazilian Indian foods incorporated into the Portuguese and African cooking that emerged after the colonizing.

The potato is important because of its social and culinary impact. Originally from Peru, potatoes were cultivated in the high Andes for hundreds of years before the Conquest. The Incas discovered a way of freeze-drying in order to preserve them, and the same method is still used today by Andean people. With more than 100 varieties, and colors ranging from black to bright orange, potatoes are a very important staple food in high-altitude regions, where rice and corn cannot grow.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century many South American countries received large numbers of immigrants from Japan, China, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. With them came a variety of different vegetables and fruits, which all found a place to flourish in the huge continent's many types of climate and soil. Today, food markets in São Paulo are full of vegetable stalls run by descendants of the Japanese immigrants. Further south, and in countries like Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, the European influence is most dominant. Germans and Italians settled in these areas because of the cooler climate and worked the land, just as they did in their homelands. Within a few decades their own food culture was established and they even started producing beer and wine. As with most Europeans, the staple diet is based on meat; vegetables play a smaller role in their eating habits.

The vegetable recipes that follow reflect the way in which local cooking has combined with imported cuisines. Main courses are followed by side dishes.

