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Viva Oaxaca!

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Sacred Grain: Corn in Oaxacan Life
- **Chapter 2** The Language of Fire: Native Chiles and Their Stories
- **Chapter 3** Bitter and Divine: Chocolate's Ancient Legacy
- **Chapter 4** Milky Threads: The Magic of Quesillo
- **Chapter 5** Earth and Spirit: Agave and the Culture of Mezcal
- **Chapter 6** Mole Negro: The Crown Jewel of Oaxacan Cuisine
- **Chapter 7** Tlayudas: Oaxaca's Crispy Canvas
- **Chapter 8** Memelas and Market Breakfasts
- **Chapter 9** Tamales of the Sierra: Wrapped Traditions
- **Chapter 10** Chapulines: Grasshoppers, Ancient Protein, and Street Snack
- **Chapter 11** Mercado 20 de Noviembre: Where Oaxaca Eats
- **Chapter 12** Tlacolula Sunday Market: A Feast of Colors
- **Chapter 13** Comedores and Cocinas: The Heart of Oaxacan Homes
- **Chapter 14** Atole and Tejate: Ancestral Drinks for Body and Soul
- **Chapter 15** The Daily Tortilla: Ritual, Craft, and Community
- **Chapter 16** Guelaguetza: Festival of Sharing and Unity
- **Chapter 17** Day of the Dead: Food, Memory, and Remembrance
- **Chapter 18** The Night of the Radishes: Edible Artistry
- **Chapter 19** Semana Santa: Flavors of Holy Week
- **Chapter 20** Seasonal Bounty: Wild Herbs, Flowers, and Foraged Flavors
- **Chapter 21** Zapotec Table: Tradition and Transformation
- **Chapter 22** Mixtec Foodways: From Highlands to Valleys
- **Chapter 23** Triqui Traditions: Resilience and Flavor
- **Chapter 24** Modern Oaxaca: Culinary Innovators and New Voices
- **Chapter 25** Going Further: Travel Tips, Eateries, and Sustainable Oaxaca

Introduction

Welcome to Viva Oaxaca! — a journey through one of Mexico’s most enchanting and flavorful regions. Whether you are a devoted cook, an adventurous traveler, or simply a curious soul craving a taste of something extraordinary, this book invites you to experience Oaxaca with all your senses. Here, food is never just food: it is a living story, an act of love, a memory preserved in every bite. Oaxaca, often hailed as Mexico’s culinary and cultural heartland, has captivated the world with its dazzling colors, smoky aromas, and the warmth of its people. Through these pages, I hope to bring that magic into your kitchen and kindle your own wanderlust.

Why Oaxaca? For me, the answer lies in its extraordinary balance of the ancient and the ever-evolving. It is a place where Zapotec, Mixtec, and dozens of other indigenous communities continue centuries-old foodways, even as Oaxacan chefs and artisans reimagine tradition for a new generation. In the markets, grandmothers press masa into tortillas just as their ancestors did; in hidden villages, mezcaleros tend agave as a sacred trust; in city restaurants, bold young visionaries combine old ingredients with modern flair. Oaxaca is a tapestry of regional diversity, where mountain, valley, and coast each contribute their own treasures — and, along the way, create a feast unlike any other.

Viva Oaxaca! is equal parts cookbook, cultural history, and travelogue. Each chapter spotlights a single ingredient, dish, ritual, or region that is vital to understanding the Oaxacan spirit. Alongside time-tested recipes, you’ll discover the folklore and traditions that shaped them, the stories of cooks and farmers who keep them alive, and practical guidance for seeking out these flavors on your own adventures — whether at home or abroad. From the dark complexity of mole negro to the simple daily comfort of fresh tortillas, from the crunch of chapulines in the market to a celebratory mezcal shared with new friends, this book reveals how food is woven into every facet of Oaxacan life.

My own love affair with Oaxaca began as many do — with a single bite. But what keeps drawing me back is not just the food, but the way Oaxacans share it: generosity at the table, reverence for the land, and a profound connection between people and culture. These are not museum artifacts or frozen traditions; they are living, dynamic, fiercely proud — and always evolving. By sharing their recipes, stories, and wisdom, Oaxacans invite outsiders to become part of their community, if only for a meal or a moment.

Throughout these chapters, you will meet cooks, artisans, and families who generously opened their homes and hearts. You will also find practical advice for sourcing

authentic ingredients and making recipes your own, even far from Mexico's sunlit markets. Vivid market scenes, festival descriptions, and interviews with culinary guardians bring Oaxaca to life beyond the plate, illuminating a region where resistance, creativity, and celebration go hand in hand.

Most of all, Viva Oaxaca! is a celebration — of resilience, of generosity, of the vibrant flavors that connect us all. May these recipes and stories feed both your hunger and your curiosity, and may you find, as I have, that every journey to Oaxaca is a new beginning, filled with discovery, joy, and communion at the table. ¡Buen provecho!

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CHAPTER ONE: The Sacred Grain: Corn in Oaxacan Life

In Oaxaca, corn isn't merely a crop; it is the very soul of the land, a sacred staple woven into the fabric of daily life, ancient myths, and culinary traditions. It's impossible to truly understand Oaxacan cuisine without first grasping the profound significance of *maíz*, as it is known throughout Mexico. This versatile grain, believed to have been first domesticated in the Oaxaca Valley around 4,000 BCE, holds a place of reverence, often seen as a gift from the gods and the foundation of human existence itself in some indigenous creation stories.

Wandering through the bustling markets of Oaxaca City or strolling through the quiet fields of a rural village, you'll encounter corn in a dazzling array of colors and forms: vibrant yellows, deep blues, striking reds, and even a mystical Oaxacan green. These aren't just aesthetic variations; each type of *maíz criollo* (native corn) possesses distinct flavors and textures, meticulously cultivated and chosen for specific culinary applications. Oaxaca boasts an impressive diversity, with at least 59 species of maize, alongside thousands of regional adaptations. This rich biodiversity is a testament to generations of indigenous farmers, particularly the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples, who have safeguarded and nurtured these ancestral varieties.

For the Zapotec, one of the earliest and most prominent indigenous groups in Oaxaca, corn is deeply embedded in their rituals, traditions, and social structures, extending far beyond simple sustenance. Their agricultural system, the *milpa*, exemplifies this profound connection to the land. In a *milpa*, corn is not grown in isolation but alongside its "Three Sisters"—beans and squash. The corn stalks provide a natural trellis for climbing beans, while the beans enrich the soil with nitrogen, and the broad leaves of squash shade the ground, preventing weeds and retaining moisture. This ingenious intercropping system, practiced for millennia, maximizes land use, enhances nutritional value, and maintains soil health without depletion. It's a sustainable model of agriculture that embodies a holistic understanding of the ecosystem.

The journey of corn from a hard kernel to the pliable dough that forms the basis of countless Oaxacan dishes is a transformative process known as nixtamalization. This ancient technique, dating back thousands of years to Mesoamerican civilizations, involves cooking dried corn kernels in an alkaline solution, typically water and calcium hydroxide (food-grade lime, or *cal*). After simmering for a period, the corn is left to soak, which softens the kernels and allows their outer skins to loosen. The nixtamalized corn is then rinsed and ground into *masa*, a wet dough that is the foundation for everything from tortillas to tamales.

Nixtamalization is more than just a preparation method; it's a crucial step that unlocks corn's full nutritional potential. It makes niacin (Vitamin B3) readily available for human absorption, preventing deficiencies that plagued populations in other parts of the world where corn was adopted without this traditional process. It also improves protein quality, enhances amino acid balance, and significantly increases calcium content. Beyond the nutritional benefits, nixtamalization imparts a distinctive earthy, nutty flavor and a superior texture to the *masa*, elevating the humble grain to a culinary masterpiece.

In many Oaxacan homes, particularly in rural areas, the nixtamalization process is still performed daily. The rhythmic sound of grinding corn, often on a *metate* (a traditional stone grinder), is a common morning symphony, a testament to an unbroken chain of culinary knowledge passed down through generations. This commitment to traditional practices ensures the freshest *masa* for the day's meals, and a continuity with the past that is deeply valued.

From this sacred grain, a multitude of dishes emerge, each telling a story of ingenuity and tradition. The most ubiquitous, of course, is the tortilla. Soft, warm, and often handmade, *tortillas blandas* accompany nearly every meal in Oaxaca, serving as edible plates, scoops, and comforting bites. But the versatility of corn extends far beyond the humble tortilla.

Consider the *tlayuda*, a large, crispy corn tortilla that can be likened to a "Mexican pizza." These substantial tortillas, often topped with refried black beans, *quesillo* (Oaxacan string cheese), and various meats or vegetables, are griddled until crisp, sometimes folded in half before serving. They are a testament to corn's ability to be transformed into a hearty and satisfying meal.

Then there are *memelas*, thick corn tortillas often brushed with pork lard (*asiento*) and topped with an array of ingredients like cheese and salsa. These are popular breakfast or mid-morning snacks, commonly found in markets and at street food stalls. *Tamales*, those delightful parcels of *masa* filled with savory or sweet ingredients and steamed in corn husks or banana leaves, are another essential corn-based creation. Oaxaca is particularly known for its tamales wrapped in banana leaves, often filled with rich mole negro and chicken or black beans.

Beyond the solid dishes, corn also forms the base of traditional Oaxacan beverages. *Atole* is a warm, comforting drink made from *masa*, water, and sweeteners, often flavored with cinnamon or chocolate. It's a staple breakfast drink, especially on cooler mornings. Even more unique is *tejate*, an ancient, energizing drink that was once reserved for Zapotec royalty. Made from toasted corn, cacao, *rosita de cacao* (an aromatic evergreen blossom found only in San Andrés Huayapam), and mamey pit, *tejate* is traditionally prepared with an elaborate hand-mixing process that creates a

distinctive frothy layer on top.

The importance of corn in Oaxaca is not just about its role in food; it's about the deep cultural and spiritual connection it fosters. Farmers diligently protect their native corn varieties, seeing it as a form of resistance against industrial agriculture and genetically modified seeds. The annual FERIA Estatal de la Agrobiodiversidad (state fair of agrobiodiversity) celebrates and protects this agricultural richness, showcasing the incredible variety of Oaxaca's native corn.

A visit to Oaxaca offers countless opportunities to witness this reverence for corn firsthand. Engaging with local farmers through initiatives aimed at preserving heirloom varieties, participating in a *nixtamalization* workshop, or simply observing a tortilla maker at work in a market, provides a deeper appreciation for this foundational ingredient. The stories woven into each kernel speak of resilience, tradition, and an enduring connection to the earth.

Recipe: Grilled Oaxacan Corn with Queso Fresco and Chile

This simple recipe highlights the sweet, earthy flavor of corn, enhanced by the creamy tang of *queso fresco* and a hint of spice. It's a popular street snack throughout Mexico, and a fantastic way to enjoy fresh corn.

Yields: 4 servings **Prep time:** 15 minutes **Cook time:** 15-20 minutes

Ingredients:

- 4 ears of fresh corn, shucked
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons Mexican *crema* (or sour cream)
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
- ½ cup *queso fresco*, crumbled
- 1 teaspoon chili powder (ancho chile powder for a mild, smoky flavor is recommended)
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper (or to taste, for a bit more heat)
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt, plus more for seasoning
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh cilantro, for garnish
- 4 lime wedges, for serving

Instructions:

1. Preheat your grill to medium heat.
2. In a small bowl, combine the mayonnaise, Mexican *crema*, lime juice, chili powder, cayenne pepper, and salt. Mix well until everything is thoroughly combined into a smooth sauce.
3. Place the shucked corn directly on the grill grates. Cook for approximately 12-15 minutes, turning the ears every few minutes to ensure they char slightly and cook evenly on all sides. You want the kernels to be tender with some nice

grill marks.

4. Once cooked, remove the corn from the grill and transfer to a serving platter.
5. Generously brush each ear of corn with the creamy mixture you prepared earlier.
6. Sprinkle the crumbled *queso fresco* evenly over the coated corn.
7. Garnish with fresh cilantro.
8. Serve immediately with lime wedges on the side for squeezing over the corn, adding a burst of fresh acidity.

Cook's Note: If you don't have a grill, you can boil the corn for 8-10 minutes or steam it for 5-8 minutes until tender, then proceed with brushing on the crema mixture and toppings. This recipe also works wonderfully with a slightly spicier chili powder if you prefer more kick.

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