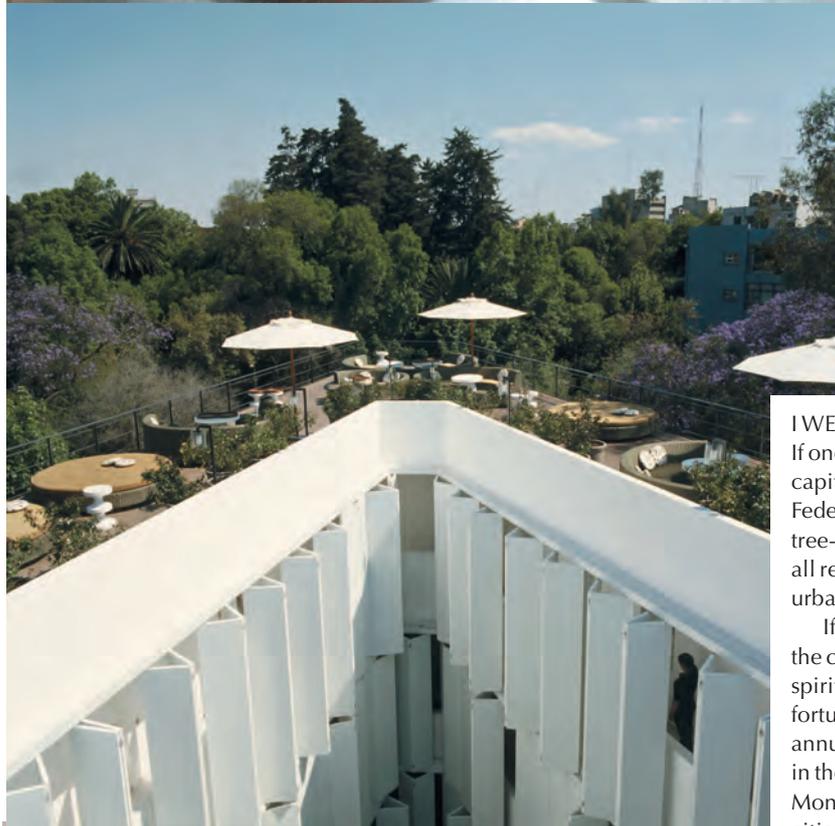




BIENVENIDOS

YOU MIGHT WANT TO AVOID THE FRIED INSECTS BUT GASTRONOMES WILL FIND EVERYTHING THEY DESIRE IN MEXICO CITY AND OAXACA



TEXT JONATHAN CANE



CLOCKWISE Shop signage, DF. Late-night street food. Skull graffiti. Mercado de San Juan fish market. Mercado Roma. Quintonil. Hotel Condesa df. Moles at Biko

I WENT TO MEXICO TO LEARN TO EAT MEXICAN FOOD. If one can visit only a single city in Mexico it must be the capital, affectionately known as DF (Mexico City Distrito Federal) because not only is it a really lovely, broad, tree-filled megalopolis but there you can eat foods from all regions that have been brought by the recently urbanised migrants.

If you have time for two, the second should be Oaxaca, the city that chef Mikel Alonso of DF's Biko told me is the spiritual home of Mexican cuisine. I took his advice and fortuitously my visit coincided with the Guelaguetza, an annual food and cultural festival, which means "the offering" in the Zapotec language and is celebrated on the last two Mondays in July. As a footnote, if you have time for three cities, don't make the third one Cancun. While there is a distinctive cuisine worth learning about in the coastal part of this state, Quintana Roo, and its "Mayan Riviera" you will have to search very hard to find it. The exquisite Caribbean beaches have been carved up into so-called all-inclusive resorts, Häagen-Dazs and Hooters franchises patronised by fat cruisers who trundle off ocean-liners to buy key chains,

expensive cheap tequila and "I'M IN CANCUN BITCH" T-shirts. Even a good dollop of irony cannot save the ugliest beautiful place in the world.

DF is the third-largest city in the world and is packed full of people who like to eat. The most refined restaurants are mostly in the Polanco neighbourhood; the artisanal café culture in Condesa/Roma; and the municipal market and best variety of street food in Centro Histórico.

Polanco is not my favourite neighbourhood. It's a bit uptight and my hotel, the Habita, was the least favourite of the group of stylish hotels (the Habita Group) that I stayed at in Mexico. The stiffness extends to the three most important restaurants: Pujol, Quintonil and Biko. While they have little of the casual charm and brash colour that one gets from traditional Mexican food they, along with others, have done a lot to consolidate, refine, rework and elaborate Mexican cuisine. Not to mention attract a class of international foodie tourists.

I met husband and wife team Jorge Vallejo and Alejandra Flores at Quintonil just as the lunch rush was beginning. Quintonil is a handsome little restaurant, long and thin with a courtyard open to the sky, as is the custom in DF. Having





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“grown up” at top-rated Pujol and then defected, Vallejo the chef and Flores the management are really excited about Mexican food heritage and good food ethics. The menu is something like “new” Mexican or even modern Mexican characterised by old recipes, traditional techniques, local ingredients (herbs from the Xochimilco floating gardens, agave syrup, mezcal, flowers, guava) and ancient craft with a very current sensibility. I’m rereading their menu after a month in Mexico and have a much clearer appreciation now of how restrained and intelligent their food is. I want to go back for the turkey with green macadamia nut “pipián” mole, and organic chicken in vanilla butter, artichokes and a corn-verbena sauce. Vallejo and Flores take food seriously, in an endearing, nerdy kind of way.

On the second floor is the area where the moles are painstakingly made and other craft work happens. Moles are complex sauces made from two or more chillies, nuts, seeds, fruit, herbs, spices and chocolate and most often eaten with meat. The second floor is also where the family meal is eaten. Vallejo tells me they are cooking from the classic Diana Kennedy cookbook, *The Art of Mexican Cooking*, recipe by recipe. I want to impose and invite myself to the family meal, but instead go back to the hotel, download Kennedy’s book *Oaxaca al Gusto* and learn more about moles.

Condesa and Roma are home to the hipsters, their coffee shops with black and white logos and metro tiles, artisanal mezcal and heirloom corn tortillas. For all their faults, hipsters have been part of a signification shift in thinking about food and drinks that values craft, inherited knowledge and heritage produce. And as much as the word “artisanal”

may be irksome, there is certainly value in reincorporating healthy, non-mechanised, hand-processed and diversified foods. Apart from three super-hip contemporary restaurants — Romita Comedor, Belmondo and Rosetta — and excellent street food on every corner, the brand spanking new Mercado Roma is where the hipsters hang. While the official inner-city market Mercado de San Juan sells snails, whole skinned goats, dried insects or *chapulines*, blood-red pomegranates and purple octopi, at Mercado Roma you won’t have to wade through blood to get your freshly roasted Mexican espresso from Alberto, the 20-something barista with a dreamy smile and a queue of thirsty admirers.

Alberto, who co-owns Buna Coffee, is one of the new foodies in DF. To flavour the coffee he serves *Villa de Patos miel de maguey*, which is an earthy cactus syrup or, more correctly put, agave nectar, which is also for sale at the Mercado. I ate a big bowl of simple chicken tortilla soup and then a blue corn tlacoyos with crumbly cheese. My tlacoyo — an oval-shaped fried cake made of blue maize — from Tlaxcalli Amantolli, was made from heirloom corn grown outside the city by owner Pedro and hand-prepared according to the old ways.

After a night at the fashionable Condesa d’ Hotel, I made my last stop in DF at Downtown in Centro Histórico, tipped as the new “it” neighbourhood. Downtown is like an 18th-century version of 44 Stanley in Milpark, Joburg, or Market in Durban. It’s oddly hard to explain: the hotel is built around a huge triple-storey courtyard with restaurants and cafés on each level. The remarkable thing is that there is an orchard growing in the courtyard, with the trees forming the ceiling of

CLOCKWISE Mercado Roma. Barista Alberto at Buna Coffee. Entrance to Downtown Mexico. Biko. Mercado de San Juan





CLOCKWISE Oaxacan ingredients: squash flowers, pomegranate, tortillas, elotes. Guelaguetza festival. Juice bar at Mercado 20 de Noviembre. La Mezcaloteca Oaxaca



the first level and giving shade to the restaurants. Creating a natural boundary between the hotel and the eateries, the orchard is truly beautiful.

The hotel rooms have high barrel-vaulted clay brick ceilings and upstairs there is a concrete pool and a deck with views of the ancient city. (Downtown also has a really cool backpackers called Downtown Beds, which is by far the trendiest budget accommodation I've seen.)

Centro has yet to open any sophisticated eateries but the street food and markets are varied and confusing and terrifying and exciting, selling food for Jalisco to Mérida. Next to one of the 60 churches I bought two delicious R10 tacos packed with a ceviche-esque shrimp and octopus tomato filling. The seafood cocktail, a speciality from Baja California, was served from a white bucket with a handle that looked like the old HTH container your dad used to use to treat the pool on Sundays. When in doubt, eat it.

A gastronomic pilgrimage to Oaxaca is a short flight or bus trip to the south. The state of Oaxaca has the highest percentage of native Mexicans and during Guelaguetza, all the diverse ethnic groups descend on the ancient capital from the mountains dressed in traditional dress to perform traditional dances, rituals and church services and to sell crafts, party and eat. It is probably the best place and time to eat street food in Mexico.

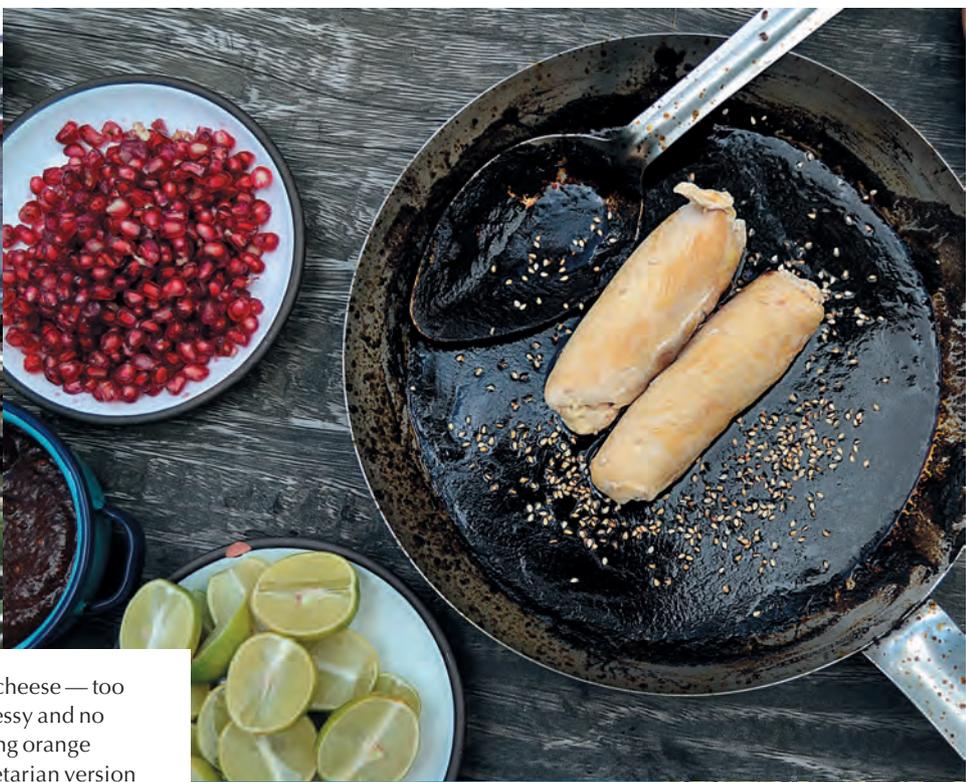
I stayed at the beautiful Hotel Azul, which is built around a gravelled courtyard with a long pencil-width pond the length of the courtyard. It's located in Centro Histórico, near the remarkable Ethnobotanical Gardens, the best churches

and La Mezcaloteca Oaxaca's mezcal library. The "library" looks like an apothecary and behind its long, dimly lit bar are collections of miscellaneous bottles with cryptic labels. This was the beginning of my mezcal education.

Mezcal is the now-trendy spirit distilled from the type of agave called espadin (*Agave angustifolia*) which is typical of the Oaxaca area. Agaves are not cacti and mezcal is not tequila. The plants take around 10 years and sometimes more to mature, after which the heart of the plant, the *piña*, is processed by hand and donkey power and distilled into a smoky, earthy spirit.

I spoke to Mauricio from the artisanal mezcal brand Sangremal about where to get started as a newbie. First off, he said, don't drink any mezcal that has a worm in the bottle. This is a sleazy marketing ploy that ends up making mezcal that tastes like worms. Avoid mezcal aged in barrels, because the taste is too woody and then you miss the important agave flavour. Don't mix it, unless there's a real mixologist at work. Finally, don't shoot it — you should *besar el mezcal*, which means kiss the mezcal. La Mezcaloteca only stocks "historic" or "ancient" mezcals, which use no mechanisation, have small runs and cannot be made from farmed agave. Then there is artisanal mezcal, which is not mass-produced but won't be made from wild agave; the distinction is blurry. Both are made by a maestro mezcalero — here picture an old man in a hat with a donkey. Artisanal mezcal like Sangremal is characterised by high design values, beautiful bottles and hipster vibes. And then there's industrial schlock: avoid.

Mauricio recommends "practising" at the following



mescalarias in Oaxaca: Los Amantes, Cuish and Insitu; and Los amantes, La Clandestina and La Botica in DF. I'm still getting my tongue around the flavour and although I can certainly see the appeal intellectually and aesthetically, I haven't developed the taste for it yet. Mezcal is often drunk with a beer, of which there are many artisanal versions and of which I remain unconvinced. Oaxaca is blindingly hot in July, so for me a beer on the hotel roof terrace makes far more sense than hot chocolate. Nevertheless, hot chocolate and chocolate in general, is deeply rooted in Oaxacan culture. I'd never reflected on how Eurocentric my thinking about chocolate was; for me chocolate only makes sense in the cold.

Chocolate is also a key ingredient in some of the distinctive regional moles. At the Mercado 20 de Noviembre you can see plastic tubs labelled with shrill neon signs with numerous mole pastes and powders. You can, if you are brave enough, buy and eat *chapulines* — grasshoppers. I was not brave. Teetering on the cusp of vegetarianism in general makes Mexican street food an especially challenging adventure. Having braved lots of dubious-looking meat in DF I had pretty much decided to avoid the meat in favour of flowers, pomegranates and peppers in Oaxaca.

Lining the streets outside the ancient churches with their barren cactus gardens are makeshift eateries hanging coloured tarps. Two rows of benches face the ladies who make the tortillas on their clay "comals", like a little theatre. The ingredients are set out like a kitsch still life with flowers in vases, a Virgin Mary, mushrooms, orange squash blossoms, three or so litre jars of chilli sauces and lime wedges. The women cooks are almost always surly, as are the gringo-weary old vendor women of the traditional market, and probably more cantankerous than ever during Guelaguetza. These ladies make fresh soft tortillas with squash blossoms, shredded chicken, tomato sauce,

coriander leaves and stringy white Oaxacan cheese — too big to eat with your hands and too hot, too messy and no possibility of asking for knives and forks. Eating orange flowers with melted cheese feels like the vegetarian version of deep-fried ortolan birds, like an edible poem.

The bicycling elote guys sell char-burned white corn, smeared with way too much mayonnaise, chilli powder, cotija (parmesan-esque) cheese and half a lime and impaled on a stick. I first had an elote at the Brooklyn Flea in New York a bunch of years ago and we have made them at braais to general amazement that this was Mexican food. (Having eaten the real deal again I now see that our version has had too little mayonnaise, too little chilli and way too much cheese; when you make them, do be shy.)

As a break from Oaxaca you can head to the Pacific coast and chill out at the secluded Hotel Escondido in the port town of the same name. This town and its neighbouring villages are probably a better idea than its tacky Caribbean cousins on the east coast. If you have more time, then travel into the hillside villages to explore the subtleties of Mexico's culinary heart.

I unfortunately headed to the crass tourism of Cancun and arrived back in DF to catch my flight to Panama feeling a little wary and ambivalent about Mexico. My last breakfast was on the street downtown at a cluster of vendors that looked a lot like a soup kitchen — steamy, makeshift structures, people standing about. I timidly ordered a double tortilla plus bacon (the least scary of the meats, methinks) plus cheese, fresh french fries (with the skins on, on the tortilla) plus chilli/ guacamole/ lime/ tomato salsa. Who doesn't want this for breakfast? I think as I stand there, a head and shoulders above the scoffing tattooed hipsters, grannies, policemen and clerks. I'm now re-obsessed. I order another; both come to R21. Will I be sorry on the plane later? Probably. But will I be back to Mexico just for the food? Hell yes.

I timidly order a double tortilla plus bacon, plus cheese, plus chilli. I order another.

Both come to R21. Will I be sorry on the plane? Probably

CLOCKWISE Piñas used for mezcal. Oaxacan mole with chicken. Courtyard of Hotel Azul in Centro Histórico. Lazy beach days at Hotel Escondido

