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Oaxaca, Where the Cooking's Hot and Cool

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It was mid-July in Oaxaca, Mexico, and my spirits were high. How could they not be? The air was refreshingly cool, the mountain view from the kitchen was beautiful, and I'd just prepared the best chocolate dessert I'd ever made.

I'd come to Mexico's Etna Valley for a five-day cooking course taught by Susana Trilling, an American chef who's made her base in Oaxaca since 1987. A few years ago, I probably would have headed to Europe to learn more about fine food. But increasingly, cooking enthusiasts, travelers and North American chefs have visited Mexico just as I did for hands-on classes that rival those in France and Italy. And for approximately half the price.

A lecture series on fine Mexican regional cuisine at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington almost three years ago had given me the idea. Chefs from different parts of that country came to Washington, prepared their specialty dishes, talked about them and passed around samples. Most of the dishes were new to me, as were some of the ingredients.

Trilling was one of those chefs. A lively expatriate American with two New York restaurants, a catering business and cookbooks to her credit, she's been teaching cooking classes in Oaxaca since 1990 and understands the varied skill levels and reference points of her American students.

But the classes aren't about cooking the enchiladas and quesadillas many North Americans think of as Mexican food. She's not teaching the cooking of the entire country either, which differs from region to region. She focuses on Oaxaca (wah-HAH-kah), one of Mexico's 31 states, where, as in every state, the cuisine varies from region to region. The variations are a result of local traditions, local crops and the history and geography of the area. Geographical influences are obvious: states on the coasts, for example, feature more fish than interior states. Historical influences are significant, too: The most dramatic one was the arrival of the Spaniards, who brought many new foods that eventually became part of local cuisines.

Because of the many different geographical characteristics within Oaxaca -- mountains, valleys and coastal areas facing the Pacific as well as the Gulf of Tehuantepec -- cooking styles vary. Although the unifying factor is the pride Oaxacans take in their food, there are seven distinct regions in the state, each with its own specific geography, each with its own indigenous peoples and each with its own regional cooking traditions: the Central Valleys, where the traditional crops are corn, beans and squash; the high-altitude areas of the Sierra and the Canada, where coffee and potatoes are grown; the coastal areas near the Pacific and the Isthmus with their seafood; the lowlands of Tuxtepec with its sugar cane, bananas and pineapple; and the Mixteca in the northwestern part of the state -- a region with many different landscapes and microclimates.

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Our mid-summer class would be cooking dishes from all seven Oaxacan areas.

For the past three years, Trilling's intriguing roster of classes has been held in a modern teaching kitchen at the ranch she and her partner, Eric Ulrich, built about 40 minutes away from Oaxaca city.

There were six of us in the class: one employment lawyer, two television types, an inveterate world traveler, another lawyer-turned-head-of-a-construction-company and me. This time -- uncharacteristically, according to Trilling -- we were all women and all reasonably comfortable in our own kitchens. Now, in Trilling's kitchen, we were plunging into recipes that we not only had never made before but in most cases had never even eaten.

Trilling went over each recipe ahead of time and asked who wanted to make what -- or for that matter, who wanted to take it easy and look out over the valley from one of the hammocks on her veranda. Nobody did.

Instead, on the first day we gave our all to the meal Trilling had put together from foods of the Tuxtepec and Mixteca regions of the state. (The second day we would make foods from Mexico's Pacific Coast, the third from the Central Valley and Sierra, and the fourth from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Canadas.)

All the dishes were new to us: Tetelas de Juxtahuaca (triangular corn turnovers stuffed with red beans) accompanied by Salsa de Chilito Verde (a sauce of little green chilis); Ensalada de Nopales Asados (a salad of grilled nopales -- a kind of cactus or prickly pear, tomatoes, onions and avocados) served on crisp roasted or fried tostados and fresh Oaxacan cheese; Sopa de Guisantes de Calabaza (a summer squash vine and flower soup of pre-Hispanic origin flavored with garlic, onion and corn) accompanied by Salsa de Chile Bravo (a hot chili sauce of peppers, tomatoes and garlic); and Chochoyones (a sort of dumpling and a hot chili sauce). "All Mexican meals start with soup," Trilling explained, acknowledging that our menu wasn't typical.

The main course was a mole (MO-lay), a rich spicy sauce with many different versions usually unique to a particular area, even town. Trilling chose a typically Oaxacan chicken mole familiarly known as "Tablecloth Stainer" -- the mole was made with three kinds of chilis, tomatoes, sesame seeds, almonds, raisins, garlic, cloves, peppercorns, allspice, local cinnamon, oregano, plantains and pineapple. It was served with Arroz con Cilantro (cilantro rice) -- rice cooked with more chilis and garlic, green pepper, onion and cilantro.

And after all that came the dessert I had made, Budin de Chocolate Oaxaqueno, a Oaxacan chocolate bread pudding made with a pound of Mexican chocolate, strong coffee, eggs, creme fraiche, sour cream, vanilla, cinnamon and raisins soaked in mescal (a strong agave-based Mexican liquor), accompanied by Salsa de Tuna (a puree of a local fruit). I'd chosen the pudding because it looked delicious and a little more foolproof than some of the other recipes. Baked in buttered ramekins in a hot water bath in the oven like many custards, the pudding's straightforward steps and familiar cooking method were reassuring.

I also wanted to work with Mexican chocolate, which is much more granular than the North American and European versions, less fat and flavored with a little cinnamon. (It's hard to find in the United States at a reasonable price, but is available through www.Zingermans.com for \$16 a pound.)

To speed things along, most of the ingredients had been cut and measured for us in advance by Trilling's kitchen assistants, Mina Arellanes Martinez and Lorenza Taboada Vasquez. Local women, they had watched other newcomers try to look competent and confident many times before. Oscar Hernandez, a Oaxacan whom Trilling met through his chicken slaughtering business, was there too. A patient culinary coach, he was ready

to answer questions, light the ovens, find appropriate cooking utensils -- and stop us before we cooked something too long or too little.

As we made the meal, we had received upbeat, attentive guidance from Trilling and her staff. Finally, it was time to eat. We took off our aprons and eagerly moved from the kitchen to a table set with Mexican pottery, glassware and linens. Hernandez, who assembled the plates and adjusted the seasoning, also served the increasingly festive meal.

And it was only the first day.

Out and About

The five-day course alternates hands-on cooking with field trips to area markets, as well as to the homes of local traditional cooks, to crafts villages and other cultural events. That first morning, Trilling sent a van to pick us up at our hotel -- a modest but cheerful place in Oaxaca city (translation: no air conditioning or exterior windows, no hotel shops, no Internet access, but a welcoming open-air breakfast and snack room with both North American and Mexican dishes).

From there we headed to meet Trilling, where she cautioned us to travel light to avoid enterprising pickpockets (no large purses or tote bags), for a visit to the city's central market, a huge indoor space that's the largest and most diverse market in the area -- and the second largest -- market in Mexico.

We started at the very busy molino stand. The molino, Trilling told us, is a 7 1/2 horsepower engine that acts as a village blender where people bring things to be ground -- at this stand primarily cacao beans for chocolate -- but other foods such as chilis or corn can be brought here too. "It's liberated the women of Mexico," said Trilling.

Just about anything you need is for sale at the market. Belts, baby clothes, bird cages. Furniture, flowers, piñatas. Shoes and sweaters. Underwear. Herbs, spices and spice pastes. There are fish stands with the fresh catch of the day, several kinds of dried fish and a variety of shellfish. Every where you look, there are mounds and mounds of chilis -- as many as 40 different kinds. And for sustenance while shopping, there are tamale and taco stands where customers ask for any of a dozen or so fillings or toppings -- from moles made with chicken, pork or rabbit to cinnamon and raisin.

The markets brought to life the foods we would hear about and cook with and introduced us to many more: tiny dried grasshoppers, brightly colored custards and gelatins, an array of herbs and spices sought out by some Oaxacans for medical purposes. Throughout the five-day course, we'd go to other markets too -- like the Sunday market at Tlacolula, where a couple of dozen outdoor barbecue grills served the "fast food" of Oaxaca, or another smaller but fully stocked local market on the way to Ocatlan.

(Eating at such open air "dining rooms" is popular on the streets of Oaxaca city too. Delicate eaters, or just plain sensible travelers worried about sanitation, sometimes shy away from food that's served on plates that might have been cleaned by a trip to a large tub of standing soapy water and then rinsed off. Grilled food is a safer bet than food that's been sitting around in a stew pot, and tidbits served on skewers or wrapped in pastry are safer than meals served on plates.)

Two foods loom large in Oaxacan experience: corn and chocolate. Different kinds of corn are grown for different purposes and even for different kinds of tortillas. In the Mixteca area, Trilling explained, corn in its various forms is not only eaten but revered. Many of the Mixtecan's myths have to do with corn, so planting and harvesting are very respected.

Chocolate is equally revered: in moles and in all kinds of drinks, including special drinks for health and good fortune.

Each day was carefully scheduled. By the end of the course, we'd learned about both the pre- and post-Spanish culinary heritages of the area. We saw fresh cheese made, chocolate processed and were introduced to fruits and vegetables that don't make it north of the border. We were also introduced to artisans of Oaxacan pottery, carpets and painted woodwork.

We made three extensive meals in the school's kitchen and ate in some very special places: one lunch restaurant stayed open one evening to make dinner for us; another located in the backyard garden of a private home where the owner serves dinner to special customers a few times a week; another on the veranda of a family of weavers; and another all-mushroom meal high up in the hills in the home of a mushroom forager and his family.

We even found time for a few margaritas.

Most of all, we learned that you don't have to go to Europe to experience a culture that respects its culinary past and shows it off to visitors with pride. "Food plays an important part in the lifestyle here," said Trilling. "People love to talk about food. It's part of the culture. And there's great pride in their cooking: They feel like Oaxacan food is the best in Mexico, and they want to share it with you."

Details: Cooking Class

Susana Trilling's classes are offered throughout the year, and range from a single-day class to long weekends to an entire week. Prices start at \$75 for a group day class (mostly for travelers already going to Oaxaca) and go up to \$950 to \$1,285 for a long weekend (depending on the length of the class and any fees associated with it) and \$1,695 to \$1,795 for a full week. Airfare is not included.

The class I attended was described as a long weekend class, which really meant six nights and five days. The cost was \$1,285, which included lodging in a modest hotel in Oaxaca, transportation to and from the classes, market and field trips, a dance festival and almost all meals.

GETTING THERE: Until recently, the only way to fly to Oaxaca from the East Coast was to transfer in Mexico City. That is still an option. However, this summer Continental introduced direct service to Oaxaca from Houston. Round-trip fare from Washington is about \$475.

INFORMATION: www.seasonsofmyheart.com, telephone 011-52-951-5187726.

-- Judith Weinraub