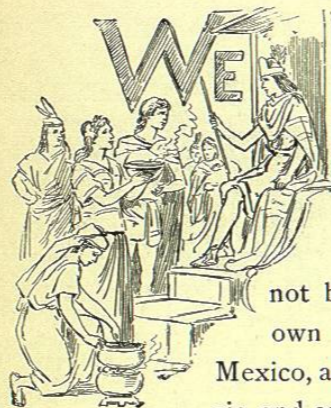


CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT THEY EAT, AND HOW THEY COOK IT.



MAY live without poetry, music, and art ;  
We may live without conscience, and live without heart ;  
We may live without friends ; we may live without books ;  
But civilized man cannot live without cooks."

According to the light of history, it has not been a civilization commensurate with our own that developed the skill of the cook in Mexico, any more than the more lofty gifts of "music and art."

When the conquerors arrived at the palace of Montezuma, they were amazed to find it complete in every appointment, and displaying a magnificence and grandeur they had not seen equaled; while, according to Bernal Diaz, his cooks must have been fully up to the standard of any that "civilized man" of to-day can employ.

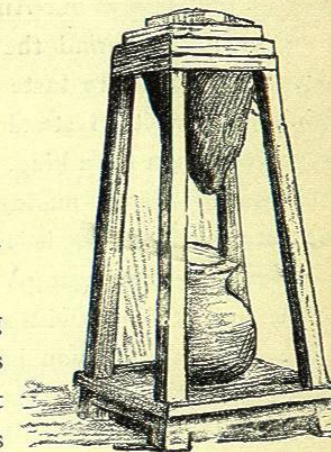
Among their accomplishments these Aztec culinary artists understood more than thirty different ways of dressing meats. At one meal they served up "above three hundred different dishes for the monarch, and for the people in waiting more than one thousand. These consisted of fowls, turkeys, pheasants, partridges, quails, tame and wild geese, venison, musk, swine, pigeons, hares, rabbits, and numerous other birds and beasts. Besides these there were other kinds of provision, which it would have been no easy task to call over by name."

Mexican ladies take great pride in their cook-books, and watch

with deep interest the accuracy with which the *ama de llaves* carries out the receipts. The cooks, however, frequently have their own books, from which, without further instructions, they execute triumphs of gustatory art.

The first glance at a Mexican kitchen is anything but satisfactory to an American woman, with her ideas of a cooking-stove and its shining equipments. But notwithstanding the fact that their only furniture is pottery, Mexican cooks are too much attached to their antediluvian ways to be able to appreciate or accept any innovations.

The *estiladera* (water-filter) is primitive in its simplicity. It is made from a porous, volcanic rock peculiar to the country. The water percolates through the pores and drips into a vessel below. Bits of charcoal are generally thrown in, and the water is as cold as ice and sparkling as crystal. Could these stones only be imported, a vexed question might be solved—or at least a troublesome subject simplified—among our own people.



THE ESTILADERA.

The same leisurely and ease-loving methods that characterize the business life pervade also the home. The most engrossed man of affairs quietly leaves his office with all its cares behind him, and takes to his home only his social endowments. He makes his mid-day meal one of enjoyment and the occasion of a happy mingling with the family circle.

After dinner the *siesta* follows, and business comes to a lull, until, perhaps, three o'clock in the afternoon.

Unfailing ceremony—a national characteristic—is observed in the serving of every meal. Whether there be three or twenty varieties of dishes, no two are served at once.

The climate seems to demand a rich and highly spiced diet, and, to make it still more luxurious, both fruits and nuts are freely used.



But, to judge from the amount of dyspepsia prevailing there, it would seem that even Mexican digestion succumbs to it.

No bread is made in the family, while griddle-cakes, waffles, and muffins are unknown. Pies, tarts, cakes, or pastries have no extensive place in the *menu*; but their desserts of various kinds, made of eggs, milk, and fruits, are excellent. If, however, they are deficient in homely bread preparations, nature has given them a double compensation in the various delicious fruit beverages, compounded not only in the homes of the wealthy, but also of the humble folk. Among these I may mention two or three:

*Agua de piña* (pineapple water), a simple beverage, and one that may be prepared in our American homes.

Beat, roll, or grind the pineapple very fine; then run through a sieve; add sugar to taste and water to make it sufficiently thin to drink. Allow it to stand for a little while; then add ice, and it is good enough for a king.

*Agua de chia* is made from a very fine seed that I have never seen in the States, but it is a delightfully refreshing drink.

*Horchata*—known to us as *orgeat*—is made from muskmelon seed, beaten and strained, with sugar, some lemon juice, and a little cinnamon. Add ice, and you have a beverage to please the most fastidious.

In a Mexican home the day begins with the simple *desayuna*. This consists of a cup of chocolate, coffee, or tea, with bread, and is usually taken in the bedroom, frequently in bed. There is no fixed hour for this repast, which is partaken of according to inclination, no two members of the family being expected to take their *desayuna* at the same time. To all who enjoy the last drowsy morning nap there is an inexpressible charm in this mode of life.

The cares of the world are at long range, and one respectfully desires them to approach no nearer. No clanging of breakfast bells breaks rudely upon this delicious and intoxicating slumber; no scowling or looks askance from hostess or landlady, for in all probability she, too, is snugly ensconced in the arms of Morpheus.

The servants are up and at their usual labors, but they move about noiselessly as specters; not by the stirring of a leaf molesting the sweet repose of the blissful sleepers.

The most vigorous-minded *gringo* soon succumbs to this delightful custom. Though his former habit had been to rise with the sun, and eat an enormous breakfast of hash, chops, steak, eggs, hominy, batter-cakes, hot rolls, and what not, he at once and almost insensibly falls in with the native custom, and in a short time out-Herods Herod. He will linger longer under the covers, caring less and less for the matutinal cup.

At twelve o'clock the family reunion takes place, when the *almuerzo*—breakfast—is served. This, however, with its numerous courses, is really the dinner.

Soup is an indispensable part of every Mexican dinner, and is used not only at the mid-day meal, but often, too, at *cena* (supper).

The soups are of infinite variety and generally excellent. One lady told me she knew how to make one hundred different kinds. I have partaken of as many as twenty in her house. At Señora Calderon's I have seen seven varieties in one week, and all tempting and delicious.

I give receipts for two kinds, and although both are called *sopa*, one is served as a vegetable and always comes the first thing after the liquid soup. One is not to take the place of the other.

*Queen of Soups*.—Make a broth of chicken. When cooked very tender, take the breast and the yolks of two hard-boiled eggs, adding to these four ounces of beaten almonds, a small piece of bread steeped in milk, with a good deal of black pepper and a little nutmeg. Beat all well together, having previously picked the chicken into shreds. Beat one egg well, and then add the above mixture, after which beat again. Then make of the paste small balls and drop into the broth. Add a lump of butter to the broth, and a little sherry if desired. Truly delicious.

*Sopa de Arroz*—rice soup—is a very rich yet palatable dish. Indeed, it is rather too rich for the average American stomach. They



take a large, open *casuella* (pottery vessel) in which about half a pound of lard is allowed to come to a boil, having ready a few onions cut into the finest particles, which are thrown in and cooked to a crisp, together with a small piece of garlic if liked. One or two pounds of rice, already washed and dried are then thrown into the boiling lard and tossed continually with a large spoon until well browned. Next, a pound or more of fresh tomatoes beaten into a jelly is thrown in and well stirred, with a few peppers, chopped fine, and a small quantity of salt. Enough boiling water is then poured in to cover the rice, a top placed over the vessel, and the whole is cooked slowly for two or three hours without stirring. It is often served with fried bananas. Where fresh tomatoes are not to be had, canned ones will answer as well, and I am sure this dish will be enjoyed by many Americans.

*Puchero* is one of the most popular of all Mexican dishes. It is not generally liked by strangers at first, and a taste for it requires considerable cultivation. It is made by boiling a shank of mutton in water for two hours without skimming. Add to this carrots, parsnips, green corn in the ear, cabbage, sweet and Irish potatoes, onions, apples, pears, squashes together with their bloom, thyme, pepper and sweet marjoram, as well as other Mexican vegetables and fruits not known outside the republic.

Very little water is used, hence each ingredient comes out steam cooked, and as nearly whole as though the component parts were boiled separately, but without a particle of salt or seasoning or any richness whatever.

Mexican housekeepers have an endless variety of methods for seasoning and dressing their meats. In a well-appointed household it is no uncommon thing to have the same meats prepared differently several times in a week.

Perhaps it may be somewhat due to the fact of the wretched manner in which the butchers do their work that they must resort to boiling, spicing, and other means to make the roast desirable. But when once prepared, the palate of Epicurus himself would be appeased.

Ham, cheese, eggs, spices and the many delightful herbs of the country are formed into a paste, and by means of skewers the entire roast becomes impregnated with the aromatic, spicy flavor.

Their sauces and gravies, however, I do not consider as good as our own.

The most popular method of preparing turkey is called *Mole de Guajolote*. Cut up as you would a chicken, and fry in boiling lard until well done, and then take one pound and four ounces of large, dried peppers, four ounces of filberts, four of almonds, half an ounce of cinnamon, a piece of garlic toasted in the fire, a few of the seeds and veins of the pepper, a few cloves, a little anise, coriander, and black pepper, a quart of tomatoes, the skins taken off, and boiled until soft. All the above is put into a dish of hot lard for a few moments, stirring constantly to prevent burning. When brown, take out and grind very fine. Have ready a large dish with hot lard; stir in the above; let it fry a little, then put in the fried turkey; then water enough to cover the turkey; let all boil together for several hours until tender, salt to taste, and serve hot.

*Tamal de Casuella* (Corn-Meal Pot-pie).—One quart of meal scalded, with a little salt added, and four table-spoonfuls of melted lard. Any kind of meat that is preferred may be used, but generally the Mexicans take both pork and chicken, boiled until tender. Stir into the meal a double handful of flour, two eggs, and on this pour enough of the broth to make a thin batter. Take three or four large red peppers chopped fine, with plenty of tomatoes; beat thoroughly together and cook in lard. Then put the meat, well chopped, into the same lard. Grease another dish or pan with lard; spread the meal mixture on the bottom and sides, as for a chicken pie; then put in the meats, and cover with paste, and bake very slowly. When almost cooked, melt a little more lard and dress it all over; then put it in to bake again.

Their list of salads quite exceeds ours, and reasonably so, as they have so many vegetables, fruits, and herbs, which, combined, impart to them a peculiarly pungent and delightful flavor. The following is