

Eric Akis: X is for Xocolátl

BY ERIC AKIS, TIMES COLONIST SEPTEMBER 13, 2009



Maria Elena Cuervo-Lorens prepares Mexican-style hot chocolate, a rich, sweet drink traditionally served in a clay pitcher with a molinillo, a wooden implement used to make it frothy.

Photograph by: Darren Stone, Times Colonist

Xocolátl, according to Maria Elena Cuervo-Lorens, is the náhuatl word for chocolate, originally a bitter, cocoa bean concoction flavoured with chilies that the Aztecs drank. She says the Spanish language does not have the "sho" sound of the x. So, when Spanish colonists came to Mexico, xocolátl eventually became chocolate.

The Mexico-City-born Cuervo-Lorens knows these things because she's an authority on Mexican cuisine, a skill developed later in her life.

"Part of my elementary and secondary school was run by British nuns, so my English was very good," Cuervo-Lorens said.

That enabled her to take a commercial course taught in English at Mexico City College, which in turn helped her land an interesting -- at times frightening -- job.

"I worked at the American Embassy. The Cuban revolution was happening, there's was a lot going on behind the scenes," she said. "Horrible protests took place outside the embassy. Sometimes we would have to leave out the back door."

Cuervo-Lorens married husband Raymond and had two children, Ralph and Mariana. She then became a stay-at-home mom and found time to earn a certificate to teach English as a second language. She also eagerly learned to cook the Mexican dishes her mother and grandmother prepared when she was a child, including those for celebrations.

"All Mexicans are the same; we like to have a good time. Food is a big part of that. My [late] husband was my biggest fan, he loved the way I cooked and encouraged me," Cuervo-Lorens said.

Much of her culinary tutelage came through conversations with her mother Paz. She wrote down recipes, tried them and adjusted them as needed. That process continued when the Cuervo-Lorens family moved to Canada in 1976.

"We started coming to this part of the world when my son attended Shawnigan Lake school. How beautiful it was," she said.

Mexico City was also beautiful, but Cuervo-Lorens worried about its rapid growth and wanted a change.

"When we lived there, there were eight million people. Now there are 22 million people," she said.

She and her husband bought a printing company in Nanaimo and things went well until the brutal recession of the early 1980s.

"We lost the equity in our house and the business; it was very, very tough," Cuervo-Lorens said.

They moved to Victoria, and Cuervo-Lorens became administrative secretary for School District 63, retiring three years ago. All the while she continued collecting recipes and wanted to do something with them, but came to a realization.

"If I was ever going to publish a book, no one would know who I was," Cuervo-Lorens said.

To change that, she began teaching Mexican cooking classes at Camosun College.

"They were extremely successful; students had no idea there were all these other Mexican dishes, beyond enchiladas and tacos," she said.

In 1991, now better known, she published Maria Elena's Mexican Cuisine: Authentic Mexican Dishes Made Easy.

"Practicality was of the utmost importance. I wanted Canadians to be able to cook the authentic food, with the authentic ingredients, without feeling overwhelmed by recipes with huge lists of unknown ingredients," Cuervo-Lorens writes on her website, mariaelenascookbooks.com.

The book was a hit, but as she continued to teach, she could see some students wanted to tackle more advanced things and included those kinds of recipes in her second book, Mexican Culinary Treasures, published by New York's Hippocrene Books in 2004.

That book, like the first, contains simple recipes, but also has more labour-intensive ones, such as tamales and mole poblano, Mexico's famous, chili-rich dish with an unusual ingredient.

"Chocolate, it adds a little bit of sweetness to balance the chilies," Cuervo-Lorens said.

Mexicans still also drink chocolate, but not the bitter xocolátl Aztecs sipped. These days a rich, sweeter drink is preferred that's traditionally served in a clay pitcher with a molinillo, a wooden implement used to make it frothy.

"I grew up with hot chocolate, it was my father's favourite, he would have it every evening," Cuervo-Lorens said.

To learn about that drink and how to prepare tasty Mexican dishes, attend a Cuervo-Lorens cooking class. On Tuesday and Thursday she'll be at French Mint Cooking School in Broadmead. On Oct. 19 and 26 she'll be at Bayside Middle School in Brentwood Bay. For more information and to register at French Mint, visit frenchmint.ca; for her classes at Bayside Middle School, visit panoramarecreation.ca.

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Eric Akis is the author of the best-selling Everyone Can Cook book series. His columns appear in the Life section Wednesday and Sunday.

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