

International News - News for Dallas, Texas

MEXICO CITY - Alba Pérez smiles and gestures proudly to the black mole sauce on the counter of her market stall, where she sells products from her native Oaxaca.

The mole, she says, is made with dozens of ingredients - chiles, cacao, peanuts, pecans and avocado leaf, among others - milled to a powder, then made into a rich paste used in dishes like enchiladas. She sells homemade mezcal with a worm floating in the bottle, seasoned grasshoppers to be eaten as a crispy snack or stuffed in tacos, dried black beans and spicy red-orange chorizo.

"The ingredients make our food special," she said. "Other countries don't have what we have."

She's right - and the world has taken notice.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, known as UNESCO, recently named Mexican cuisine an "intangible cultural patrimony of humanity," along with French gastronomy - the only two cuisines to earn the honor.

It's international recognition that Mexicans here and north of the border are proud of, but hardly needed - they already know what sets their food apart.

Chefs, señoras, foodies and vendors point to, among other things, the creative use of more than 100 varieties of native chiles, the high quality of the ingredients and the blending of ancient indigenous and immigrant influences.

"We mix everything - insects, animals, a variety of chiles," said Francisco Fernández as he shopped for cactus and habanero chiles at the mercado where Pérez has her stall in the city's central Narvarte neighborhood. "This country is shaped like a cornucopia and is famous for its abundance."

Texas families sitting down to holiday meals spiced with Mexican flair - turkey and tamales, hot salsas and guacamole - can rightfully celebrate the designation, said David Suro, maker of Siembra Azul tequila, restaurateur and a noted Mexican food traditionalist. Tex-Mex cooking has had its own spicy identity for years and could justifiably be considered "one of the regional cuisines of Mexico."

"It has its own flavors, its own way to treat spices and herbs - just like Sonora, Yucatán or Jalisco," Suro said.

Today Texas is increasingly moving beyond Tex-Mex to experiment with the exotic ingredients and elaborate preparations native to central and southern Mexico, the kind that inspired UNESCO to call Mexican cuisine "elaborate and symbol-laden" and "a comprehensive cultural model comprising farming, ritual practices, age-old skills, culinary techniques and ancestral community customs and manners."

Amador Mora, chef and owner of Maximo's Cocina Mexicana in Dallas, prepares traditional Mexican fare like enchiladas and chicken in mole.

"I learned from my mother, and she learned from my grandmother," said Mora, a native of Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato. "She would say, 'Son, this is what we eat.'"

At the well-known El Refugio restaurant in Mexico City's Zona Rosa neighborhood, chef Claudio Hall cooks recipes passed down generation to generation; his grandmother founded the restaurant. Known for its commitment to Mexican culinary traditions, El Refugio goes so far as to mill its own corn to make the masa, or dough, for tortillas.

"Mexico has one of the most complex cuisines in the world," he said. "The secret is in the preparation."

Pérez echoed a similar sentiment.

"It's the work one puts into preparing the food," she said. "And the love."

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