

# FOOD FORUM \*

Dorothy Johnson

## South Of The Border Food

CONTRARY TO general belief, Mexican cooking is not necessarily hot. It is subtly spiced, and the range of dishes goes far beyond the better-known tacos, tamales, and moles. Authentic Mexican dishes, like our own American cooking, once demanded hours of preparation. Modern labor-saving devices, however, such as the electric blender, have replaced the black stone mortar and the tortilla press.

Mexican dishes are superbly suited to entertaining for much of the preparation can be done ahead, and the traditional earthenware casseroles and pots are not only attractive serving dishes but take to the range and oven like no other and offer the added advantage of keeping food hot longer than ordinary utensils.

CHILES ARE ESSENTIAL to the Mexican kitchen. Although there are an estimated 61 classified varieties (sweet, pungent, and hot), no cook needs them all; eight is a gracious plenty. I really manage with only two; Ortego whole chiles and pimiento. However, when putting on a real Mexican party, unless there is a gourmet shop or a Mexican neighborhood store close, it is hard to find all the ingredients needed in Mexican cooking. In Los Angeles, it is a joy to market at La Luz del Dia, 610 Spring St.

Beans, indigenous to the Americas and India, are also important to Mexican cooking. The most popular in Mexico is the black bean, the red kidney, and the pink bean that can be found in all supermarkets.

Tomatoes are, perhaps, Mexico's best gift to the world of food. The red tomato, called jitomate in Mexico, can be found everywhere. The green tomato, small with a papery brown covering, is harder to obtain. Green tomatoes are used in many sauces.

Herbs and spices figure largely in Mexican cooking and, of course, tortillas are mandatory. Like everything else, thank heavens, the making of tortillas and tamales have been modernized. Flour for the Masa is sold and packaged as Masa Harina made by the Quaker Oats Company and can be bought in most any supermarket.

### TORTILLAS

2 c. Quaker Masa Harina, 1-1/2 c. warm water, 1 tsp. salt... Mix ingredients to form a soft dough. Divide into balls (the size of a small egg) and flatten on tortilla press between two sheets plastic or waxed paper to a thin pancake about 4" across. If the tortilla sticks, the dough is moist. Scrape it off, and add a little more Masa Harina. Place ungreased skillet over medium fire and cook tortillas, one at a time, about two minutes on each side or until edges begin to lift and they are slightly brown.

### TACOS

Tacos are small (4") tortillas stuffed with various mixtures rolled, fastened with toothpick, fried in lard and served with various sauces and chiles on the side or served unfried with extras to the individual taste. In the United States, the taco is not rolled, but simply folded in half. In Mexico, they are always rolled.

For a taco party, set out bowls of canned chiles, chopped lettuce, fried chopped chorizo (Mexican sausage), shredded chicken or pork, guacamole, frijoles, refritos, or some of the following taco fillings. Serve with hot tortillas to be filled and eaten unfried.

### TACO FILLINGS

(1) Tacos de Jamon--Mix together 1 c. chop-

ped boiled ham, 1 tbsp. finely chopped onion, 3-1/2 oz. pkg. mashed cream cheese, 2 med. peeled, seeded and chopped tomatoes, chopped canned serrano, or jalapeno chile to taste. Stuff 12 small tortillas with mixture and serve with guacamole.

(2) Tacos de Picadillo--2 lbs. chopped beef, 2 onions finely chopped, 1 clove garlic crushed, 2 apples peeled, cored, and chopped, 1 lb. tomatoes peeled, seeded, and chopped, 3 canned jalapeno chiles sliced, 1/2 c. raisins, 1 oz. pimiento stuffed green olives cut in half; Pinch each of ground cinnamon and clove or, if preferred, thyme and oregano, salt, pepper, 2 oz. of slivered almonds... Heat 4 tbsp. olive oil in large skillet and brown meat. Add other ingredients, simmer gently, uncovered, until cooked about 20 minutes. Fry almonds until golden brown in a little oil and add to cooking filling--Cook a minute or two longer--stuff and roll tortillas. Serve with guacamole.

(3) Tacos de Frijole--Stuff tacos with frijoles refritos (fried beans), strips of jalapeno chile, Monterey Jack cheese, or a similar cheese, and serve with guacamole.

### GUACAMOLE (Avocado Sauce)

Peel and mash two large avocados. Add one med. tomato peeled, seeded, and chopped, 1 tbsp. finely chopped onion, 2 or more canned serrano chiles chopped, 1 tbsp. finely chopped celantro, salt, pepper and pinch of sugar. Mix well and pile into serving dish with the avocado pit in center to keep the guacamole from turning dark --makes about 2 cups.

### HUEVOS RANCHEROS (Eggs Ranch Style)

1 lge. onion chopped, 1 clove garlic chopped, 1 lb. tomatoes peeled and chopped, salt and pepper to taste, 1/2 tsp. sugar, 1/4 tsp. oregano, 3 or more canned serrano chiles chopped, 12 tortillas, 12 eggs, cooked black beans or frijoles refritos (fried beans) heated.

Heat 2 tbsp. shortening in skillet and fry onion and garlic until limp. Add tomatoes, salt and pepper, sugar, oregano, and chiles. Simmer this sauce gently for about 15 minutes. Heat 3 tbsp. shortening in a skillet and fry tortillas on both sides until limp or, if preferred, quite crisp. Place 2 tortillas side by side on plate and keep warm. Fry eggs in butter, place an egg on each tortilla--Pour sauce over eggs and serve with a couple tbsp. of hot beans on the side. Serves 6.

### TAPADO DE POLLO (Smothered Chicken)

6 tbsp. olive oil, 3-1/2 to 4 lb. fryer cut into serving pieces, 1 lge. onion sliced, 2 cloves garlic chopped, 3 lge. tomatoes peeled and sliced, 1/2 lb. baby peas, 1 lb. zucchini or summer squash sliced, 2 cooked apples peeled and sliced, 2 pears peeled and sliced, 4 slices pineapple cut into chunks, 2 lge. or 4 small bananas peeled and sliced, salt and pepper to taste.

Heat 4 tbsp. olive oil in skillet and saute chicken pieces until golden. Place a layer of half the chicken in a heavy-lidded casserole and follow with half of the onion, garlic, tomatoes, peas, zucchini, apples, pears, pineapple and bananas. Repeat with remaining chicken, vegetable and fruit and remaining oil. Cover and cook on top of stove over low heat until chicken is tender; about 1-1/2 hours. Serves 6.

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