

THE MOLES OF MEXICO

By CLAUDIA ALARCON | Photography courtesy of EL NARANJO



Perhaps the most iconic dish in Mexican gastronomy, mole is steeped in history, lore and complexity. Its origins date to pre-Columbian Mexico, where cultures like the Maya and Aztec prepared elaborate sauces using chiles, seeds, herbs and tomatoes cooked with indigenous vegetables and meats — the name mole is derived from the Nahuatl word *mulli*, meaning a sauce or stew.

Mole evolved over the centuries to incorporate ingredients and techniques arriving from Europe and Asia, eventually becoming a Baroque preparation that layers flavors and textures from dozens of diverse ingredients. But this festive dish is much more than what some mistakenly label as a “Mexican chocolate sauce.” Although the word immediately conjures *mole poblano*, the dark, rich sauce that originated in the state of Puebla, it is important to clarify that moles come in a variety of colors, textures and flavors, based on regional ingredients and preferences.

Legends abound regarding the origin of mole, but we will never know exactly how the dish we know today came to be. The most widely believed — or distributed — story is that the nuns of the Santa Rosa convent in the city of Puebla created the dish in the XVII century while hurriedly preparing a special feast for a visiting archbishop. Supposedly, the convent’s cook accidentally threw chiles, tomatoes and even chocolate into a pot where she was preparing a turkey stew using Spanish staples like bread, nuts and spices. However, upon studying mole recipes through time, cookbook author and Mexican food historian Ricardo Muñoz Zurita concludes that they carefully evolved over many years. He argues that

indigenous cooks were experienced in handling, processing and grinding the chiles and knew how to combine them with other ingredients. Spanish nuns eventually agreed to let these women incorporate such ingredients into European-style preparations, resulting in a dish that is truly Mexican. Today, there are dozens of moles prepared in all regions of Mexico from Coahuila to Yucatan, but the most iconic hail from Puebla and the southern state of Oaxaca.

Renowned chef Iliana de la Vega, former Culinary Institute of America instructor and owner of El Naranjo Restaurant in Austin, is an expert on Oaxacan cuisine — the original El Naranjo in Oaxaca City garnered the chef international acclaim. She explains that, unlike *mole poblano*, Oaxacan mole does not have a romanticized story about its origin. “Josefina Velazquez de Leon, a legendary cooking instructor who was the first to start cataloging the regional cuisines of Mexico, wrote a book on Oaxacan cuisine with the help of several housewives who were famous for their cooking skills and shared their recipes,” says De la Vega. “This is the first time that Oaxaca’s famed seven moles are mentioned together in a book. It is important to mention that said seven moles are from the Central Valleys of Oaxaca. In other regions of Oax-

aca they make other moles.” These classic seven moles are *mole negro*, *mole coloradito*, *mole verde*, *mole Amarillo* or *amarillito*, *mole rojo*, *mole chichilo* and *manchamanteles*. (See sidebar on page 62 for descriptions.)

De la Vega’s recipe for Oaxacan black mole, the restaurant’s signature dish, calls for five varieties of chiles including some specially imported from Oaxaca, and it takes the chef and her staff three days to make from start to finish. This serious, artisanal approach is a point of pride for the chef. “There are a few chiles that are common to all Mexican moles, such as ancho, guajillo, pasilla and mulato,” she says. “In Oaxaca, we also use black, red and yellow chilhuacles, red and yellow chiles costeños and chile chilcostle.” At El Naranjo, the menu currently boasts the intricate *mole negro*; a fresh, light and herbaceous *mole verde*; and a *mole amarillo* that the chef loves for its wonderful texture, acidity and slight spiciness.

Because of their complex and time-consuming recipes, home cooks in Mexico usually prepare mole only for special occasions and celebrations such as weddings, baptisms, birthdays and Day of the Dead. Here in Texas, local restaurants often cut corners by using commercial mole paste, but that’s not the case at South Lamar’s El Mesón. Chef Marisela Godinez prides herself in her home-style cooking, using recipes taught by her mother. “My mom used to make a red mole that was not from Puebla — in fact, the recipe came from my paternal grandmother who was from Hidalgo, like my mom,” says the chef. “When we opened the restaurant, my mole was labeled “red mole from Hidalgo” on the menu, but I changed the description because people were very familiar with *mole poblano*. Of course, I also had to change the recipe.”

At El Mesón the menu always features this mole, as well as a delicious green mole with pork and fresh fava beans. “My mom made the green pipián, and also another red one (more yellow than red, really) with pork.” But Godinez found that her mole recipes didn’t quite convert to the large amounts needed to serve her customers. It was during an Austin visit from renowned Mexican chef Patricia Quintana that she found the solution. “The chef was staying with us, so I asked her to taste the green mole... after a few tastings and various tweaks we finally arrived at the correct proportions so it would be fit to serve at the restaurant.”



Some San Antonio restaurants also take the time and effort to prepare their moles from scratch, and longstanding favorite Rosario’s is always on the short list of best options. They serve their Puebla-style peanut mole atop a boneless chicken breast garnished with toasted sesame seeds, or doused over chicken enchiladas with melted Monterey Jack cheese. ❖

EL NARANJO

512.474.2776 | Elnaranjo-restaurant.com

EL MESON

512.442.4441 | Elmesonaustin.wordpress.com

ROSARIO’S

210.223.1806 | Rosariossa.com

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Although there are myriad types of mole, most share common or similar ingredients that include dried or fresh chiles, dry spices, fresh herbs, vegetables and fruit, and thickening agents such as almonds, pecans, pine nuts, peanuts, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, stale bread, charred corn tortillas or fresh corn masa. These are some of the most popular moles in Mexico.

Mole Poblano

A dark brown mole made with peanuts, almonds, pecans, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, raisins, chocolate and chiles ancho, pasilla, mulato and chipotle. Usually served with turkey or chicken.

Mole Negro Oaxaqueño

A very dark, almost black mole (hence the name) that incorporates charred corn tortillas, egg bread, ripe plantains, peanuts, almonds, pecans, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, raisins, chocolate and chiles chilhuacle negro, chilhuacle rojo, pasilla and mulato. Usually served with turkey or chicken.

Mole Verde

Fresh and herbaceous, made with tomatillos and a variety of green herbs and vegetables like lettuce, radish leaves, hoja santa, cilantro, chile poblano, serrano or chile de agua, thickened with fresh corn masa and pumpkin seeds. Best with chicken, pork, shrimp or fish.

Mole Amarillo

A yellowish-orange mole made for pork or chicken and vegetables like squash, chayote or green beans in a sauce of tomatoes, tomatillos, chiles ancho, pasilla, chilhuacle amarillo, guajillo, costeño amarillo and chilcostle, and seasoned with hoja santa, a herb widely used in tropical Mexico.

Mole Manchamanteles

The name of this unique mole means “tablecloth-stainer” due to its bright orange hue. It combines pork with chunks of tropical fruit like plantains and pineapples in a sauce made with chile ancho, guajillo and pasilla or mulato, sesame seeds, almonds, garlic, oregano and cloves.

Mole Coloradito

A mole with a red hue from chile guajillo that also includes chile ancho and chilcostle, tomatoes, onions, plantains, bread, dry spices and a hint of chocolate. Usually served with pork or chicken.

Mole Rojo

A brick-red mole generally made with pork, it is one of the spiciest moles, seasoned with chile ancho and chilhuacle rojo, allspice, black pepper, clove, oregano, onions, garlic, almonds and sesame seeds.