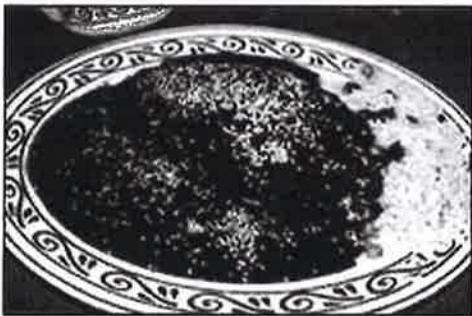


# Mole Poblano: Mexico's National Food Dish

## History Of Mexico's Most Famous Culinary Preparation:

Most people associate mole with either with Puebla or Oaxaca , but the origin of mole poblano, the thick, rich, chocolate-tinged sauce made so famous in the colonial mountain city of Puebla, Mexico, is still disputed, and generally involves these two versions of the legend:

The first says that 16<sup>th</sup> Century nuns from the Convent of Santa Rosa in Puebla de los Angeles, upon learning that the Archbishop was coming for a visit, went into a panic because they had nothing to serve him. The nuns started praying desperately and an angel came to inspire them. They began chopping and grinding and roasting, mixing different types of chiles together with spices, day-old bread, nuts, a little chocolate and approximately 20 other ingredients..



Mole Poblano, Convento de Santa Rosa

This concoction boiled for hours and was reduced to the thick, sweet, rich and fragrant mole sauce we know today. To serve in the mole, they killed the only meat they had, an old turkey, and the strange sauce was poured over it. The archbishop was more than happy with his banquet and the nuns saved face. Little did they know they were creating the Mexican National dish for holidays and feasts, and that today, millions of people worldwide have at least heard of mole poblano.

The other legend states that mole came from pre-hispanic times and that Aztec king, Moctezuma, thinking the conquistadors were gods, served mole to Cortez at a banquet to receive them. This story probably gained credibility because the word mole comes from the Nahuatl word "milli" which means sauce or "concoction". Another connection could be that chocolate was widely used in pre-columbian Mexico, so people jumped to that conclusion.

Diana Kennedy, the famous cookbook author and television chef, adds a third, less plausible version in her book *The Cuisines of Mexico*, [Harper & Row:New York] 1972, (p.199-200), "This time it was Fray Pascual who was preparing the banquet at the convent where he (the archbishop) was going to eat. Turkeys were cooking in cazuelas on the fire; as Fray Pascual, scolding his assistants for their untidiness, gathered up all the spices they had been using, and putting them together on a tray, a sudden gust of wind swept across the kitchen and they spilled over the cazuelas." Thus mixing together such an unheard-of combination of ingredients.

What do the real experts say? "The idea of using chocolate as a flavoring in cooked food would have been horrifying to the Aztecs—just as Christians could not conceive of using communion wine to make, say, coq au vin. In all the pages of Sahagun that deal with Aztec cuisine and with chocolate, there is not a hint that it ever entered into an Aztec dish. Yet, today many food writers and gourmets consider one particular dish, the famous pavo in mole poblano, which contains chocolate, to represent the pinnacle of the Mexican cooking tradition. ...the place of origin of the dish and its sauce, the Colonial Puebla de los Angeles; this beautiful city, unlike others in central Mexico, has no Aztec foundations — and neither does the dish, regardless of what food writers may say." Taken from *The True History of Chocolate*, Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe [Thames and Hudson: London] 1996 (p. 216-7).



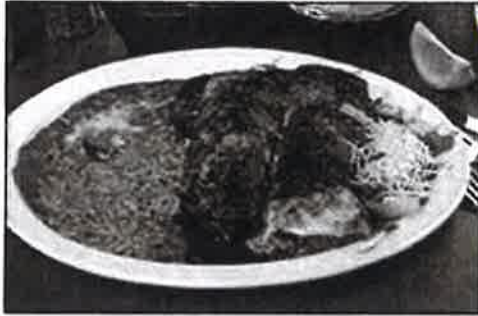
Poblano Kitchen

There is no greater expert on pre-hispanic Mesoamerica than Michael Coe and this detective is convinced.

Case closed (for now) on the mystery of the origins of mole poblano.

## **THE OTHER MOLES**

No story about mole poblano would be complete without talking a little bit about the other moles. There is a lot of misinformation about mole out there, in general. Most culinary experts agree, there are 6 moles and as Susana Trilling describes in her book, *My Search for the Seventh Mole: A story with Recipes from Oaxaca, Mexico*, [self-published, 1997], she is looking for that elusive seventh mole. Does she find it? You'll have to read the book to find out, and the recipes are fantastic, so you can try your own mole at home, if you dare.



Enchiladas con Mole

All moles are very time consuming, labor intensive and require many ingredients. Some sources state that some moles have as many as 100 ingredients, but that's an exaggeration. But 30 ingredients is not unheard of, and some mole recipes contain 10 different varieties of chiles alone. Other ingredients include: peanuts, almonds, fried bread, plantains, lard, sugar, bittersweet chocolate, cinnamon, cloves and many more. For those willing to give it a try, here is a less elaborate recipe for Mole Poblano with chicken.

Each Mexican woman has her own mole recipe, probably passed down from her mother. Because mole takes so much time to prepare, it is usually made in huge batches, too large for the home blender to handle. Therefore, women take their mole ingredients, all cooked and ready to blend, to large "molinos" or grinders in their neighborhood. The mole is passed through the grinders and comes out smoother than you could get from your home blender. It is not unusual to see women walking home from the molinos with buckets of mole for a fiesta.

And be sure to have plenty of napkins nearby when eating any mole. As you dip your warm, homemade tortilla into the wonderful sauce, you are bound to take some home with you on your shirt, your arms and under your fingernails. Now you know you're enjoying mole!

For those who want to further delve into Mexican cuisine, here is a collection of our favorite traditional Mexican recipes . Also useful is our glossary of Mexican food terms and list of regional specialties.

# Mexican Mole Has Many Flavors, Many Mothers

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ELIZA BARCLAY

KAREN CASTILLO FARFÁN



Three of the six moles served at Casa Oaxaca of Washington, D.C. Some of these mole recipes were passed down to chef Añfo Blangiardo by his grandmother.

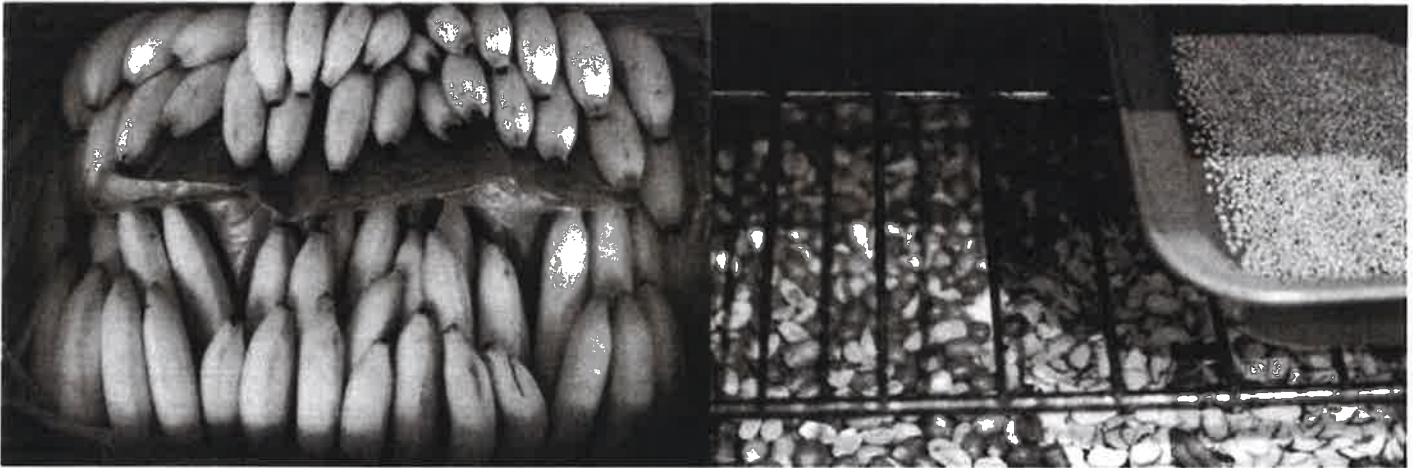
*Karen Castillo Farfán/NPR*

As with so many iconic dishes in a country's culinary heritage, Mexican mole has a creation tale.

The story goes that in the late 17th century, the Dominican sisters of the Convent of Santa Rosa in the city of Puebla heard that the archbishop was to pay a visit. The sisters had to scramble to put a meal together and gathered the ingredients they had — dried chili peppers, chocolate, old bread, nuts and more — to make a sauce for wild turkey. The meal was such a hit with the archbishop, legend has it, that mole became a

symbol of Mexican cuisine (up there with the taco).

But as Maricel Presilla writes in her newest book, *Gran Cocina Latina: The Food of Latin America*, the back story of mole is not so simple. The famed holy mole comes from "a long line of parents, such as the pre-Columbian chile-thickened sauces ... and thickened chocolate drinks. Look even closer at the nuns' kitchen and you'll start to see the whole clan of ancestors — using nuts as a thickener, for example, which was a keynote of Spanish medieval cooking."



Eric Evans, a chef in Washington, D.C., uses bananas, peanuts, walnuts, sesame seeds and almonds to make black mole. He prefers keeping the skins on the nuts for the color and the intense flavor they'll release.

*Karen Castillo Farfán/NPR*

Today this tasty and complex sauce has moved way beyond Mexican convent kitchens. With Mexicans migrating around the world, foreigners are learning how to make it, too. But take heed: Mole-making requires a serious trip to the supermarket, depending on the shape of your pantry.

You'll need spices like cloves, oregano, cumin and bay leaves; nuts and seeds like almonds, pumpkin seeds and walnuts; lard; sugar or chocolate; dried chili peppers like chile ancho, mulato, poblano and chipotle; and dried or fresh fruits and vegetables like bananas, pineapple, celery and squash.

Nine variations on mole appear in Presilla's book — from Oaxacan "tablecloth stainer" fruit mole with raisins and pork, to a Guatemalan mole with a plantain base.



The main ingredient in mole is dried chili peppers; to prepare them for cooking, one must remove the seeds, toast the seeds with tortillas, then rinse the seeds, then roast the skins, rehydrate them and finally blend and cook them together with all the other ingredients.

*Karen Castillo Farfán /NPR*

For the less ambitious or the time-crunched, Herdez, the Mexican product line of Hormel Foods, has been marketing the jarred mole brand Doña María since 1968. That mole needs to be thinned with broth before serving.

But as the interest in mole among consumers grows, Herdez has introduced mole "ready to serve" in a carton. "People are also looking for more flavors in their culinary experiences, and the complexities of a mole sauce provide something new and exciting for those outside of a Mexican heritage," Gilberto Gutierrez, Herdez brand manager, tells The Salt.

And increasingly mole's diversity is being showcased in Mexican restaurants outside Mexico. Alfio Blangiardo is the executive chef at Casa Oaxaca in Washington, D.C., which has six moles on its menu derived from Blangiardo's grandmother's recipes: red, yellow, green, white, the classic poblano and black mole, also known as Oaxacan mole.

Mole is a constantly evolving dish, in part because of the wide variety of possible ingredients, and there is no one way to make it, Blangiardo says. "A chili picked in lower elevation will taste different from one picked at a higher elevation," he says.

In Mexico, mole is served for breakfast, lunch and dinner but also on very special occasions, like weddings and holidays, like Day of the Dead. Traditionally, ingredients

are ground by hand, making it an all-day affair. But today, grinders and blenders make the task much easier, cutting down the cooking time to four to five hours, says Blangiardo.