

# Introduction

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It was about 1994 that I was first asked to write a book for the governor of Oaxaca on the traditional foods of that state, but for various reasons, politics among them, the project was never realized. Two more frustrating attempts were abandoned, and it did not get written until about 2003, when I received a definite commitment from a Mexican publisher for a joint project with a U.S. publisher. However, when it was apparent that the style and content of the book were being severely compromised, I broke off negotiations and retrieved my material. Another prolonged delay ensued before I was able to find a publisher that was willing to include the text and recipes from the indigenous areas and not just the more familiar material illustrated with the usual predictably glamorous photographs.

Trying to record the ethnic foods as well as the more sophisticated recipes from the urban centers presented an enormous challenge and responsibility. Oaxaca is the most mountainous and diverse state of Mexico, with many different cultural and linguistic groups, often living in areas difficult to access, and with an incredible biodiversity. Like many authors before me, I am sure that if I had known what it would entail to travel almost constantly through the year, and often uncomfortably, to research, record, photograph, and then cook and eat over three hundred recipes, I might never have had the courage to start the project in the first place.

I am not an academic, historian, anthropologist, or botanist, but just an adventurous cook and a lover of the natural world who delights in the experience of traveling to discover and taste foods, some of which I had only heard about, but many that I was yet to discover in this infinite world of Oaxacan gastronomy. It was an enormous challenge to try to record in words and images these little-known

foods, both wild and cultivated, the way they were prepared, and the part they play in the daily or festive life of the communities I visited.

Of course, it would take various volumes and many years to do full justice to this fascinating subject, as well as contributions from anthropologists, archaeologists, botanists, and linguists (a pity that local gastronomy does not play a part in their professional training). Nevertheless, in these pages I have attempted to relate something of what I found in my many years of wandering throughout the state of Oaxaca. I realize that there are notable omissions of the specific foods of the Mixe, Zoque, and Amuzgo areas, for example. I only hope that the many wonderful cooks whose recipes I have not been able to include will forgive me. They may not agree with my choices (there are always disagreements and rivalries among cooks about ingredients, quantities, and methods), but I have tried to include the most representative recipes for the foods that I have eaten and cooked in Oaxaca since my first visit there in 1965.

Those who do not know Oaxaca outside the popular tourist areas may perhaps get a broader view of the enormous gastronomic wealth that plays a part in the daily, religious, and festive life of Oaxacans of different cultures and economic levels.

Apart from all the intense work and difficult travel over many years, I have been immensely enriched, not only by discovering the incredible natural beauty of the countryside but by getting to know Oaxacans from all walks of life. Even the most humble have invited me into their kitchens to share and demonstrate their culinary knowledge; they have fed me and given me shelter without a question asked and with a generosity and caring without limits. They are the soul of this book.

