



# **A Recipe for Identity: Food and Culture in Oaxaca, Mexico**

By  
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*Stirring mole in a cazuela.*

## **Declaration**

This thesis is original and contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of the thesis.

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## Abstract

This thesis is about the centrality of food to culture in Oaxaca. Food is highly sensual and tastes in food are developed at a very early stage in life, making tastes in food intimate, emotional and therefore extremely memorable. Tastes in food reflect far more than nutrition and like the perception of the senses, it is clear that taste is in large part socially constructed. Eating is an essential activity but it is also an intensely social activity, which reveals much about culture. Activities surrounding food including production, shopping, cooking and eating are considered both in everyday and festive circumstances. The labour of men but especially the labour of women in the purchase and preparation of food is discussed as an expression of love and devotion to family, which is a mundane form of sacrifice that raises consumption into the social sphere and uses it to communicate, create and maintain important social relationships, thereby negating the destructive capacity of consumption for its own sake (Miller 1998, cf. Adapon 2005).

Individual ingredients such as corn, *mezcal*, chocolate, *chiles* and *chapulines* as well as iconic dishes such as *mole negro* are considered as carriers or reminders of history and of personal and group identity (Palmer 1998). These ingredients are considered to be local and traditional with a long history of farming and use in the area that dates back to well before Spanish conquest. In the face of global market pressures, *Oaxaqueños* deliberately choose to shop at local markets rather than supermarkets for fresh ingredients, which are grown in the area. These ingredients are seen to be the best and the tastiest but their flavours also connect people to place and to history. In fact, notions of *terroir* are explicitly used to advertise *mezcal* while a single grain of native corn can be seen to carry the whole of Indian history and farming knowledge which has been passed down through generations of men (cf. Mendras 1970, Trubek 2005). Unwritten recipes for everyday and festive dishes are stored in the body and are handed down through generations of women serving a similar function.

Habitual body memories such as cooking skills are considered as knowledge and as the basis of all other forms of memory (Casey 2000). Memory is the foundation for any narrative of group or self, which in turn is the basis of identity. Oaxaca is a place with a unique ethnic identity within Mexico and one of the finest expressions of this unique culture is the highly elaborate food that it is famous for. Even the most basic of foods in Oaxaca are labour intensive and involve the investment of time and effort by the cook, which is recognised by the family as an expression of love. The most highly prized dishes are the most labour intensive and these are also the most suitable offerings to the gods during festivals such as the Day of the Dead festival. Festivals serve important functions and bind communities through obligatory food sharing but also through the commemoration and re-enactment of past events (cf. Mauss 1954, Casey 2000). Food is integral to any celebration but it is also consumed on a daily basis and therefore has a central role in nourishing, creating and binding Oaxacan people, constantly reminding them of who they are and where they come from.

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## ***Dedication***

*To my mother, without your support and patience this would not have been possible.*

*To my father, who would have been proud.*

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