

**The Art of Mexican Cooking**  
**culinary agency and social dynamics in Milpa Alta, Mexico**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in the subject of Social Anthropology

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June 2001

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## Abstract

Drawing on Alfred Gell's 'art nexus' theory, this dissertation considers cooking as a kind of artistic practice. The focus of this study is the culinary culture of *barbacoa*-makers in the community of Barrio San Mateo, Milpa Alta in Mexico City. Mexican cuisine is analysed at three levels – the social and culinary contexts of the production and consumption of *barbacoa*; the daily life of women and especially their domestic cooking tasks; and the dynamics of hospitality, as expressed in the cycle of fiestas.

*Barbacoa* is pit-roast lamb, and the production of it is an important means of livelihood in San Mateo (along with the cultivation of *nopales*, and other agricultural activities). *Barbacoa* – which is served during fiestas, and also eaten in the market on Sundays and holidays – is produced by married couples whose social environment both creates and is created by the practices surrounding the preparation of the dish. The division of labour observed in making *barbacoa* is directly related to normative gender roles, i.e. those performed in the normal domestic context.

Women are associated with cooking, which includes making *salsas* and other foods which require laborious culinary input. They appear to be restricted both by the expectations of men and by the demands of the kitchen. But male and female gender roles are shown, in this dissertation, to be complementary, and they are not in general characterized by the hierarchy of men over women. Examination of the fiesta cycle further reveals that the basis of social interaction is the conjugal unit, both at the level of families (through links of *compadrazgo*, co-parenthood), and at the level of the community (through the *mayordomía*, the 'cargo system').

Women may be viewed as culinary artists whose body of work is the corpus of Mexican cuisine. The source of their culinary mastery is located in the individual's hand or *sazón de amor*, a touch of love. The development of 'traditional' cuisine is therefore born of the domestic realm as a product of artistic innovation and technical skill, both in a culinary and a social sense. Counter to Goody's theory, this high cuisine is not the product of a hierarchical society, as such, but rather develops from the highly-valued work of women as wives, mothers, and family cooks.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Alfred Gell. I was fortunate to be one of his last students, before his untimely death in 1997. I wish I could thank him personally for all his understanding and encouragement, especially for taking me seriously when I announced that I would only do a PhD if I could study chile peppers. Without him I would never have begun this investigation, nor even think of going to Mexico. He was my inspiration, my guide, supervisor, accomplice, and most of all, friend.

In Mexico I owe a great debt to many whose generosity and presence made my stay both pleasant and stimulating. Ricardo Muñoz Zurita was my 'Muchona the Hornet' of Mexican cuisine. He welcomed me into his professional and personal life and was a constant friend even during the oddest of times and for the oddest of needs.

The people with whom I came in contact in Milpa Alta, especially Yadira Arenas and Luis Enrique Nápoles, Ma. Primitiva Bermejo, Doña Margarita Salazar, and Alejandro Enriquez, took a strange foreigner into their homes, and shared much more than their lives, homes, and food with me. Iván Gomezcézar shared with me thoughtful insight about Milpa Alta, as well as several texts, which I would have not been able to find or access on my own.

Andrés Medina, welcomed me to the Institute of Anthropological Research (IIA) in the UNAM with a sense of humour. He was the first person to really understand what I was getting at when I arrived in Mexico for the first time. Without his warmth, constant moral support and generous interest in me and my work, I would never have eventually found my way during fieldwork. It was he who introduced me to Luz del Valle, who offered me valuable friendship and a link into Milpa Alta. Leticia Méndez was the second person I met there who understood me both academically and emotionally. Her premature death in 1996 was one of the great shocks that I encountered in Mexico, and I have missed her ever since.

Janet Long-Solis generously shared some of her books and her contacts with me. She introduced me to José Luis Curiel in the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, who allowed me to sit in some classes of the Gastronomy program, and get to know the students and faculty. It was through him that I met other scholars of Mexican cuisine, including José Luis Juárez and Ricardo Muñoz.

Other friends in Mexico – Patricia Salero and her family, Ileana Bonilla, Ricardo Bonilla, Gabriel Gutierrez, Fabiola Alcántara, Antonio Rivera, Abdiel Cervántes, Juan Carlos López, Juan Manuel Horta, and the rest of the staff of the Executive Dining Room in the UNAM – opened their hearts and homes to me. Their friendship and thoughtful conversations constantly provided me with ideas and security.

Back in London, several more people helped me to bring this project to completion, with incomparable patience, kindness and academic rigour. Fenella Cannell was a constant presence and was especially helpful in grounding me during the period immediately following Alfred Gell's death. Charles Stafford was consistently most reliable, thoughtful, thorough, and frank. He took more responsibility over me and my work than he was required, I am sure. Peter Gow always provided timely encouragement and helped me to learn how to see. Their sensitive comments and insight were invaluable as I waded through the writing process of this dissertation.

My family, especially my parents and sister, have supported me in all possible ways, even when they did not understand my motives or reasoning. Without their constant presence, visits, and patience, I would have had no means to survive. Good friends and peers like Yueh-ping Yen, Anja Timm, and Dorothy Arts were continually encouraging and intellectually stimulating, as well as willing eaters for all my culinary experiments. And finally, much love and gratitude to Kai Kresse, for the reasons just mentioned and for his astounding commitment and interest in my work and my mental state.

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## **Introduction**

## The project and the setting

### 1.1 Organization of the thesis

This study focuses on cooking as a deeply meaningful social activity, on cooking as a form of art. The scope of my analysis is Mexican cuisine of the central region, and its appropriateness for an investigation of artistic practice will be explained in chapters two and three. I largely draw upon ethnographic data that I collected in a community in Milpa Alta, in southeast Mexico City. The thesis is divided into two parts, the first providing ethnography and analysis of daily family life, and the second dealing with the special social occasions of family celebrations and local fiestas.

Approaching cooking as artistic activity is most salient when what is under scrutiny can be defined as an elaborate cuisine, or, in Jack Goody's terms, a 'differentiated' or 'high' cuisine (1982: 97-99). As Goody defines it, a 'high' cuisine depends on 'a variety of dishes which are largely the inventions of specialists. But by no means entirely. For the higher cuisine also incorporates and transforms what, from the national standpoint, is the regional food of peasants and the cooking of exotic foreigners' (104-5). What can be inferred from this is that any good cook is a 'specialist'. Such a situation is what has existed in Mexico since before the Spanish arrived (see chapter three, and also Coe 1994, Cowal 1990, Corcuera 1981, Sahagún 1950-1982). Since then, throughout Mexico's history, there has been continuous adjustment, development and innovation of culinary techniques, new foodstuffs have been introduced and incorporated, enriching the cuisine through the sharing of culinary and cultural knowledge.

Assuming that a 'high' cuisine can be thought of as culinary 'art', part one focuses on cooking as an artistic and technical practice. It begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework I use to analyse food in terms of Alfred Gell's theory of art (chapter two). The next three chapters provide different perspectives of Mexican cuisine and how people cook and eat informally, at home or in private spaces, with family and close friends. It is not unusual for many women to cook elaborately (that is, with recipes that sometimes require complex technical processes), and it is in private, for

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loved ones, when they prepare the greatest variety (and quality) of foods and dishes. Good food is highly valued for having superior flavour, and not just for the sake of sustenance. This variety and value are meaningful because they depend upon social factors as much as on the availability of ingredients and a cook's knowledge and technical skill. The centrality of gastronomy in social life will be shown as a matter of course, and not reserved for occasional special events.

Chapter three introduces Mexican gastronomy and situates the culinary practices I discuss in Milpa Alta. Milpa Alta is divided into villages (*pueblos*) and districts (*barrios*), each of which is dedicated to a particular trade. In Barrio San Mateo, most people prepare *barbacoa*, pit-roast meat, for a living. *Barbacoa* is usually eaten on special occasions since it is a dish made in large amounts because a whole sheep or goat is cooked overnight in a pit. There are restaurants in Mexico City which only serve *barbacoa*, but it is more commonly prepared like a cottage industry by families called *barbacoieros*.

I describe the process of preparing *barbacoa* in detail in chapter four. The work is shared between husband and wife, and is one demonstration of how culinary practices are a means by which actors construct their social world (cf. Munn 1986). Weekly and daily life is structured by the rhythms of the kitchen, and the production of *barbacoa* as a trade also dictates the spatio-temporal forms of *barbacoiero* social interaction and their relative status in Milpa Alta. This and the next chapter are the core of the analysis of cooking related to the division of labour and gender complementarity in the domestic sphere. This perspective demonstrates how one form of agency that effectuates social interaction and change is a culinary agency (cf. Hugh-Jones 1978, 1979 for a comparative and detailed analysis of how the ordering of male and female productive activities are characterised by a dynamic complementarity that effectuates the production and reproduction of the social order in a Vaupés community in Colombia).

The notion of culinary agency as powerful and meaningful is further explored by looking at women's social and physical boundaries. In chapter five I describe society's expectations of women and try to assess how food and cooking are related to marriage and to a woman's sense of identity and morality. My data is limited to women, because of my closer access to women rather than men, and also because daily meals are almost always taken as women's responsibility, in Milpa Alta and elsewhere in Mexico. Women do most of the cooking in the household, and in some ways it seems that a proper woman is thought of as one who knows how to cook, especially if she cooks well.

Because of this ideal of womanhood, there is a saying about marriage and cooking in Mexico which takes the form of a criticism: *No saben ni cocinar y ya se quieren casar*, 'They don't even know how to cook and yet they already want to marry'.

Part two is concerned with extrafamilial socio-gastronomic relations in Milpa Alta. This is the realm of ritual and feasts. Rather than a focus on cooking as an artistic activity, the emphasis here is on special dishes and food sharing for building social ties and reciprocity. Although this view has already been shown by many others before me (e.g., Richards 1939, Williams 1985, Johnsson 1986, Montaña 1992, Rutter 1993, Carsten 1997), I describe this dimension of social life as complementary to the first part, for a more complete understanding of culinary agency.

Goody would support the comprehensive treatment of both spheres of life in this manner. He writes, 'To claim that one has to see the ritual cuisine in the context of the domestic is, again, not to give universal primacy to the economic, any more than the reverse would privilege ideology, or myth in a similar way' (1982: 214). Thus an understanding of both spheres of social interaction provides a fuller picture of how daily life is punctuated by contrasting practices (rituals) particularly prescribed for occasions which are defined as special by each society. During these ritual events, Mexican gastronomy follows specific rules (traditions), which are organised and determined by religious (Catholic) classification. In part two, greater attention is paid to feast food and the perspective of how people eat outside of the family sphere. The coerciveness of hospitality and competitions for prestige are dealt with here.

Although fiestas are releases from daily routine (Brandes 1988: 1, cf. Paz 1967 [1950]) and recipes of ritual dishes are more elaborate than any quotidian meal, festivity is actually controlled and bound by a set of rules. For fiestas, there is a strict menu which needs to be followed (i.e., *mole*<sup>1</sup>, *tamales*, rice, beans), otherwise the meal is not properly defined as festive. Preparing an elaborate dish indicates respect and grandeur, however this menu monotony characterises a fiesta. Considering that there are so many delicious recipes encompassed in Mexican cuisine, which is one of the reasons why it can be considered to be an elaborate cuisine or to be artistic, it may seem strange to reserve loyalty to a handful of recipes for all kinds of celebrations. Festive dishes,

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<sup>1</sup> Most words in italics are defined in the glossary, but *mole*, specifically, is discussed in chapter eight.

however, have elaborate recipes; a good *mole* is not so easy to prepare. It takes a particularly skillful hand to prepare it well.

Since special dishes involve laborious and often complex techniques in order to produce them, the fiesta may appear to be the arena of the greatest culinary artistry. Fiestas are also occasions when greatest expense can be allocated to food. This is indeed what occurs in Milpa Alta, where there are some families who leave their houses unfinished, yet consistently hold large-scale fiestas every year serving the requisite festive dishes, apparently regardless of the expense. Although not writing about Mexico specifically, Goody comments (1982: 131):

The complexity of cuisine requires as well as money the availability and differentiation of domestic labour, labour that has often been removed from the female sex (the harem is reserved for the pleasures of the bed) and allocated to the male. The labour, sometimes provided by slaves, is then sub-divided into a variety of tasks surrounding the acquisition of raw food, the preparation of dishes, and the serving of food...

Indeed, Milpa Alta society, like Mexican society in general, is characterised by social differentiation, and many families have full- or part-time domestic helpers who have migrated to Mexico City from poorer states. Having or being domestic labour directly affects social interaction, as well as the material by-products (such as food) of different kinds of social interaction. As Goody argues, there is a relation between the hierarchy in society and the possibility to develop a differentiated cuisine with recipes of various degrees of complexity.

I recognise that complexity is not equivalent to artistry, but well-prepared complex dishes are casually praised by many as works of 'art', and these special dishes are usually associated with celebrations. In addition, fiestas are important events of wide social interaction, and in Milpa Alta the hosts are defined as a cooperating family unit, rather than as individuals. Still, women are usually in charge of the cooking for feasts, as well as for daily meals. Furthermore, just as Goody has argued (see quote above), there are some commercial dishes, like *barbacoa*, that are popularly served at fiestas and that are now more commonly prepared by men, or jointly by men and women. In fact, fiesta hospitality and the corresponding food are products of gender complementarity and family cooperation, although women are thought of as the family cooks. So in other words, in the fiesta sphere, women's culinary agency is distributed and shared amongst her family, vis à vis the wider public.

To explain this further, I discuss the systems of social organisation in Milpa Alta in chapter six. Here I describe the two basic socio-political structures, the *mayordomía* (cargo system) and *compadrazgo* (co-parenthood). The main purpose of these structures is to organise a proper fiesta at town or family level, which includes serving a proper feast with the appropriate menu. To illustrate family fiestas, chapter seven is about the two most important celebrations in the life cycle, weddings and funerals. Weddings are the quintessential example of festivity in Milpa Alta, and possibly in the rest of *mestizo* Mexico, as well. They celebrate the ideal relationship between a man and a woman (as husband and wife), and also the potential for the physical generation of a family. Funerals are also 'celebrated' in Milpa Alta, with food (and music) that are central to their performance. Funerals represent the importance of the feast for the sake of social regeneration of the community.

Chapter eight is an analysis of fiesta food and coercive hospitality. It also includes a discussion of the rigidity or flexibility of the festive menu. Food hospitality is actually the important basis of other social exchanges, in a similar way to how Nancy Munn (1986) describes it in her study of value transformation in Gawa, Papua New Guinea. Community viability, she argues, comes as a result of 'positive evaluation' by (external) others, that is, through fame, which is produced through externalizing actions, inter-island transactions of food hospitality and kula. For Milpa Alta, I wish to demonstrate that community viability can similarly be understood as based upon food hospitality. The unit I discuss is the family or household, and the transactions of food hospitality at issue here are inter-familial or external to the household. I also show that it is not just the act of giving food, which makes food giving powerful in hospitality or within the family. One crucial aspect of food which plays a role in its social efficacy is its flavour, which comes about because of the cook's 'technical mastery' (Gell 1996 [1992]), as well as his or her talent, *sazón*. So hospitality, especially fiesta hospitality, is enacted through serving flavourful food.

Festive dishes can be thought of as culinary works of art, but if artistry is determined by action (see chapter two; Gell 1998), then the greatest culinary artistry characterises the domestic or quotidian sphere. The artistic nature of cooking is embedded in domestic activity, as will be shown from my analysis of food preparation and consumption. While I have been unable to treat the topics of food production and distribution at a level beyond the *barrio*, as Goody prescribes are necessary for the



study of cuisine in anthropology, nor is there space for me to include a comparative analysis with other cuisines or other cultures, my work does provide particular attention to the one aspect of cuisine that Goody was unable to discuss at length in his own work: that is food preparation, 'the arts of cooking and the cuisine' (38).<sup>2</sup> I also make a very light account of political and economic forces with respect to the world economy, drawing my main conclusions from my data of the local system of Barrio San Mateo in relation to the rest of Milpa Alta. A comparative study of another group in a different, even neighbouring, community of Mexico City, or another community of central Mexico with Náhuatl roots, as Milpa Alta has, would surely provide a broader perspective than my limited research allowed. Yet like Sidney Mintz (1979), using a dish, *mole*, (rather than an ingredient, sugar), I use food to illustrate how symbolic structures have meanings which transcend time. Chapter nine concludes this study with a discussion of the centrality of gastronomy to social life, as well as a brief final word on cooks and chefs as culinary agents. The following sections provide background on my research methods and on my fieldsite of Milpa Alta.

## 1.2 Sociodemographic profile of Milpa Alta

Milpa Alta occupies an area of 288.41 km<sup>2</sup>, which is 19.2% of the Federal District (Mexico City). Most of this land is put to agricultural use (95.5%), 3.5% is inhabited, and the remaining 1% is used for urban buildings and other purposes. The municipality has one of the lowest population densities of Mexico City (281.12 persons per square kilometre). According to the census of 1995, the total population of Milpa Alta was 81,102, made up of 40,435 men (49.9%) and 40,667 women (50.1%). In relation to the whole Federal District, which had a population of 8,489,007, Milpa Alta contained 0.96%. In comparison to the fifteen other municipalities of Mexico City, Milpa Alta was the smallest<sup>3</sup> (INEGI 1997: 21-22). The population has grown at a pace proportional to the rest of the Federal District, making up about 0.65% of the entire population, on average, since 1950.

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<sup>2</sup> Goody's analysis highlights four main areas of investigation to study food based on household and class. These are production (economic factors), distribution (political factors, market, allocation), preparation, and consumption. His own work focuses on production and consumption, and on a comparative perspective of cuisines since cultures must be situated within the world system.

<sup>3</sup> Xochimilco contained 3.9% and Iztapalapa contained 20% of the population of Mexico City in 1995 (INEGI 1997: 22).

The people of Milpa Alta are very attached to their land, and rarely emigrate. 96.7% of the population are natives of Milpa Alta and have never changed their place of residence as of the census of 1990 (DDF 1997: 15). According to the same source, 89.3% of the population were born in the municipality, and 10% were born elsewhere (the remaining 0.7% did not specify). The birthplaces of this 10%, in decreasing order of frequency, are the State of Mexico, Puebla, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Guerrero, Guanajuato, and other areas (INEGI 1997: 30). As further discussed below, the population of Milpa Alta used to define itself as 'Indian', but in recent years there have been decreasing numbers of those above the age of five who can speak any indigenous languages. In 1995, 4.0% (2,891 out of 71,738) spoke an indigenous language, and within this group, those who spoke Náhuatl made up 2.9% (2,078 of the 71,738). In 1990, 4.8% of the population over five (2,696 out of 56,123) could speak an indigenous language (DDF 1997: 15, INEGI 1997: 31).

The population is fairly young; 64.5% (52,334) are under the age of 30; 79.8% (64,692) are under 40. Those in the most active and productive ages (15-64) make up 61.9% of the population, and within this group, 46.9% (38,060) were 20-54 years old. Among those who were 12 years and older in 1990, 45.7% were married, and within this group, 65.5% had both civil and religious weddings, 32% had only the legal wedding, and 2.5% had only a religious wedding. The remaining 54.3% were subdivided as follows: 38.5% were single, 10% lived in free union, 1.3% were separated from their spouses, 0.4% were divorced, 3.5% were widowed and the final 0.6% did not specify their civil status (INEGI 1997: 30).

According to the figures for 1990, among the 45,233 who were over the age of 12, 43.4% were economically active, of whom 42.2% (19,106) were employed and 1.2% (530) were unemployed. 54.5% (24,670) were economically inactive, and 2% (927) did not specify their condition. Among those counted as economically active, 75.4% (14,405) were men, and 24.6% (4701) were women. Those counted as economically inactive were 28% men (6924), and 72% women (17,746) (ibid: 77). More than half of the economically inactive part of the population (53.3% or 13,139) were classified as housewives (dedicated to housework), and 11% (9017) were classified as students (ibid: 83). As will be described later in this dissertation (chapter five), a large proportion of these people may actually contribute their labour to the family business, although they do not officially represent themselves as wage earners, and may

consciously choose to define themselves as dedicated to their homes and families, rather than as businesswomen (*comerciantes*).

In 1990, 94% of the population were recorded as professing the Catholic faith, with the remaining 6% made up of Protestants or Evangelical Christians (2.6%), other religions (1.4%), no religion (1.4%) or unspecified (0.6%). This differs only slightly from the figures from 1980, when 95.6% of the population were recorded as Catholic, and only 1.6% were Protestant or Evangelical, 0.6% were other religions and 2.2% professed no religion (*ibid.*: 32).

Also in 1990, based on information on 12,258 households in the whole municipality, 83.3% (10,216) owned their own homes, 9.9% (1216) were renting, and the remaining 6.8% were in other situations or unspecified (*ibid.*: 37). Regarding home ownership, the residents of Milpa Alta have had consistently high figures in comparison with the rest of Mexico City (table 1).

**Table 1: Percentage of families who owned their own homes in Milpa Alta, compared with the rest of the Federal District.**

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
<b>Milpa Alta</b>	80.7%	65.2	79.6	92.4	83.3
<b>Federal District</b>	25.4	20.9	37.5	53.5	65.6

Source: INEGI. *Cuaderno Estadístico Delegacional: Milpa Alta, Distrito Federal*. Edición 1996. (1997: 38).

The materials used to build these homes also reflect a high proportion of economic comfort. 78.7% had cement floors, 92.7% had walls of brick, stone or cement, and 65.1% had roofing of concrete or brick (see table 2).

**Table 2: Private homes according to predominant material of floor, wall and roof.**

Predominant material	Federal District		Milpa Alta	
	Absolute	Relative	Absolute	Relative
<b>Floors</b>				
Earth	1 789 171	100.0	12 258	100.0
Cement	37 916	2.1	1 852	15.1
Wood, mosaic, other	1 014 886	56.7	9 645	78.7
<b>Walls</b>	722 402	40.4	718	5.9
Cardboard	1 789 171	100.0	12 258	100.0
Bamboo or palm	11 828	0.7	388	3.2
Mud	166	NS*	7	0.1
Wood	824	NS*	26	0.2
Metal sheet	9 389	0.5	108	0.9
Adobe	8 049	0.4	91	0.7
Brick, stone, cement	18 889	1.1	104	0.8
Other	1 721 047	96.2	11 367	92.7
Unspecified	6 379	0.4	122	1.0
	12 600	0.7	45	0.4

<b>Roofs</b>	<b>1 789 171</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>12 258</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Cardboard</b>	111 547	6.2	2 289	18.7
<b>Palm, shingle, wood</b>	6 646	0.4	49	0.4
<b>Metal sheet</b>	199 596	11.1	1 645	13.4
<b>Tile</b>	2 962	0.2	211	1.7
<b>Concrete, brick</b>	1 442 353	80.6	7 983	65.1
<b>Other</b>	12 540	0.7	37	0.3
<b>Unspecified</b>	13 527	0.8	44	0.4

\*NS = not significant

Source: INEGI. *Cuaderno Estadístico Delegacional: Milpa Alta, Distrito Federal*. Edición 1996. (1997: 39).

Milpa Alta has twelve towns (*pueblos*): San Agustín Ohtenco, San Francisco Tecoxpa, San Jerónimo Miacatlán, Santa Ana Tlacotenco, San Antonio Tecómitl, San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan, San Pedro Atocpan, San Salvador Cuauhtenco, San Pablo Oztotepec, San Juan Tepehuac, San Bartolomé Xicomulco, and the municipal capital, Villa Milpa Alta (see map 2, p. 35). Villa Milpa Alta is the largest town of the region, occupying 3.59 km<sup>2</sup> of the municipality (this is 1.24%; recall that only 3.5% of the total area is inhabited). It has the highest population density, with a population of about 40,000. It is further subdivided into seven districts (*barrios*), called San Mateo (the site of this research), La Concepción, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, San Agustín, Santa Martha, and La Luz. Barrio San Mateo is one of the largest *barrios* of the capital, and around 1000 families reside there. Following the census of 1990, each household contains an average of 5.2 occupants (as opposed to 4.6 for the whole Federal District) (*ibid.*), making the population of Barrio San Mateo an estimated 5-6000.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the families of this *barrio* prepare *barbacoa* for a living, and unofficially, they can earn an estimated Mx\$3000 per week (equivalent to around £214 per week). Several families may earn much more, because the *barbacoa* business can be very lucrative, but since all transactions are in cash, they need not declare all their earnings. This means that though they enjoy considerable economic comfort in reality, on paper, at least, they are consistently portrayed as amongst the poorest of Mexico City.

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, for the *barrio* level there are no demographic figures in print, so my data here is reliant upon personal communication with Enrique Nápoles of Barrio San Mateo, Villa Milpa Alta.

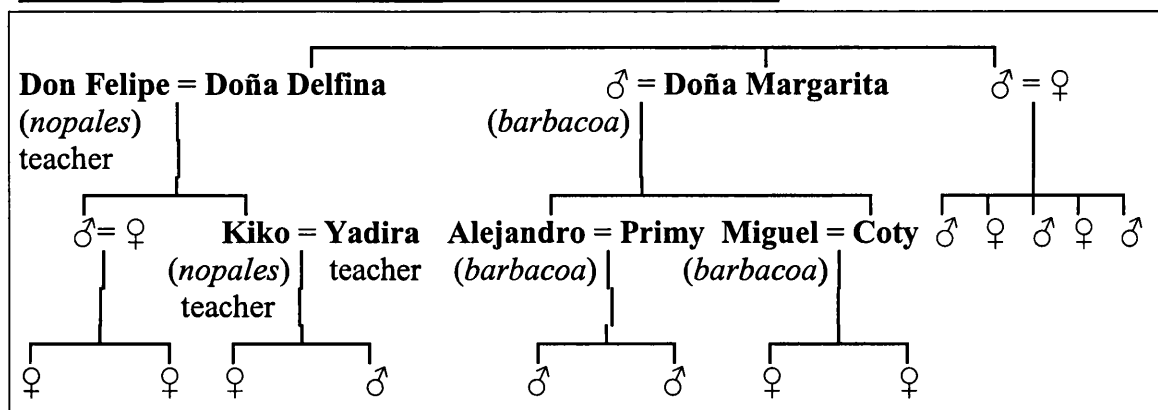
### 1.3 Fieldwork and methodology

I spent a total of 24 months in Mexico, from 1995 to 1998. After four months growing accustomed to the city and the language, scouting out different research possibilities in different areas, and making contacts in universities, I decided to settle in Mexico City, and conduct my fieldwork from there. I had several ideas about possible fieldsites and research focus, but I always remained interested in food and cooking. The next twelve months of my time were largely spent in professional kitchens or chef schools, working with Mexican chefs who specialised in Mexican cuisine. I was particularly affiliated with Chef Ricardo Muñoz Zurita, who generously took me under his wing and taught me much about the regional cuisines and culinary traditions of Mexico.

I spent my final eight months in Mexico in Milpa Alta, living in Barrio San Mateo in the municipal capital, Villa Milpa Alta. Strangely enough, Milpa Alta had been one of the areas I targetted during my first three months in Mexico, when I was searching for an appropriate fieldsite. I had heard about the *Feria del Mole* in San Pedro Atocpan, and so I visited the town with a friend, hoping to find a way into the community. Since this was my first trip to Mexico, and my Spanish was not yet very good, it is unsurprising that my initial attempts to make significant contacts met with failure. I retreated to the university in this early stage, where I was able to develop friendships with academic colleagues, who later were crucial to my proper introduction into Milpa Alta. Those months prior to my entrance into Milpa Alta society provided me with essential background and training in Mexican cuisine and life in the city.

In Milpa Alta, I mostly divided my time between two families who were part of the same extended family. I lived with María Primitiva Bermejo Martínez (Primy) and her *barbacoiero* family, and also with Yadira Arenas Berrocal and her family of schoolteachers, who also made a living by cultivating *nopales* (*Opuntia* and *Nopalea spp.*, prickly pear cactus). I was injected into the community with a suddenness that surprised me, but which later made sense, as I had been introduced to Yadira by her cousin, my friend, Luz del Valle. The key characters who appear throughout this text are listed in Figure 1 below, showing their relationships with one another.

**Figure 1: The families with whom I lived in Milpa Alta**



I conducted informal interviews with people of all ages and occupations, but I also used a tape recorder for longer interviews with them and some of their family members. With the help of Doña Margarita, I compiled several family trees of her neighbours, including the means of livelihood of the members of each family, and where they were born. In addition to this, I noted everything I ate, as well as people’s commentaries on gender relations and food, and any interesting trivia that caught my attention. People’s gastronomic discriminations that I recorded consisted of decisions about what or how to cook or to eat and when, how well something was prepared, and comparisons they made with their memories of eating similar foods. Most of my time was spent helping women with culinary activities, or keeping my friends (informants) company while they performed other tasks.

I was fortunate to have got along very well with Yadira, and later with Primy, and their families, and they readily incorporated me into the rhythms of their lives. I realised our mutual attachment some weeks after moving to Milpa Alta. Primy’s young son once complained to his mother that I ought to understand that I should stop going away for several days at a time, because I belonged in their house and in their family. Primy told me about this, and said that she explained to her son that he should not think that way, because I was independent, but it was obvious that I had quickly become a member of the household, in spite of the odd circumstances of my residence.

So although I talked to many kinds of people, both in Milpa Alta and in the chef schools of Mexico City, my main sources of data were my closest friends in Mexico, namely Chef Ricardo, Yadira and Primy. I found it very difficult to get more intimately involved with young chefs in training, since they had such long working hours and they lived so far away from one another. At that point I had not been prepared to investigate

formal culinary instruction, although I found this field interesting. Since my initial research questions pertained to the importance of chiles in Mexican cuisine and the gastro-social life of people who cooked, I soon realised that my involvement in formal culinary training was distracting me from the driving questions of my research.

It was only then, by which time I could hold conversations in Spanish with ease, that I managed to refocus my efforts and find my way into the sort of community where I could explore people's personal attachment to their food, and to chiles, as I eventually did in Milpa Alta. The ideas that I develop in this dissertation largely grew out of the intensity of my experiences there. Though I learned much about the regional cuisines of Mexico, the data and arguments that I present pertain to the community of San Mateo, where the action of this thesis is focused.

After returning to London to write up my findings, I recognized that the data and knowledge that I had collected in the different parts of Mexico City could be linked. In particular, with the posthumous publication of Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998), I discovered that what had interested me most about the way people highlighted certain recipes or ways of eating or cooking could be viewed from the perspective that chefs normally take towards cooking, that is that it is creative, even artistic, but most of all, a technical skill. For this reason, sometimes I noticed that I had data that could be very well explained if food-as-art were presumed. Since I had not had the benefit of these ideas during my fieldwork data collection, I have made conclusions to the best of my ability with what I had; yet they will have to remain tentative until further investigation is possible.

There are advantages to having intimate relationships with a small number of key informants, but there are also disadvantages. Among the advantages, the speed at which I was able to gain insights into several concepts and practices could only have been possible because of the openness, trust and great patience of my friends. To begin with, living and working with Ricardo was like taking a crash course in the culture and cuisines of Mexico. Then, armed with this broad knowledge, my understandings of the culinary culture in Milpa Alta was far more efficient and productive. That means that despite the relatively little time that I spent in Milpa Alta, I acquired a depth of local knowledge through the quality of my time there that cannot be underestimated.

Among the disadvantages of relying so much on few informants is the question of how representative is my sample of community members. Since nuclear families in

Milpa Alta are often small, and both Primy and Yadira were married women in their thirties, my exposure to unmarried women was limited. At times, daily domestic tasks confined us to the house for most of the day, and there were few opportunities for mingling with others (cf. Levine 1993, who describes a similar situation in Cuernavaca, Mexico). This led to my growing intimacy with the women and children in the family, and relative distance to those outside of the family circle. Although I did have the freedom to come and go as I pleased, I found it more interesting to shadow my closest friends as they went about their normal routines. It seemed more beneficial to make the most of my hosts than to try to spread myself thinly among several neighbours. I opted for a more thorough inspection of a small sample of people rather than more superficial observations among a range of informants.

This is not to say that I neglected to try to gain a wider perspective of community members. Several people offered me their time and even their homes, but I found rare occasions to test their invitations beyond informal interviews conducted at opportune moments. Barrio San Mateo also happens to be considered one of the most unfriendly *barrios* of Milpa Alta. What exists appears to be a kind of mistrust of others and over-protection bred of economic success and subsequent greed, *envidia*.<sup>5</sup> As an example of this, soon after moving to Milpa Alta, I wished to make a survey of the neighbours of the *barrio*, their place of birth (according to *barrio*), their marital status (civil and religious), and their profession before and after marriage. I was discouraged on all fronts, with the argument that a stranger like myself would not get very far, and that no one would be interested to take time off for my survey.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, I was easily distracted from this activity, and though I could have persisted, I discovered that Doña Margarita was happy to help me work out a detailed diagram of the same data.

I can recount another instance that may reveal the caution with which strangers are met: *I attempted to make friends with a woman who had been mayordoma in 1997, when I was in Milpa Alta for the barrio fiesta. I had taken photos of the coronation ceremony but I consistently failed to locate her at the phone number that she gave me. By chance I saw her at one of the wedding parties that I attended, and I gave her the prints that I had been carrying with me. When she asked for more copies, I was*

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of greed is something that I would have liked to investigate further had I had the opportunity to spend more time in Milpa Alta. I noticed that many negative values were attributed to a person being '*envidiosa*', such as any kinds of reluctance to help, trust or share. In fact, when neighbours ask for small favours, they are often only given if they are paid for.

<sup>6</sup> My initial experiences in San Pedro Atocpan were also indicative of this attitude.



*encouraged, and believed that I had an opportunity to build up a relationship with her. But when I asked her for her own contact details, she was reticent, and replied that we would surely see each other again at another fiesta. I never did bump into her again, and my contact with her ended.*

Eventually I realised that I had greatest success in getting to know others when I met them via people whom I already knew. Approaching people as a stranger gained me no friends, but when introduced by someone like Yadira or Primy, I became a friend by extension, invited to participate in any family affairs. Thus it was more viable for me to shadow my friends, and accompany them wherever they went, rather than attempt to extend my social circles on my own.

Perhaps this was because I did not quite fit in any normal family category. My status as a single woman was particularly noticeable in Milpa Alta. A floating unmarried woman is understandably treated with mistrust, so in a sense, I was confined to Primy's and Yadira's families. Most women are categorised as 'daughter of—' or 'wife of—' someone in the community (personal communication, Andrés Medina). My being neither eventually proved to be both an aid to my developing some relationships with some women, as well as a (threatening) hindrance to get to know most men.

Because of my unmarried status, there were times when it seemed that informants were careful of what they said, especially regarding sexual relations. I learned to be more guarded about asking questions that may have been construed as too intimate or embarrassing, and reserved my curiosity until I could ask Yadira and Primy if they could elaborate. Since I also looked younger than my age, this may have influenced the way that people treated me. An example of how my status as an unmarried woman was an obstacle is as follows:

*After spending several hours with Alicia, she told me to come to her house to speak with her husband. We set up an appointment when she would be out, but her husband would be at home. When I arrived at the door, his mother answered the bell, and when I told her my business there, she said that her son was not in. I insisted that it was his wife who had asked me to come speak with him at this time, but she refused to budge and shut the door in my face. I returned to Primy's house and told her and Doña Margarita what happened, and they reacted with some impatience, and exclaimed, 'What? Does she think you're going to steal away her son from his wife?' Primy decided to accompany me back to the house, but we were met with the same response.*

*When I related the incident to Yadira the following day, she laughed and said that Alicia's mother-in-law had definitely feared the worst. Women think that their sons are the most handsome in the world, she added, and they think that all other women want to take them away from their wives.*

Evidently, the data I collected mainly came from married women. Primy and Yadira acted both as my teachers and confidantes, and in return I was friend and companion, as well as eager listener. Since they were only three or four years older than me, in relation to them the position I occupied was more like a sister although sometimes I felt like a daughter to them. Doña Margarita treated me as she would have treated the girlfriend (but not yet the wife) of her son. Since I did not permanently reside in one house, but rather lived as a rotating guest in different households, I basically remained unclassifiable beyond that of friend, *amiga* or *amiguita*.

I had little contact with teenage girls and boys, although I had the opportunity for long conversations with elderly women, like Doña Margarita and Doña Delfina, and also, later, Doña Carmen. Both Yadira and Primy had small children, and their siblings did not live very nearby. So although I had some contact with their extended family network, via their husbands (as they themselves were connected to one another via their husbands who are cousins), most social interaction outside of the family occurred during professional transactions or during festive occasions. Among the other people with whom I spent much of my time, Lulú was quite a good friend in her mid-twenties who was unmarried. Yet unlike the relationship I enjoyed with Primy and Yadira, our friendship never developed to the degree of intimacy that comes with coresidence.

Another point that needs to be made is that I base my findings on women in the network of Milpa Alta society. My data does not take into account the household help as such, although they are women who also participate in the cooking, and thus also in the production of sociality<sup>7</sup> (cf. McCallum 1989). As I explain in greater detail in the following chapter, their culinary agency can be abducted by the most active social players in the community. Incidentally, those women who work as domestic help are

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<sup>7</sup> McCallum defines sociality as 'a temporary product of morally correct engagement in social relationships' (1989:11) which is characterised by generosity with food as a central virtue among the Cashinawa of Western Amazonia. There are (immoral) actions that can lead to anti-sociality, and not all social relations lead to sociality, although they do lead to social organisation. Likewise, arguably, those social relations that lead to sociality may be not only characterised by food generosity, but also by food quality, that is, culinary technical superiority or culinary artistry.

not natives of Milpa Alta, but mostly are migrants from the poorer states of Oaxaca, Puebla and Veracruz. I did not question the social hierarchy that existed, because my concern was not the condition of women in general, but it was the role of cooking in social dynamics and the emergence of an elaborate cuisine. Women are key actors in the workings of the culinary system, and just as their agency is mobilized by the family in community-wide sociality, they too can mobilize the agency of others such as those whom they hire as their domestic helpers.<sup>8</sup>

Because of these factors, by no means am I claiming that my findings can apply to all women in Milpa Alta, nor to Mexican women in general. My initial research interests were to do an analysis of the chile as a symbol of Mexican national identity. Because of this, I approached professional cookery with greater attention than gender relations. From living in Milpa Alta it became clear that any discussion of food and cooking necessitated a more thoughtful analysis of women and gender roles. For the women I knew from the chef schools, cooking was a professional pursuit for both women and men. In Milpa Alta, gender differentiation and family allocation of labour was something that I recorded in my notes, but not a topic that I had thought I would pursue before. In this way my findings are a result of my allowing the data to determine my conclusions. Thus I confine my argument to pertain to the situation that I observed in Milpa Alta, and any apparent generalisations that I make are rather in regard to Mexican cuisine as I learned about it both formally and informally whilst spending intensive periods of time among chefs and other food researchers.

The ideas that I have developed here are based on a focused group of people who are either culinary professionals (preparing *barbacoa* for a living) or closely related to them. I did not have the opportunity to pursue concentrated comparative fieldwork in another *barrio* of Milpa Alta nor in another *pueblo* of Mexico City. In this respect, the broader scope of comparison that I use is the experience I had with young chefs in the centre of the city. Among chefs who specialised in Mexican cuisine, I garnered knowledge of technical terminology and processes much more systematically than what I learned from women in Milpa Alta. That is not to say that the techniques of one group were any more or less sophisticated than the other's. The women of Milpa Alta and

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<sup>8</sup> Thus it may not be the existence of domestic labour (or the existence of hierarchy) *as such* that leads to the development of cuisine. But because of the demands of culinary ideals, hierarchical relationships may be useful, incidentally, in order to effectively pursue these ideals.

those chefs of the centre differed greatly in social class and social context, and to my understanding each group held the other in great respect, for the other's presumed culinary mastery. Yet when it came to the way in which they talked about Mexican cuisine, they used a very similar discourse.

There is a rhetoric of food and love in Mexico, which is exemplified by novels such as *Like Water for Chocolate* (Esquivel 1992). Different kinds of culinary specialists ascribe to this popular discourse on the connection between love and cooking. Professional chefs have a sophisticated language in which to express themselves about gastronomic matters, but when we talked about Mexican cuisine, they almost always took up this popular discourse of love, and gave an emotional value to the topic. Noticing these contrasting ways of speaking about culinary mastery, in trying to understand how to achieve good Mexican cooking, I thus paid more attention to daily family life than to technical training among chefs (see chapter three).

In order to situate these findings in the local context, the next section is a brief run-down of Milpa Alta's history.

#### 1.4 Historical background of Milpa Alta

Milpa Alta is a municipality of Mexico City, in the southeastern edge, adjacent to Xochimilco. It is a semi-rural and mountainous area made up of twelve *pueblos*, and the municipal capital, Villa Milpa Alta, is made up of seven districts, called *barrios*. Like the rest of Mexico City, it can be characterised as *mestizo* (native *indio*, 'Indian', mixed with Spanish), although it is only since the 1940s when the population stopped defining themselves as Indian.<sup>9</sup> Most Milpaltenses talked of Mexico City as a separate entity. The city was a megalopolis of extremes in opportunities, wealth, conveniences, disturbances, poverty, pollution, and danger.

Whilst Milpa Alta enjoys infrastructural and commercial benefits from its status as part of Mexico City, it remains mostly agricultural. Milpa Alta remains the proud, self-proclaimed 'province of Mexico City' where traditions are maintained and land continues to be venerated. The word *milpa* refers to a maize plantation, whose borders were traditionally delineated with a border of *magüeyes* (agave).<sup>10</sup> The maize was

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<sup>9</sup> There have been several studies made about identity in Mexico. Some notable work includes Friedlander 1975, Méndez 1992.

<sup>10</sup> The magüey is the source of *pulque*, a mildly fermented viscous drink made of the magüey sap. When unfermented, it is called *aguamiel* or honey-water. *Pulque* used to have religious significance during

planted in rows and intercropped with beans, chiles,<sup>11</sup> squash, and sometimes tomatoes. Plantations were organized like this since before the Spanish came to Mexico, and Milpa Alta has only begun to produce less maize since the latter half of the twentieth century. The name Milpa Alta literally translates as ‘Highland Cornfield’ as it is a region of high elevation, formerly dedicated to maize and *maguey* production.

It was first inhabited in the thirteenth century by nomadic Chichimecas from Amecameca in the state of Morelos. Nine families or groups first settled there in 1240 and called the area Malacachtepec Momoxco, which means ‘Place of Altars Surrounded by Mountains’. In 1483 seven Aztec groups took control over the Chichimecas under the reign of Hueyitlahuelanqueh (‘Man Who Attracts Multitudes’). They settled in what are now the *barrios* of San Mateo, Santa Martha, Los Angeles and Santa Cruz, and the villages of Tecómitl, Ixtayopan, and Tulyehualco. Hueyitlahuelanqueh pushed the Chichimecas to other areas, who then founded the villages of Atocpan, Oztotepec, Tlacotenco, Tlacoyucan, Tepenáhuac, Tecoxpa, Miacatlán, Ohtenco and the *barrio* of La Concepción (DDF 1997: 2, Martínez Ruvalcaba 1987: 12).

Hueyitlahuelanqueh’s son Hueyitlahuilli (‘Great Sage’) was the last emperor of Malacachtepec Momoxco (1484-1528) and greater stability ensued during his reign. Maguey plantations were established and agriculture, communication and trade with neighbouring settlements were developed. Hueyitlahuilli built a port and organised the construction of canals for communication and trade, and improved the technology of agriculture and stone masonry. Already then Malacachtepec Momoxco became a major provider of maize to Tenochtitlán. A system of tribute was established, which was later to be adopted by the Spanish Conquistadores when they took power over the region (Martínez Ruvalcaba 1987: 17, Reyes H. n.d.: 27).

When Tenochtitlán fell to the Spanish in 1521, some Milpaltense people fought against them, and many families fled to the mountains. In 1528, Hueyitlahuilli made peace with the Spanish, and he allowed the evangelization of his people in order to retain control over the land. Even before the Spanish arrived, Milpa Alta had been under the jurisdiction of Xochimilco (‘Place Where Flowers Grow’), and in 1529 the

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Aztec times, and there is a long history of its importance and subsequent prohibition which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>11</sup> There are several accepted ways of writing this word in English (i.e., chili, chilli, chilli pepper, chile pepper). I follow the word as used in Mexican cookbooks published in the US (e.g., Kennedy 1989, Martínez 1992, Bayless and Bayless 1987).

region was renamed Milpas de Xochimilco (Martínez Ruvalcaba 1987: 12, SEP 1988: 5435, DDF 1997: 3).

From 1530-31 families began to trickle back to repopulate and reclaim their land. The Spanish largely kept the political and social organization that existed in Milpa Alta before they had come into power, but they also introduced the *encomienda* system, allowing for communal rights to land in exchange for manual labour and payment of tribute to the Crown (Martínez Ruvalcaba 1987: 13-17). On the feast day of the Assumption of Mary, 15 August 1532, Fray Ramírez de Fuenleal came to baptize the people and bless their villages. This Virgin Mary of the Assumption became the patroness of Milpa Alta and eventually, the villages of the municipality were established with corresponding names of Catholic saints. Thus Atocpan was renamed San Pedro Atocpan, Tecómitl became San Antonio Tecómitl, and so forth. In later years the name of the whole region was changed to Milpán, then La Asunción Milpa Alta, before finally becoming known as Milpa Alta (DDF 1997: 3).

Villa Milpa Alta became the municipal capital in 1570 (Martínez Ruvalcaba 1987: 19), but Milpa Alta still depended politically on Xochimilco until 1787 (DDF 1997: 3). In 1854 it became part of the Federal District and in 1903 it became a separate municipality (DDF 1997: 3, SEP 1988: 5435). In the meantime, Franciscan missionaries had settled in the region, to indoctrinate and maintain social control over the inhabitants, yet there was relatively little miscegenation during the sixteenth century. This was probably due to the climate and mountainous geography of the region, as well as the small population. Because of this relative isolation, Milpa Alta was able to conserve many of the older traditions and customs of the area, including their native language, Náhuatl (DDF 1988: 22). Indeed, the contemporary Náhuatl spoken in Milpa Alta is held to be the closest to the ancient Aztec dialect as recorded in the colonial codices (Galarza and López Avila 1982: xiii).

The preservation of their language is considered by many to be a source of pride and an indication of their 'authenticity'.<sup>12</sup> It is also seen as an indication of how the 'indigenous character' of the region was maintained until early this century (Martínez Ruvalcaba 1987: 8). Furthermore, contemporary Milpaltenses are proud of having sustained their rural character, rather than succumbing to the influences of the growing megalopolis of Mexico City. They demonstrate this in several ways, including

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example Flores Aguilar 1992, DDF 1997.

conservatively using traditional methods of food preparation, for example. Many people prepare *mole* from scratch, and use clay pots (*cazuelas* and *ollas*) for cooking.<sup>13</sup> Some women even pat out their *tortillas* by hand, at least some of the time, despite the wide existence of *tortillerías* which have provided machine-made *tortillas* since the 1960s (see Pilcher 1998: 99-111). As expressed in the Foreword of the compilation called *Historias de mi pueblo* (Gomezcésar 1992), ‘the “ruralness” of Milpa Alta is largely the result of a decision of its inhabitants, of a disposition to continue to be “faithful to themselves”, against the current of the absorbing dynamic of urban gigantism’ (Botey Estapé 1992: 7, my trans.).

This protective and chauvinistic attitude appears to be characteristic of Milpa Alta, as proven during the Revolution of 1910 when Milpa Alta joined the Zapatista contingency. In 1912 Milpa Alta became a ‘Zapatista sanctuary’ (DDF 1988: 57) and by 1914, when Zapatista forces occupied most of Milpa Alta, many inhabitants gave strong support for their fight for justice and to retain their land. In 1917, when Venustiano Carranza came into power, the Zapatistas had to evacuate, and among those Milpaltense families who had not already left to join the fight or go into hiding, many fled to other parts of the Federal District, and elsewhere. Up to now, people are proud of having relatives or ancestors who fought in the Revolution (DDF 1988: 53), which was a social and political turning point in the history of the region (Ivan Gomezcésar, personal communication). Supporting the Zapatista movement has instilled an awareness of history and a respect and love for land which exists to the present day (DDF 1988: 53-64, SEP 1988: 5436, DDF 1997: 4-5, Reyes H. n/d: 49-54).

In the 1920s to 30s the former residents of Milpa Alta returned to their land once more. The *ejidos* were founded during this time. In 1935 drinking water became available and in 1938 running water was established. In the early 1950s electricity was set up and roads were built to connect the towns within the municipality and with the centre of Mexico City. Now Milpa Alta is perhaps best known for the annual *Feria del Mole* (*mole* festival) in the town of San Pedro Atocpan. *Mole* is a thick sauce made of dried chiles, nuts, spices and several other ingredients. It is usually served on special occasions, and is thought of as ‘traditional’ Mexican celebration food. Although *mole* is often prepared at home, there are now many commercially prepared *moles*, most of which are produced by family industries in San Pedro Atocpan, Milpa Alta.

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<sup>13</sup> Visiting one family during a fiesta, the mother of the house proudly showed me her clay *olla*, where she

The first *mole* to be commercialised from San Pedro began to be sold in the central market, *La Merced*, in 1927 and by the 1950s most families of San Pedro prepared *mole* for a living. Until the 1960s, the *maguey* was the economic base for the area. In the 1960s the *nopal*, an edible cactus, was introduced as a cash crop. Since then it has become more and more widely grown and economically viable, significantly improving standards of living and economic prosperity. By the 1990s, there was little maize grown in Milpa Alta, and it had become the main supplier of *nopales* for the Federal District (Gomezcésar 1992: 12, DDF 1997: 5).

During the 1940s to 1950s there was a movement to reject the notion of 'being Indian'. During the 1950s, 30% of the population of Milpa Alta spoke Náhuatl. By the 1990s this number had reduced to 4%. The people of Milpa Alta had consciously become *mestizo* ('*se mestizó conscientemente*'). Before the Revolution, Milpa Alta was like an island of Indianness in *mestizo* Mexico (Gomezcésar, personal communication). Afterwards, Milpa Alta became one of the indigenous communities that was very susceptible to change, in lifestyle, industry and technology, the capitalist economy, education, social organisation, religion and values (Martínez Ruvalcaba 1987: 7). Because of their proximity and improving infrastructures leading to the centre of Mexico City, they began to adopt *mestizo* clothes and language and participated in the kind of de-Indianization described by Bonfil Batalla (1996).<sup>14</sup>

In spite of all these drastic changes and powerful influences, Milpa Alta has retained its conservative reputation. In recent years there has been much local interest in their own traditions. A youth group has been set up in the municipal government whose purpose is to investigate and preserve local culture. Local residents have been 'reinventing' their culture and history, reinventing their fiestas. One thing that did not seem to change so drastically was their food and their food habits (Gomezcésar, personal communication). This last point will be discussed in the remainder of this dissertation. For now, I make a final note on traditionalism and Milpaltense love for their land.

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had steamed her *tamales*, instead of using a metal *tamalera*.

<sup>14</sup> Bonfil Batalla is further discussed in chapter three.



## 1.5 Land and traditions

In Milpa Alta, land is the most valued form of property. Since the time of the Spanish conquest, Milpaltenses have been fighting for their land with neighbouring peoples. Many current residents are aware of the territorial borders of Milpa Alta, and can easily recite the bordering points of Milpa Alta's communal land (Gomezcésar, personal communication). Historically the residents have depended on the land for their livelihood, and it is still true at present, in spite of the high levels of education that many have achieved since the 1960s. Professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, choose to till the land, rather than to put their educations into practice. One informant told me that in Milpa Alta the people enter into further study for the sake of their egos, rather than for their career. They always go back to their land. As one Milpaltense wrote, 'The pride of being from Milpa Alta sustains the possibility of counting on their own land, without falling prey to the exploitation to which those of other towns had to submit' (F. García 1992: 62, my trans.).

Their attachment to their land is well encapsulated in a Náhuatl saying which is embedded in local thought in Milpa Alta: '*La tierra no es nuestra, sólo nuestros hijos nos la tiene prestada*', 'The land is not ours, our children are only lending it to us'. For this reason, I was told, land is defended and kept with fervor and love, and the people become more hermetic and ambitious, '*La tierra la guardan con fervor y con amor, y se vuelven más herméticos y ambisiosos*'. It is rare for anyone to sell their land to outsiders. When a non-Milpaltense is interested in buying a plot of land, it is not unusual that the price quoted is much higher than its actual market value, or at least higher than the price offered to a resident of Milpa Alta.

There is a historical basis for the fervent connection that Milpaltenses feel towards their land. One of the most significant occasions in Milpa Alta's recent history was their fight to retain communal ownership of their woods in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> Because of governmental plans to cut down the forests of Milpa Alta in the interests of urban expansion, the community mobilized to protect their land and their natural resources. This movement emphasized and possibly also solidified the general feeling that the Federal District was an urban threat, attempting to colonize Milpa Alta and turn it into another crowded district (*colonia*) of Mexico City. Taking away their forests meant destroying one of the few remaining natural resources of the city (Flores García 1992).

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<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth study of this movement, see del Conde Henonin 1982.

The movement also inspired the community to group themselves as a separate ethnic group, of Náhuatl speakers who could define and defend themselves against the urban (*mestizo*) enemy.

We consider ourselves and are sure that we are an authentic ethnic group, because we have our traditions, we still speak Náhuatl in the market, in the street, in the *tlicuil*; because we have our own socio-economic organizations that we deeply respect, like the *mayordomías*, traditional weddings and, furthermore, because we love the land on which we were born; we look after it and defend it emphatically. With regard to private property, we prefer to sell it to those within the family, *compadres* or friends, at a price much lower than what a city-dweller would pay. This is, without a doubt, a demonstration of ethnic consciousness. (Flores Aguilar 1992: 129, my trans.)

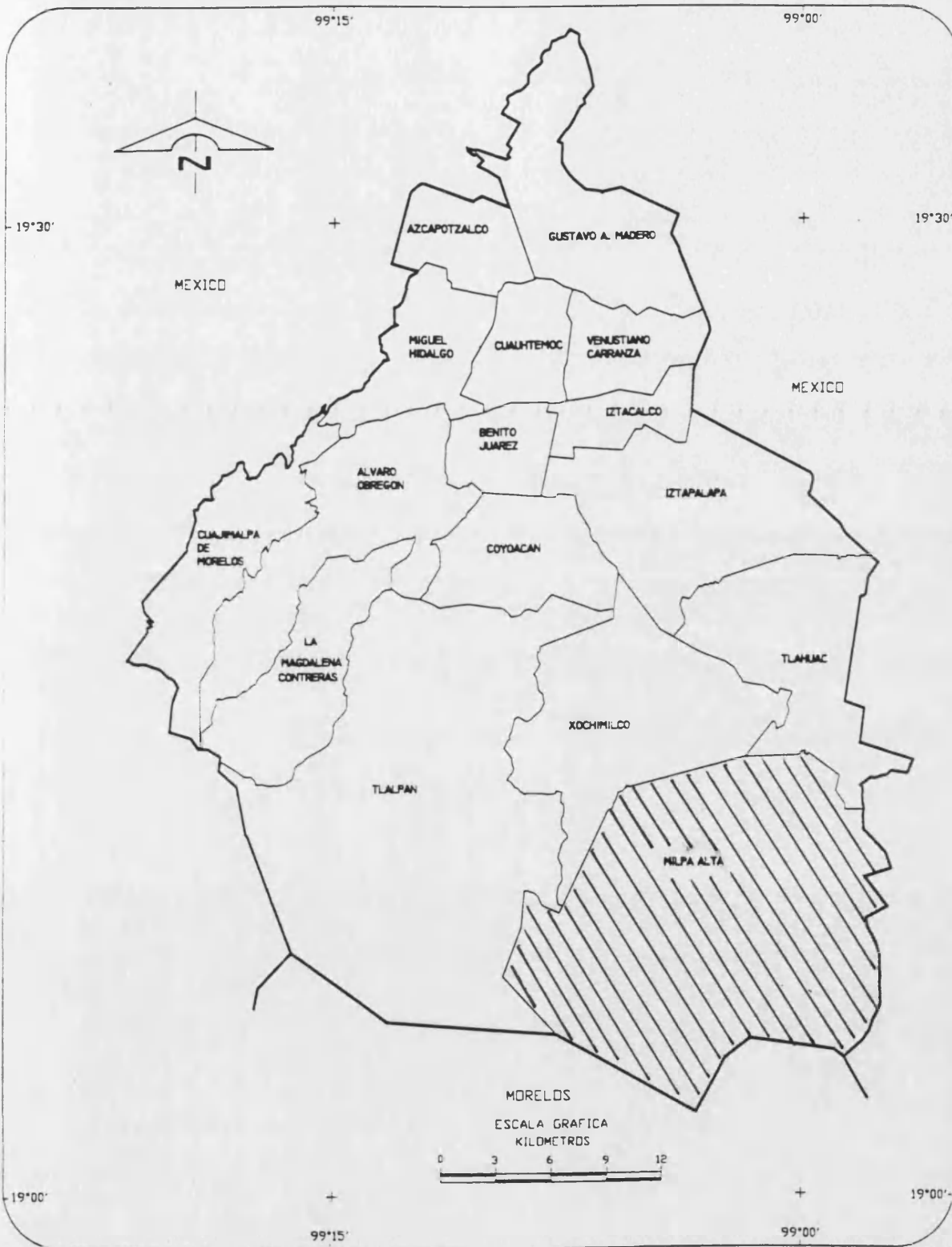
In Milpa Alta, urban growth is viewed as negative, and there is a general antipathy to outsiders (see, for example, Jiménez Bastida 1992). On observing how Milpaltenses do not let go of their land until death, an outsider may judge them as greedy, yet the locals view this attitude as self-preservation and protection. Damaso Jiménez Bastida explained that the growth of Milpa Alta is the 'fault' of those who are not native to the region. These outsiders multiply and bring in even more outsiders who cause the population of Milpa Alta to rise and who introduce different customs, ideas, and many problems. 'As an inhabitant of Milpa Alta,' he wrote, 'my aspiration is that we do not lose our customs, that what our ancestors left us is not forced to disappear' (201).

In fact, customs, skills, practices, knowledge, and material things, like land, that are of particular value in the community are described as traditional, as the way the ancestors did things, or as something to be left to future generations. This is the source of the conservative nature of Milpa Alta. It is manifested as a desire for a closed community with strong ties to their ancestors and the continuity of their ancestors' ways of living, eating, cooking, tilling the soil. The problem of modernization, one informant asserted, is that it may lead to the land being forgotten, and therefore the destruction of the environment, and ultimately, the destruction of their culture, their customs and traditions. It is the 'recreation of agrarian history' which allows for the reinvention of the traditional and local/national images of Mexican character and culture (Bartra 1987, more generally, see also Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The past is romanticized, they strive for unadulterated rural purity, and a justification for reclaiming what is Náhuatl, therefore 'traditional' or 'truly' Mexican, in the present.

People in Milpa Alta are very proud of calling themselves ‘traditional’ and they take every opportunity to say how they (unlike others) maintain their traditions, ‘*aquí se conservan las tradiciones*’, or how their traditions are especially nice, ‘*las tradiciones de aquí son muy bonitas*’. In particular, this occurs now that it has become a source of pride to be able to speak Náhuatl, when during the last generation it used to be a source of shame. The sense of loss and the desire to recover lost traditions is an impetus which appears to have arisen as a result of a recent pursuit of the ‘authentic’ which underlies many cultural and social movements. The same interest and search for authenticity permeates the realm of gastronomy and culinary exploration, and this is also evident in the centre of Mexico City where there have been growing numbers of restaurants which serve ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ Mexican food, prepared as in the olden days, ‘*como de antaño*’.

Historical consciousness works like an accordion: in the minds of present-day Milpaltenses, the events of the past thirty years merge with the prehispanic era, making the Spanish contributions to their cultural present appear irrelevant or as easily assimilated without trouble. In fact, this may be a representation of the cyclical idea of time which characterizes ancient Aztec, and present-day Indian, thought (Bonfil Batalla 1996: 38-9, see also Florescano 1994). The connection to the land so strongly felt in Milpa Alta is also characteristic of an Indian community, which has not yet completely succumbed to de-Indianization (Bonfil Batalla 1996: 33). The cultural mixture that led to the development of the *mayordomías* and rituals with Catholic bases (like weddings) is accepted in an uncomplicated manner. In this same way, the people of Milpa Alta, and other parts of Mexico, embrace and protect their culinary traditions. For this reason, ‘the tradition of Mexican cooking remains not simply alive and well, but dominant’ (Davidson 1999: 500).

**Map 1: The municipalites of Mexico City**  
**División Geoestadística Delegacional**



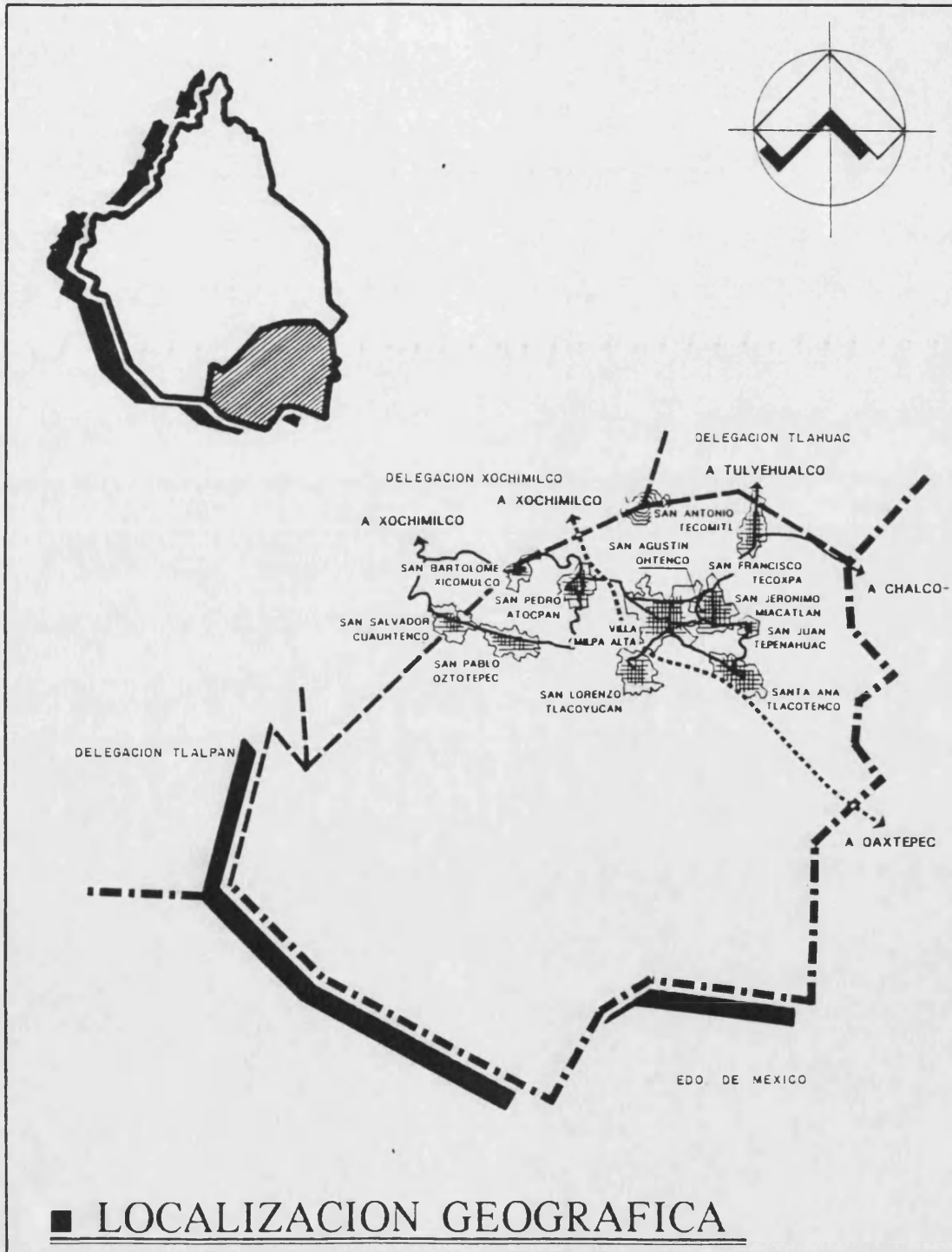
NOTA: Los limites fueron trazados con el fin de captar y presentar informacion estadistica y no necesariamente coinciden con los politico-administrativos.

FUENTE: INEGI. Marco Geoestadistico 1995. Inedito

(Source: INEGI 1997: iv)

Map 2: The towns of Milpa Alta

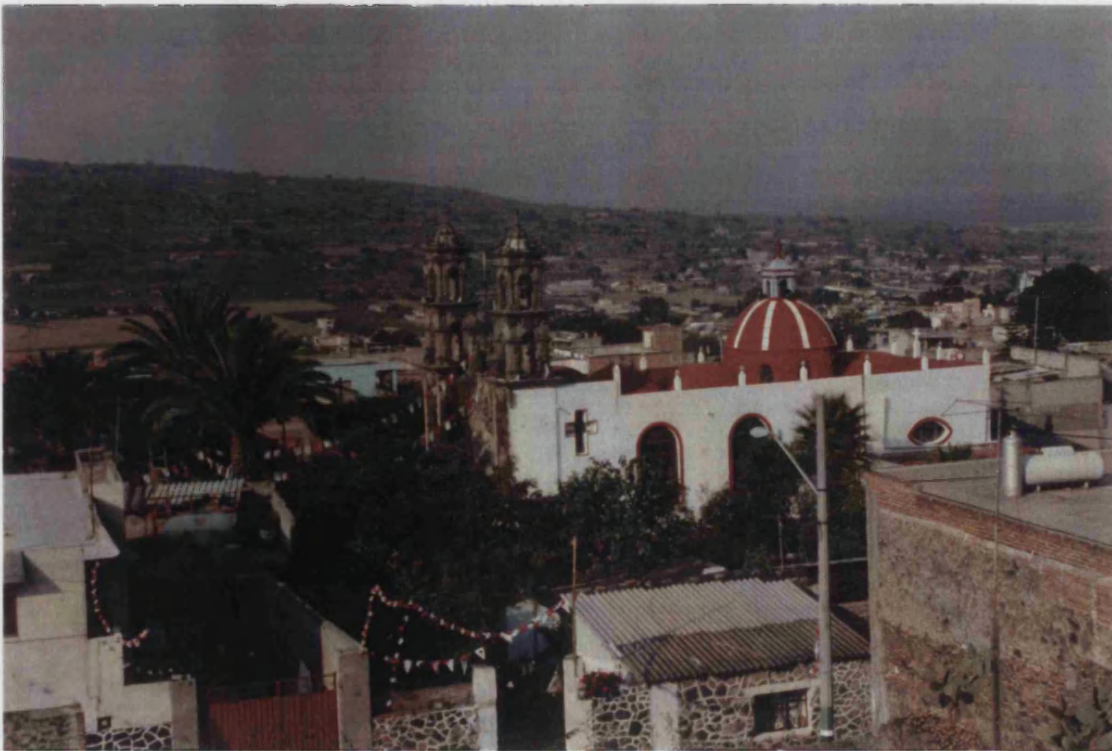
# DELEGACION MILPA ALTA



(Source: DDF 1997: xi)



1 Kiko's *nopalera* with the hill Teuhtli in the background, Milpa Alta.



2 The church of the Assumption of Mary, in the centre of Villa Milpa Alta.

**Part I**  
**Food in the private sphere**

## 2

### An approach to the art of Mexican cooking

My interest in Mexican cuisine began with an interest in chiles. I initially intended to analyse chiles in Mexican society, setting out to prove that the chile would be a more adequate national symbol of Mexico than the Virgin of Guadalupe. Arriving in Mexico in 1995, just after the Chiapas rebellion of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), it seemed clear to me that the cry of poverty against government corruption was powerful and unifying enough, unlike in Zapata's time when the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe served to bring together different Mexican peoples to fight for freedom from their oppressors.

The shared devotion for a Virgin seemed to be a less meaningful source of shared identity for the average Mexican than their shared devotion to chiles. An image of the Virgin may hang in a person's car, but more like a good luck charm. Surely, I thought, Mexicans who travelled away from home would long for their chiles more than for the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>1</sup> I naively opposed food with religion because Mexicans seemed more interested in discussing where to buy chiles or real Mexican food, or in sharing their personal supply. When meeting Mexicans in Mexico it also seemed to matter more to my hosts whether I could or would eat chiles, and not whether or not I was Catholic.

Although my idea was enthusiastically supported by half of the Mexican people I met, I soon realised that following it up would have restricted my interests and I would risk offending some devout Catholics, Mexican or not. Furthermore, there already exist many social scientists as well as cookery writers who emphasize the importance of chiles in Mexican culture and social life (e.g., Long-Solís 1986, Lomelí 1991, Andrews 1984, Coe 1994, Muñoz 1996, van Rhijn 1993, Verti 1994). Ethnographic and other writings, as well as Mexican people themselves, also gloss the Mexican diet, especially the rural, as being just corn, beans, and chiles (e.g., Friedlander 1975: 74). The importance of the chile was clear. It was unnecessary to oppose it to a religious symbol.

One area of Mexican culture where chiles might be usefully analysed semiotically is in *albur* (and *caló*) (see Jiménez 1991, Lomelí 1991: 20-6). *Albur* is a kind of

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<sup>1</sup> On nationalism, Alma Guillermoprieto writes, '... It is in the kitchen, where lowly cooks prepare glorious food for the children of the middle class, that Mexicans forge a common heritage...' (1994, 255)



wordplay, used exclusively among men. It is very rare for women to speak using *albur*. If they do, it is amongst other women (not in mixed company) and is of a milder sort. This is because there are overt sexual connotations in the speech games in *albur*, as well as the central metaphors used, such as the chile, which stands for the penis. Men speak with their friends (*cuates*) in terms of sexually penetrating them, without being considered homosexual. This kind of homosexual *albur* is known as '*albur suicida*' (Lomelí 1991: 21). As long as a man is the one penetrating, rather than the one penetrated, he still often considers himself to be heterosexual, even *macho* (see Gutmann 1996, cf. Kulick 1998). A man using *albur* plays upon these sensibilities, as well as on linguistic twists, and depends on speed and wit. So for me, a woman lacking these linguistic capabilities, *albur* was impenetrable, and maybe was best left for others, better endowed, to investigate.

I found that the meanings of chiles were easier to understand if I placed them in the context of the rest of Mexican cuisine. To extract the chile on its own, and analyse it semiotically no longer corresponded with my interest in the culinary uses of chiles. Mexican cuisine as a whole became more interesting, so the next question was how to approach its analysis.

I initially attempted to gain an understanding of chiles by studying the cuisines of Mexico along with culinary professionals who specialised in similar investigation. Little by little, however, I realised that few people who studied to be chefs, even those whose ambition was to specialise in Mexican cuisine, had much first-hand knowledge from cooking at home. I learned that only by immersing myself in the life of the *pueblo*, far from the centre of the city, would I be able to glean any true understanding of Mexican gastronomy.

Dietary staples, like rice or maize, can be thought of as the most important foodstuffs in a cuisine, worthy of anthropological analysis because of their obvious importance in societies. There are often rituals and certain restrictions surrounding the processing, distribution, and consumption of important foodstuffs, which have defined symbolic meanings (Douglas 1966, Fiddes 1991), or which signify social incorporation or identity (e.g., Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). But almost always, staple foods are accompanied by other foods, the relishes, sauces, or even more substantial dishes which make up a cuisine. These accompanying dishes are often taken for granted as being present simply for the sake of flavour.

An early example of how anthropological analysis of food takes flavour for granted is the work of Audrey Richards (1932, 1939). Her concern is nutrition and its relation to social reproduction, and she notes that for the Bemba, 'Food and beer are without a doubt the most exciting and interesting topics of native conversation' (1939: 44). She continues that:

[a]ny one who can follow the ordinary gossip of a Bemba village will be struck at once by the endless talk shouted from hut to hut as to what is about to be eaten, what has already been eaten, and what lies in store for the future, and this with an animation and a wealth of detail which would be thought quite unusual in this country. (ibid.)

She acknowledges that the inconsistency of the food supply makes a native obsession with food and eating expected, but it is also important to note that the Bemba take active interest in the minutiae of gastronomic practices. This clearly goes beyond the nutritive and economic potential of food.

Richards states that the hospitable greeting to one who has just returned from a journey is, 'Have you eaten *well?*' (45, my emphasis). It is not 'Have you eaten *yet?*' or even 'How do you do?' Furthermore, since her primary concerns are nutritional and economic, although she observes the 'tremendous emotional significance' (ibid.) of food transactions, she does not explicitly consider precisely what this consists of. What she does mention is how the name of the main foodstuff, *ubwali*, a porridge-paste made of millet, is a word that stands both for food and for nourishment in general (47). This idea is manifest both in ritual and quotidian contexts, thus she considers the double meaning of *ubwali* to be the source of the marked emotional attitude that the Bemba, like 'the majority of primitive tribes', have for food.

The importance of the staple understood, she then makes a point of mentioning *umunani*, the relishes or accompaniments of *ubwali*. The functions of the *umunani*, she writes, 'are two: first to make the *ubwali* easier to swallow, and second to give it taste' (49). Although the *umunani* appears to have little nutritive value, it is a mechanical aid to ingest food, *ubwali*. Sometimes these relishes are cooked in groundnut sauce (*ntwilo*) which improves flavour as well as nutritive value, but 'the Bemba himself explains that the sauce is not food<sup>2</sup>....It prevents the food "coming back"' (ibid.). She adds,

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<sup>2</sup> In contrast, in Mexico, as explained later, it is the sauce which defines the dish, as in *mole* or *adobo*, or *carne en chile verde* (literally, this means 'meat in green chile', but it is more likely to be beef in a green sauce made of green husk tomatoes, green chiles and other condiments).

however, that 'there is no doubt that an additional function of the relish in native eyes is to give the porridge taste and to lessen the monotony of the diet' (ibid.), and then later writes that '*the art of good cooking* among the Bemba is to have sufficient groundnut sauce (*ntwilo*) to add to other relishes to make them palatable' (95, emphasis added).

Over all, Richards emphasizes the close association for the Bemba between food consumption and nutritive benefit, but her own examples of the importance of *ntwilo* and the constant detailed talk of food reveal that flavour and preference may take more precedence than she was predisposed to believe at first. Flavour must have a purpose, and may have social meanings beyond the physical lessening of the monotony of the diet, as she described. The ideal of eating well must be related to the emotional significance of food, as much as the relations of the people who eat together or feed each other or cook for one another.

Subsequently, there has been little written in anthropology particularly focusing on these other dishes which accompany staple foods. Yet there must be a reason why there exist some cuisines which have elaborate dishes with varied flavours, other than because of the availability of a wide range of ingredients. Goody (1982) explains that the emergence of elaborate cuisines occurs in hierarchical societies with literacy and industrialization. But though his comparative analysis of different world cuisines makes a convincing argument that culinary differentiation arises in circumstances of social differentiation<sup>3</sup>, he does not discuss the particular flavours in any cuisine. Probably this is because it is difficult to analyse people's preferences in flavour (or taste) in food. As Bourdieu writes, 'each taste feels itself to be natural –and so it almost is, being a habitus' (1984: 56). It is difficult to talk about something like gastronomic knowledge, because it has been internalized, and becomes the 'learned ignorance' that is habitus. Many people, including culinary professionals, often find it difficult to articulate their reasons for preferring some foods over others, or to describe and discuss flavours in food (see Fine 1996: ch. 7, 'The Aesthetics of Kitchen Discourse').

Eating is something we do for the satisfaction of appetite and a desire to eat well (in a gastronomic sense), although in emergencies, eating can have a different meaning when it is necessary to prevent starvation. Pottier (1999) has recently published a

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<sup>3</sup> I agree that this is the case of Mexico (see chapter one).

volume on the anthropology of food scarcity and development, but it is with the former with which this thesis is concerned. There are two aspects of food which are important to both cooks and eaters—taste and nutrition. We eat because we need to eat for survival, but we also eat because we enjoy the taste of good food, or we have cravings for particular flavours. Flavour must have a function beyond the purpose of making food palatable. Appetite and gastronomy demand focus on taste and culinary technique, rather than taste and nutrition. Flavour may reveal certain meanings in foods, which are related to other structures in society. An anthropological study of cuisine would therefore investigate the social relations surrounding the production and consumption of (good) food, in the desire to achieve culinary technical mastery and superior flavours. What Richards deliberately chose not to discuss is precisely what I would like to focus on in this thesis—flavour and the emotional significance of food.

## 2.1 Food and culinary art in anthropology

Chefs and gastronomes talk passionately about and fervently believe in cookery and cuisine, in food. Whilst we may subconsciously appreciate very good food as superior craft, we are not used to thinking of it as art; some would dismiss cooking as incapable of being considered as art because of the necessity of food for survival. Ellen Dissanayake (1995) would easily define cookery as art because in her book, *Homo Aestheticus*, she argues that art in general is just as necessary for survival as nutrition. Not everyone would agree, but the idea of cookery as art and the importance of both, has been taken more seriously in recent years. As Mexican novelist Elena Poniatowska wrote, ‘Today more than ever, *the art of cooking* has acquired the same status as that of history’ (Valle and Valle 1995: foreword, 4, emphasis added).

There has been a sudden proliferation of publications of cookery books, and of edited volumes and interdisciplinary studies of food, focusing on change, status, the body, power and identity, (e.g., Lentz 1999, Counihan and Kaplan 1998, Macbeth 1997, Counihan and van Esterik 1997, Caplan 1997a, Wiessner and Schiefenhövel 1996, Lupton 1996, Curtin and Heldke 1992, Brown and Mussell 1985).<sup>5</sup> Before, the topic of

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast, in Mexico, as explained later, it is the sauce which defines the dish, as in *mole* or *adobo*, or *carne en chile verde* (literally, this means ‘meat in green chile’, but it is more likely to be beef in a green sauce made of green husk tomatoes, green chiles and other condiments).

<sup>5</sup> Note that my intention here is not to provide a detailed overview of the treatment of food in anthropology and sociology. This has already been well done by several others (Goody 1982: 10-39, Mennell *et al.* 1992: 1-19, Caplan 1997b, Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 47-70; see also Warde 1997).

food has been dispersed, and there is little written in anthropology about cooking as a form of art, especially from the perspective of the anthropology of art. Yet thinking of a cook/chef as an artist is a connection that is so easily made in societies where most anthropologists come from.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the artistic aspect of food production has often been ignored in favour of its shock value, or, as Sidney Mintz put it, food and eating 'were more interesting [to anthropologists] if they offended the observer, baffled him, or were ceremonialized, than if they simply pleased those who were doing the cooking and eating' (1996: 3). Mintz encourages anthropologists to study food in its social context as a 'cuisine', and not food as a means of defining what else it can be used for in the social order (e.g., Malinowski 1935).

Food-related ethnographies often privilege development issues (e.g., Lenten 1993) or are more about economic issues and gender than on cuisine itself (e.g., Babb 1989). Some also base analysis on religious taboo or hierarchy and classification (such as Douglas 1966, Khare 1976). There are some exceptions, of course, which focus interest on cuisine or on eating particular foods for (gastronomical or other) pleasure. Peter Gow (1989) analyses the desires for food and sex in the construction of social relations in Amazonian Peru, and Richard Wilk (1999) uses food preferences for understanding cultural change and local identity in Belize.<sup>7</sup> Alicia María González (1986) does not write about art, but her thesis analyses the symbolic meanings of Mexican wheat bread, focusing on the *panadero*, baker, and his craftsmanship in making bread with particular names and shapes. A baker's life is taken for granted, marginalized by his working hours, yet he acts as a 'cultural broker' for Mexicans, especially those who live at the border of the United States. The *panadero* creatively forms different varieties of bread which has symbolic and ritual value, keeping more than the tradition of bread-making alive.

There is also Kanafani's (1983) ethnography of women in the United Arab Emirates. She explicitly focuses on the culinary arts, although not on cooks as artists. She emphasizes the artistic nature of foods and personal adornment, including

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Instead, I dedicate space to explaining the theoretical basis of the perspective I am taking, and I mention food-related studies that have more direct relation to my argument.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Dornenburg and Page (1996). It is also interesting to note that one of the chefs represented as culinary artists in this book is Chef Rick Bayless, who specializes in 'traditional' or 'authentic' Mexican cooking (see Bayless and Bayless 1987, Bayless 1996). On the other hand, as Gell observes, 'the neglect of art in modern social anthropology is necessary and intentional, arising from the fact that social anthropology is essentially, constitutionally, anti-art' (1996: 40).

<sup>7</sup> Note, however, that these are both articles, and not monographs.

perfumes, describing the interconnections among sensory experience, aesthetics and body rituals among women. She argues that aesthetic satisfaction enhances the experience of the senses, and is also used to avoid pollution and to restore oneself to a state of purity. Her analysis locates the source of aesthetic meaning on the recommendations of the Prophet Muhammed, because the aesthetic cannot be isolated from (Islamic) social or cultural values, and beauty is pleasing to Allah. This conclusion may seem unsatisfying, but at least there is an attempt to understand the artistic notions attached to cooking tasty food.

In Goody's (1982) analysis of hierarchy and the development of elaborate cuisines, he supports the observation and study of cooking at the domestic level, stating that

there is a tendency to spirit away the more concrete aspects of human life, even food, sex and sacrifice, by locating their interpretation *only* at the "deeper" level, which is largely a matter of privileging the "symbolic" at the expense of the more immediately communicable dimensions of social action.... a neglect of the "surface" in favour of the "depths", especially in areas as closely tied to the whole domestic domain as that of cooking. Without the consideration of such related areas, comparison and contrast within and between cuisines lacks an essential dimension. (25)

Strangely enough, he discusses 'the art of cooking', using this label without questioning its meaning. But as I have already mentioned, his interest is in comparative analysis over a broad historical, political and economic framework. He argues for the need to contextualise social theory in 'the total process of production, preparation and consumption of food' (2), yet in his own work he neglected the aspect of preparation.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, from his topic of enquiry it seems logical to observe 'the art of cooking' itself, in the context of its social dimensions.

Goody and Mintz (1979) insist that meaning (in food) is salient beyond the immediate place and time of its production and consumption; meaning is temporally extended and extendable. Furthermore, 'neither social relations nor social structure "express" or "symbolise" the acts of individuals because the former are necessarily derived from and totally encompass the latter' (Goody 1982: 30). These are important points which could lead to further investigation, and this dissertation attempts to respond to such a gap. My position with specific regard to food, as I explain in this

chapter, is to locate the source of meaning in the social relations between cooks and eaters and in culinary agency.

The social meanings of foods can be better understood by analysing cuisine as a whole, focusing on culinary practice, but also to acknowledge the artistic quality of the act of cooking. To help in thinking about the anthropology of food, therefore, I mainly draw upon Alfred Gell's theory of art, as he developed it in several publications (e.g., 1999, 1998). Thus, I am taking cuisine as art in the way that Gell sees art, 'as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' (1998: 6).

In investigating the culinary arts of a social group, the work of Lévi-Strauss is also helpful, although his approach may seem to contradict my purposes. Lévi-Strauss took a great interest in food and cooking and wished to make general statements about the social order by basing them on semiotic relations amongst culinary techniques. In *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964) his aim was to use myths and ethnographic data to show how tangible objects and empirical categories (like raw and cooked) have a kind of logic within the social order. Using myths drawn mainly from South America, he cleverly shows how they can all be seen as interrelated transformations of each other by means of inversions of their most basic factors. His approach is most fruitful for my purposes in so far as he privileges the act of cooking above other social acts. What he ultimately argues is that 'cooking is conceived of in native thought as a form of mediation' (64). It is a form of socialization which links 'heaven and earth, life and death, nature and society' (65).

Since there are five senses, there are five basic codes, and the gustatory code, the one corresponding to eating, occupies a privileged position (164). All the myths he presented 'have to do with the origin of the cooking of foodstuffs' (285) even if the myths may not say anything related to cooking or eating or food. He goes into a much more complex explanation of the analogy between the sky and earth which is mediated by cooking fire and a husband and wife which is mediated by a child, because a childless marriage 'disturbs the equilibrium of the social group' (328). This is all observable by comparing ethnographic evidence within the matrix of meanings gleaned from myths.

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<sup>8</sup> This is possibly because the two cultures in which he did fieldwork, the LoDagaa and the Gonja, both had 'simple' cuisines. For them, the main difference between feast food and daily fare was abundance, rather than special preparations of dishes.

Lévi-Strauss developed a diagrammatic means of structuring the basic aspects of cooking, which he called 'the culinary triangle'. His inspiration for this was the linguistic 'phoneme' which he believed was analogous to any other kind of social structure. Thus he illustrated the culinary triangle as having the raw, the cooked and the rotten as its points ('gustemes'). The conversion of raw food to cooked food, or raw or cooked to rotten, he argued, was the key to understanding the separation between nature and culture. But the linguistic structure loses its relevance as soon as he replaces the points of his triangle with culinary techniques (smoked, roast, boiled), and tries to account for other cooking methods (like fried). The culinary triangle becomes a tetrahedron, and can be expanded into infinite planes, a multi-dimensional culinary matrix (1978).

Though Lévi-Strauss's culinary triangle has been criticised as 'empty speculation' (Mennell *et al.* 1992: 9), this expanded culinary matrix can be loosely thought of as like Marriot's matrix of (food) transactions (1976). If we think of the culinary matrix in terms of layers of meaning, it is also loosely reminiscent of Gell's network of intentionalities (discussed below). If we specifically think of cooking as art, then Firth's characterization of art is also similar:

To an anthropologist, the formal qualities of a piece of sculpture or music are significant. But from an anthropological standpoint, even the simplest naming of an object—as mask, or anthropomorphic figure, or funeral song—indicates an awareness of a social, ritual, and economic matrix in which the object has been produced (1996: 15).

Rather than direct metonymic expressions of foodstuffs standing for other social structures, then, the perspective of food as art may help in understanding some of the meanings that foods carry. Another way of looking at it is Munn's definition of meaning, as being:

the relational nexus that enters into any given sociocultural form or practice (of whatever order of complexity) and defines that practice. The anthropological analysis of cultural meaning requires explication of cultural forms—a working through or unfolding of these culturally specific definitions and connectivities in order to disclose both the relational nature of the forms and the significance that derives from this relationality. (1986: 6-7)

Put into the context of this study, the cultural meanings of culinary activity as part of women's work is different from a semiotic analysis of foodstuffs. 'Because people act in terms of understood meanings, meaning can be said to effectuate behaviors of certain



kinds. And power and meaning are always connected' (Mintz 1996: 30). It is the active element in food preparation, the creative activity, combined with the fact that raw materials need to be bought or collected from different places (and also sold), that give cooks greater social value, hence, power. The active agency of art is the conveyor or mediator of social meanings, which are powerful enough to lead to social changes in other levels in the matrix of cultural forms. It allows women to change their social spaces, and thereby expand their social network outside of the home (see chapter five, and cf. Mintz 1996: Ch. 3).

There is another sense in which the nature of art production is active. Some objects of art are produced with the intention of capturing the viewer's (recipient's) attention, which thereby facilitates a perceptual change in the recipient. This may be effected and experienced as aesthetic awe, gastronomic bliss, or (eventually) the development of personhood, to name a few examples. Dornenburg and Page (1996) conceptualize a continuum for the categorization of cooks or chefs. The accolade of culinary artist can be abducted from the effect that their cooking has on the eater. For them, artistry is recognized by the power of the food to perform a perceptual change in the eater—giving the eater a physically enhanced experience of life. The table they constructed to clarify their continuum is reproduced below:

**Table 3: Are there three categories of chefs?**

	<b>Trade</b>	<b>Craft</b>	<b>Art</b>
<b>Category</b>	'Burger-Flippers'	'Accomplished Chefs'	'Culinary Artists'
<b>Customer Goal</b>	Survival	Enjoyment	Entertainment
<b>Chef's Intention</b>	Fill/Feed	Satisfy/Please	Transcend/Transport
<b>Price of Lunch</b>	Movie Ticket	Off-Broadway Theatre Ticket	Broadway Orchestra Ticket
<b>Who Determines Meal</b>	Customer ('Have It Your Way')	Customer/Chef	Chef (Tasting Menu)
<b>Chef's Primary Repertoire</b>	Hamburgers	Classic dishes	Chef's own dishes
<b>Number of Senses Affected</b>	5	5	6
<b>Customers Leave Saying</b>	'I'm full.'	'That was delicious.'	'Life is wonderful.'

Source: Dornenburg and Page (1996: 7)

The way that I use the term 'culinary artistry' is better understood by using Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of art.

## 2.2 Gell's theory of art

Gell (1996 [1992]) suggests thinking of art as a 'vast and often unrecognized *technical system*, essential to the reproduction of human societies' (43, emphasis added) which performs an aesthetic effect by what he calls 'the technology of enchantment'.<sup>9</sup> Art objects, in particular, 'demonstrate a certain technically achieved level of excellence...as *made* objects, as products of techniques' (43, orig. ital.). Although there are many objects that may be thought of as beautiful, art objects are those that are '*beautifully made*, or *made beautiful*' (ibid.). They also are thought of as having higher value. This value is given to them by humans because of a perceived superiority, which is seen as artistic excellence or exemplary craftsmanship.

The perception of artistry, or the allocation of value, is an effect which Gell calls the 'halo effect of technical difficulty'. In this he follows Simmel's notion of resistance as a source of value. The more an object resists our possession, whether actual or intellectual possession, the greater the awe it inspires in us. That is, the greater the difficulty of access to an object, or of access to the technical process required to produce that object, the higher the value it is given. 'It is the way an art object is construed as having come into the world which is the source of the power such objects have over us – their becoming rather than their being' (46). This means that the 'magical' quality that works of art are perceived to have is not some inherent 'aesthetic' quality which the art object possesses somehow. It is a complex feat of technical mastery, a 'technical miracle' (49) which is experienced by the spectator (or consumer) as artistic.

Gell's theory of art is based upon an 'art nexus', which is a nexus of intentionalities of an 'artist' via a 'prototype' which reaches a 'recipient' via an 'index' (artwork). The nature of this theory is complex and the exceedingly brief account that I give here may appear overtly simplified. Simplistic as my account may be, I am abstracting these few basic aspects of Gell's theory as the most useful ideas for making sense of my ethnographic material on Mexican cuisine. Although I do not contest the analytical advantages of a structural framework (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1966, Douglas 1975, and for a particularly effective and convincing ethnographic analysis, see Hugh-Jones 1979, and for a successful use of semiotics in analysing cuisine, see Weismantel 1988), an artistic approach may provide greater scope for an analysis of an elaborate cuisine, like

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<sup>9</sup> Gell was not the only nor the first one to emphasize the technical aspect of art. It is a received notion that one cannot assess art without looking at techniques (see Bateson 1973, Firth 1996 [1992]).

the Mexican. While it is true that Mexican eating habits can be placed into classifications and then encoded, illuminating their structure may lead us no further than etiquette when it is also possible to observe complex and varied culinary techniques which inform cooks and eaters about other social meanings. At least from my findings in Mexican cuisine, there is no 'language of food' which can be learnt via a grammar of eating habits or cooking techniques.

To illustrate this point, an example from my fieldwork is helpful. When I first went to Mexico, I was interested in learning the 'language of chiles' that I had been led to expect existed from reading Mexican cookbooks. Some cookery writers, fully trapped under the spell of delightful flavours, describe Mexican culinary mastery as analogous to the control required to manipulate poetic language or magic. Having succumbed, myself, to this 'enchantment', I was surprised to find that real Mexican people, both professional cooks and women in Milpa Alta, simply did not have a clue about what I was getting at when I talked about culinary manipulations of chiles and other foodstuffs. It makes more sense, therefore, to talk about a body of knowledge, or a socially developed system which is employed in the preparation of foods for consumption.<sup>10</sup> The communicative aspects of cooking and eating lie in the meanings that actors (or agents; both cooks and eaters) place in the food within their social context; that is, within the complex of intentionalities that Gell talks about in his work (1999, 1998).

An artwork has the power not only to inspire awe, but also to inform the spectator's relationship with the represented image (or the artist himself) as if it were a relational node where the two beings cross paths. This is because an art object can be thought of as equivalent to a person, a social agent, which belongs to families, lineages, and so on (Gell 1998: 153). It is an extension of a person whose biography can be traced via the whole body of art, the art corpus (its family, lineage). Crudely put, that means that the construction of an artwork is like the construction of a person. By its artistic nature, an object has the power (agency) to act, to produce social effects on or conduct social relations with other social beings. In effect, it is the artist's technical mastery which gives the object of art this social ability.

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<sup>10</sup> Foodstuffs which have direct symbolic meanings in relation to religious belief, for example, are another issue.

The work of art is inherently social in a way in which the merely beautiful or mysterious object is not: it is a physical entity which mediates between two beings, and therefore creates a social relation between them, which in turn provides a channel for further social relations and influences. (1996: 52)

To explain this mediation performed by an artwork, Gell poses the example of the work of an (anonymous) artist commissioned to produce a likeness of a ruler or a religious figure. The spectator's perception of the person whom the image represents is directly related to perception inspired by the artistic quality of the art object (ibid.). There is a similar effect occurring when a person holds a catered dinner party and the host gets the credit for the quality of the food and enhances his or her social relations by means of the occasion and its success, and the hired cook is overlooked. Regardless of who actually did the physical labour, the agency of the artwork can be mobilized by another person for social relational influences.

This can also be observed in Milpa Alta, Mexico, in public feasts, such as weddings (chapter seven). Part of the requirement for a proper wedding is a proper feast. Without a sufficiently elaborate or festive dish, the celebration loses some of its meaning, and this directly affects the families of the bride and groom. So, 'technical virtuosity is intrinsic to the efficacy of works of art in their social context' (Gell 1996: 52).

### **2.3 A recipe as an object of art**

So far I have assumed that a recipe or a dish can be taken for granted as a work of art. I am not assuming this only for the purposes of analysis. In Milpa Alta and other parts of Mexico City, cookery is commonly spoken of as artistic practice. In fact, food is often the subject of conversation among all kinds of people, and many times I found myself listening to grandmothers tell stories about other women, now dead, who were legendary cooks, whose renditions of classic recipes were equivalent to art. Such women gain fame in the community and their daughters and daughters-in-law, and other close women friends, try to learn their craft by proximity. Working with or for a 'master' (or culinary artist), a woman hopes that some of her magic/skill will rub off on her, as she observes, ingests, and employs those skills on her own.

Culinary knowledge or skill, therefore, is based on practice which can be learnt, and a particularly skillful cook is casually thought of as an artist, since cooking is roughly called an 'art', '*la cocina es un arte*', and being known as a good cook is socially valued

in Mexico. The practice in itself is not restricted to publicly acknowledged culinary masters, although those who stand out as particularly talented are given recognition. Learning to cook is actually part of every girl's domestic training as she develops into a grown woman. She begins to learn from her mother, and later also from her mother-in-law and other women. Like any other type of skill, good cooking is learnt by training and imitation of masters, who are older women in the community. But the learning process is not simply a matter of imitation and reproduction of the same. Not all of a master's apprentices produce equivalent works. With a change of the hand that prepares the dish, the flavour changes. Thus, the difference between great food and good food, between art and craft, is attributed to the hand of the cook, *la mano*, which is also called *la sazón* (literally, flavour).<sup>11</sup> It is a talent or flair which is physically exhibited, but not copied. Culinary knowledge, then, can be developed with practice, but what is learnt is a bodily discipline like other artistic skills, such as painting:

what is imitated is not the exterior actions as such, but the demonstration of knowledge itself. This is the process by which hidden bodily-interior knowledge is manifested outside the body.... a woman learning how to paint with design comes to 'hold designs in her head': she becomes a creator of designs. (Gow 1999: 241)

Although cooking can be conceived of as artistic practice from a native point of view, food is not necessarily thought of as art in the same sense as Mexicans or Milpaltenses would think of visual arts, such as the works of Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Nevertheless, thinking of food as art makes it easier to understand why it is that flavour and cooking mean so much to Mexican people. If we consider the whole of cuisine to be a body of art, then each individual work could be defined as being a recipe or a dish.

Gell's anthropology of art does not focus solely on analyzing works of art as defined by an art public *per se*. Potentially almost anything can be considered as an art object, so long as it fulfils certain pre-requisites. 'The nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded. It has no "intrinsic" nature, independent of the relational context' (Gell 1998: 7). Gell's definition of an art object is perhaps easier to grasp from his essay, 'Vogel's Net' (1999 [1996]), where he

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<sup>11</sup> Also, a *sazón* that works to produce spectacular flavours is commonly called *una sazón de amor*, the flavour of love. (See chapter three.)

convincingly argues that traps can be artworks and at the same time, artworks act as traps to the viewers/victims:

...animal traps...might be presented to an art public as artworks. These devices embody ideas, convey meanings, because a trap, by its very nature, is a transformed representation of its maker, the hunter, and the prey animal, its victim, and of their mutual relationship, which, among hunting people, is a complex, quintessentially social one. That is to say, these traps communicate the idea of a nexus of intentionalities between hunters and prey animals, via material forms and mechanisms. (203)

Confronting a trap is like confronting a person, as it is the hunter's intentions and ingenuity which are present in his handiwork. At the same time, the hunter constructed this particular trap for that particular animal, using the knowledge he possesses about his victim's habits and sociality.

If we think in terms of food, confronting a meal can also be thought of as confronting a person. The meal presents a subset of the cook's culinary knowledge, and the food itself is the outcome of the cook's intentions to provide nourishment, flavour, hospitality, family warmth, and, potentially, history, empowerment, and other kinds of intentionalities, depending on her relationship to the people she cooks for. This is the sort of play of ideas that Laura Esquivel used in her successful novel and film, *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992). Using folk remedies, typical sayings with culinary themes, and recipes, Esquivel's novel constructs a Mexican world in which the heroine's emotions, convictions, and unverballed intentionalities are infused in her cooking, and later literally embodied in those who eat her food, with sometimes alarming physical effects.

Although this is a work of fiction, part of its commercial success in Mexico has to do with the resounding truths which emerge in this magico-realistic interpretation of the culinary sphere. In real-life Mexico, food does not have quite the same powers, but there is no doubt that there are complex belief systems surrounding matters of cooking and eating. People in Milpa Alta continue to believe that 'angry' *tamales* will never cook, for example, and certain foods cause stomach upsets, such as too much rice or the soft centres (*migajón*) of crusty bread rolls (*bolillos, teleras*). In a similar way, many people say that they are never full unless they have eaten *tortillas*, or that they need their '*chilito*' (chile, *salsa*) in order to fully enjoy eating. These ideas relate to what it means to be 'traditional' or 'truly Mexican' or even coming from Milpa Alta (chapter

three).<sup>12</sup> For this reason, I think Gell would agree that his theory could be applied to Mexican food, since his anthropological definition of an object of art is as follows:

objects that are scrutinized as vehicles of complicated ideas, intended to achieve or mean something interesting, difficult, allusive, hard to bring off, and so on. I would define as a candidate artwork any object or performance that potentially rewards such scrutiny because it embodies intentionalities that are complex, demanding of attention and perhaps difficult to reconstruct fully. (Gell 1999: 211)<sup>13</sup>

He also wrote, ‘Artworks can also trap eels... or grow yams. The “interpretation” of such “practically” embedded artworks is intrinsically conjoined to their characteristics as instruments fulfilling purposes other than the embodiment of autonomous “meaning.”’ (1999: 211) For the purposes of this analysis, that means that artworks can also satisfy hunger or fulfil gastronomic desires. A recipe or a special dish can be thought of as an art object, a social nexus embedded within a culinary system, which is in itself a social system within a matrix of other interrelated social systems.

## 2.4 On edibility, hospitality, and exchange

One of the main differences between food and visual art is, of course, the fact that food is eaten. Food that is considered as artwork happens to have two fundamental qualities—it has (superior) flavour (as opposed to bland or mediocre), and like other works of art, it is a physical thing which, like other art objects *in theory*, can be owned and exchanged. The flavour aspect is analogous to artistic decoration, which seems to lie in the realm of aesthetic pleasure. Gell’s insight on decoration is pertinent at this point:

Aesthetic pleasure is consummatory, an end in itself, and there is nothing empirically to show that the decorated objects with which the world abounds are contemplated except in specific situational contexts in which their aesthetic properties are never the sole focus of interest.... [Decorated objects] are not self-sufficient sources of delight, but vehicles of personhood, to be owned, exchanged and displayed (1998: 81).

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<sup>12</sup> For the general theme of invention of tradition, see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Firth recognises art in a comparable way, as having human involvement with the material: ‘Art is a product of human commitment, determined by man’s social existence. It is essentially form; but only when the form is mobilized for human purposes, given meaning in human terms by comparative associations, can one properly speak of art’ (1996: 18).

This is not to say that the decorations are not important; in fact, these decorations perform an important function, and in the case of food, *the functional and 'decorative' aspect is its flavour*. Eaters remember who prepares superior flavours in certain dishes, and return to those cooks. They sometimes depend on them gastronomically, and also sometimes socially.

It must also be remembered that when it comes to food and eating, there is a crucial element of sharing involved. 'It is in the nature of food to be shared out. Not to share it with others is "to kill its essence", it is to destroy it both for oneself and for others' (Mauss 1990 [1950]: 57). Generally, food is cooked for more than one person, for the family or for non-family members who are guests. This aspect of food giving and receiving implies an element of exchange, although there is a different quality to commensality that seems not to fit with art ownership and display. Display and food presentation (how it appears on the plate) can be seen as equivalent, but the ownership needs further explanation.

In hospitality, there are always at least two people involved in the transaction—a donor (the cook/artist) and a recipient (the eater)—and the object being offered or transacted is the food.<sup>14</sup> If it is an object of exchange in a Maussian sense, then it is an extension of a person, it contains his or her 'essence' or 'spirit' by nature of being the product of a cook's invested and creative labour. This product is then materially ingested by the recipient, resulting in a literal communion of persons, which will be reciprocated in some unspecified way at an unspecified time in the other direction (that is, from eater to artist).<sup>15</sup>

What, then, does this mean? The eating of the food implies that the 'spirit of the gift' that Mauss describes is ingested as well. But I think that food is not merely an object of exchange in the same sense, and the temporary possession of the 'spirit' which must be reciprocated is not enough to explain the kind of social contexts in which food is shared. Food has particular physical and sensual qualities which differ from other types of objects which are exchanged, although Mauss argues that they are all homologous. Nancy Munn's (1986) analysis of food hospitality, kula exchange and fame in Gawa can help to illuminate this further, and can be better applied to Milpa Alta.

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<sup>14</sup> The case of the cook as eater is discussed below.

<sup>15</sup> In a way, hospitality can be thought of as a form of sacrifice. See Lok (1991) for a discussion of sacrifice and exchange, with specific regard to the Days of the Dead.



There is another kind of giving and receiving which occurs at the dining table that is slightly more complicated than a donor giving and a recipient receiving. Food giving is a basic form of generosity in Milpa Alta, just as neglecting to offer food when hospitality is pertinent is considered to be selfish and greedy (*envidioso/a*). Eating food on one's own, therefore, is the opposite of sharing food with others. As sharing is a positive act, so not sharing (that is, eating) can be thought of as a negative act (cf. Munn 1986). If we think of the things (artworks, dishes) that a person makes as the products of her agency, this infers that corresponding to the agent (donor) there must be a patient (recipient). If we further accept that these things are extensions of the agent's personhood, they are material repositories of that person and that person's intentions, which are given, shared, and distributed to others. The act is a value-enhancing, positive extension of the agent's 'spacetime' which transforms the patient's relationship with the agent, ensuring an ongoing relationship which may be based on exchange at another level of social interaction, thus also ensures community viability.

Food is shared with specific others as a means of exhibiting respect for an existing or future relationship of reciprocity, with the expectation of future reciprocity of a similar or different kind. The offering of a meal is a spatiotemporal event transacted by the host to the guest with an underlying intention of reciprocity at another level within the nexus of transactions that make up social life. As Munn describes for Gawa, 'the exchange of comestibles in hospitality is the *dynamic base, and condition which underlies kula shell exchange between partners*' (1986: 56, orig.ital.). Food sharing is dynamic and self-extending, whereas eating is socially static and self-collapsing. So cooking is an inherently social act, and so conversely, eating what one cooks oneself is anti-social, *unless* one is sharing the food.

What this notion of cooking and eating also explains is why it is that a lone person in Mexico almost never cooks for oneself to eat alone. Within the corpus of Mexican culinary culture there exists a vast subset of street food and market food, some of which is the same as home cooking, prepared by vendors (*señoras*), to serve commercially. Like in food hospitality, there is an agent (cook, vendor) and a patient (eater, customer). This is food which follows the logic that it should be prepared for an other, in keeping with the social aspect of cooking. In this case, though, there is a direct exchange

between the social actors. Food is exchanged for money. The transaction ends there.<sup>16</sup> Food selling retains the social activity, but does not carry the fundamental persuasiveness of food giving which provides the agent with the powerful potential to demand reciprocity.

Understood in this way, food hospitality in Milpa Alta is somewhat similar to the substance-sharing that has been reported in food-based studies in India, where commensality effects 'biomoral' losses and gains (Marriott 1976) which can be controlled or negated by emotions, such as love in Tamil Nadu (Trawick 1990), or the recycling of essences in Nepal (Rutter 1993). There are some important details that vary. The rules of hospitality in Milpa Alta are matters of etiquette which exert the force of a moral principle. This means that when a visitor arrives at someone's home, the host is obliged to offer something to eat or drink and the guest is also obliged to accept it. If it is mealtime, the guest is offered a full meal, even if it means that a member of the family goes without, and also even if the guest protests that he or she has already eaten.

Abstracting the process of food hospitality in this way ignores another fundamental aspect of food that is offered to others. This is its (the object of exchange, the food's) necessity of having a good flavour and being made with culinary technical mastery, which is what makes it analogous to a work of art. If we account for that, then we can think of ingesting food as equivalent to the consumption/acceptance/possession of a work of art. Since Mauss considers food hospitality to be equivalent to gift exchange, it is at this point where his argument has some resonances which can be applied. Gift exchange causes the development of furthering social relations, especially since it requires a *time lag* for reciprocation rather than immediate-return exchange.<sup>17</sup>

By their very definition, a meal shared in common, a distribution of *kava*, or a talisman that one takes away, cannot be reciprocated immediately. Time is needed in order to perform any counter-service. The notion of a time limit is thus logically involved when there is question of returning visits, contracting marriages and alliances, establishing peace, attending games or regulated combats, celebrating

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, the transaction may continue if a customer becomes a regular, and then becomes recognized by the vendor as deserving of occasional special favours. In this case there is a blurring of the boundary between commercial and non-commercial social reciprocity which is acted out in terms of generosity with food portions. The food product transacted remains the same, so the 'sociality' produced is of the kind that McCallum describes (1989).

<sup>17</sup> See Woodburn 1998 for a view which refutes the idea of (food) sharing as exchange.

alternative festivals, rendering ritual services of honour, or “displaying reciprocal respect”... (Mauss 1990: 36)

With this perspective, we can think of food as both a work of art as well as an object of exchange. Now the final problematic issue to explain is its possession. Possession of food-as-art is not anything like the possession of an object which sits on the mantelpiece for personal admiration, nor is it like the intellectual possession of a famous painting beyond a consumer’s (financial) capacity to take it home and own it, as Gell describes (1996). The possession of food-as-art seems to take the form of having eaten it, and perhaps also having the possibility (or controlling this possibility) of eating it again. In one sense, its true possession can be thought of as possession of the know-how to be able to reproduce it (to know how to cook), or at least to know where to go in order to reproduce it (to know how or where or with whom to eat).

Perhaps it is also possible to say that the ‘inventor’ of a dish, a cook or chef, for example, with his name labelling the cuisine he produces, remains the owner of that dish. But this confuses the artist with the recipient, and fails to solve the problem of the acceptance of the recipient to possess the art-object-of-exchange that the artist produced and offered. It also is inapplicable to the anonymous cook who cooks ‘traditional’ foods, rather than self-consciously ‘invents’, and who solely produces these dishes within the family sphere. The fact that most women in the community know how to prepare similar dishes following similar recipes (with the same ‘index’), makes it seem ludicrous to try to pinpoint any ‘owner’ of a dish.

Having eaten something once or twice, and enjoyed it very much, does not really make an eater the ‘owner’ of that dish, either, even temporarily; neither does the memory of the flavours of a particular gastronomic occasion which was somehow touching or marked in the eater’s life experience. A heightened awareness of artistic or culinary expertise does not in itself constitute possession or ownership of the work. Not only this, once the dish is produced, the eating of it makes it disappear, yet it can be reproduced *ad infinitum*. Possession is a more complex issue because of the fact that the dish can be reproduced, but may not necessarily be reproducible in exactly the same way or in the same context, or within the same transactive nexus, or its reproduction may depend on the actions of a specific cook.

Remembering once more that as soon as the supply of the food is depleted, it can be constantly renewed, it can never truly be completely consumed, therefore it can never

be truly owned. Parallel to this, opening an exchange relationship by offering food to a guest or family member likewise opens the possibility for reciprocity in some form (Mauss 1990, Munn 1986). On two levels, therefore, the food hospitality consists of 'unfinished business' which is the essence of the endurance of social relations (Gell 1998: 80-81). As the outcome of a recipe, an index of the dish/work of art, food is an object of exchange. However, since food is eaten and virtually disappears, and yet it can be cooked again and regenerated, it 'is never fully possessed at all, but is always in the process of becoming possessed' (81).

## 2.5 Flavour and value

This brings us back to flavour. At the beginning of my discussion of Gell, I mentioned that art, here cuisine, should be thought of primarily as a technical system. Cooking techniques are learned by apprenticeships to masters, which in Milpa Alta translates as girls learning to cook from their mothers and other older women. Knowing the proper techniques for peeling chiles, making *tortillas*, or wrapping *tamales* does not necessarily mean that the results are always uniform from cook to cook. What distinguishes an extraordinary cook from an ordinary one is perceived as technical skill which can be judged via flavour. Although judgment of flavour seems to be an aesthetic judgment, and technical mastery appears to be more objective or scientific, I would like to explain how the two can in fact be thought of as one and the same. But first, it is necessary to mention the well-known sociological work in the analysis of taste judgements, Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984).

The starting point of Bourdieu's argument is that our perceptions of taste have little to do with the inherent qualities of the things on which we place value. What we learn to discern as valuable is due to our accumulating 'economic capital' and 'cultural capital' which is learnt via social class, education and upbringing. Along with this cultural capital, a person learns the kind of taste that he needs for social belonging, so by his choices of what deserves value, he can be distinguished among others of different classes, who would value other things. Taste is a subconscious kind of knowledge, a habitus, 'history turned into nature'. This means, for example, that a preference for red wine rather than beer is really a matter of class (and education), and ultimately is not an issue of personal taste.

A person's taste becomes the mark of distinction between social classes, and is revealed by an individual's possession of an 'aesthetic disposition'. This is the capacity to recognise artistic characteristics in anything, whether a purposely made work of art, or not. The artistic quality of an object is not inherent in the thing; its social value is derived from its social use. As Bourdieu puts it, 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (6). This would explain why there is an element of prestige and (class) distinction involved in the choices of serving, cooking and eating certain foodstuffs. '[A]rt and cultural consumption are predisposed consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences' (7). Taste is a sociological phenomenon, rather than a question of a person's passion or individual discernment.

To some extent this perspective helps to explain why *barbacoa* began to be accepted as feast food in Milpa Alta. Although I cannot determine exactly where or when it began to be served during fiestas, having observed its widespread use, it appears that its acceptance is related to the prestige attached to *barbacoieros*, at least in Milpa Alta. This will be explained more fully in the following chapters (see chapter eight), after understanding the social dynamics surrounding the cuisine, and not just the isolated dishes. So although Bourdieu's perspective is convincingly applied to the context in Milpa Alta, it also has limitations. Focusing exclusively on classifications, he does not analyse particular 'works of art' in relation to their own 'art world'. He asks questions which are directed towards general attitudes and judgments<sup>18</sup>, more interested in the patterns of relative amounts of spending on food, clothing and cosmetics, and leisure activities. Because of his defined concern with judgment, class and hierarchy, he is, in fact, aware that he deliberately ignores the cooking aspect of cuisine. But the cooking is crucial to the achievement of its artistic status, and as Goody has argued, judgment of something cannot be separated from an understanding of the process of its production (for food, that is cooking). In an analysis of taste and aesthetics, this should also be observed, and if the topic is an 'art world', then some constituting artworks should be discussed as well.

Bourdieu approaches artworks by arguing that value is allocated through the 'stylization of life' or 'the primacy of forms over functions' (5). He separates form from function by associating 'art' with form (and luxury), and 'life' with function (and

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<sup>18</sup> For example, one survey he used queries whether 'the French eat too much' or whether people have 'a favourable opinion of someone who enjoys eating and drinking' (Bourdieu 1984: 179).

necessity). In contrast, I argue that form is necessarily related to function (cf. Gell 1998). In a sense, the link between form and function can also be concluded from Bourdieu's own concept of habitus and self-presentation. He explains,

Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is *embodied*, helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways. (190)

Thus, form and function are merged when externally exhibited in bodily action via the 'aesthetic', which he describes as a dimension of habitus and systematic choices produced in practice.

So in the case of food, if form is constituted by flavour, then flavour is socially functional. Perhaps this is better explained with Gell's method of analysing art, as he approaches art from another perspective. Following Gell, therefore, rather than beginning with social classifications, this thesis focuses primarily on the artwork (cuisine) and the artist, then considers the audience and how this informs the artist to modify the artwork; in other words, how it comes about that a society places value on an object, and judges one thing to be in better taste, or to taste better, than another.

Similar to Gell, Malinowski treats flavour and value in a way that is more applicable for my approach. He shows that food production and allocation are associated with patterns of belief and social reciprocity (1935). More specifically, in his account of the Kula ring (1922), he discusses the constant give and take of life in the Trobriand Islands, and shows how it is erroneous to believe that human relations to material goods are purely rational (168). As for food, 'they are not merely regarded by the natives as nourishment, not merely valued because of their utility' (ibid.). The desire for social prestige and display are what stimulates the accumulation of food to the extent that yams are left to rot, as an excess of wealth, and magic is performed on people to curtail their appetites so that there will be food leftover (to rot). In public ceremony and daily life in the Trobriands, it is possible to even say that there is a 'cult of food' because of the centrality of food and cooking (170), 'but it is important to note that the centre of gravity of the feast lies, not in the eating, but in the display and ceremonial preparation of the food' (171).

Although he notes that quantity is of primary concern, he adds that ‘the Trobrianders enjoy their eating as one of the chief pleasures of life’ (ibid.). He states that the sentiments of enjoyment are not socialised (171-2), which indicates that they cannot be controlled. Nevertheless, I would add that they still have social effects. Malinowski does recognize the value of food derived from the pleasures of eating. ‘Value is not the result of utility and rarity, intellectually compounded, but is the result of a sentiment grown round things, which, through satisfying human needs, are capable of evoking emotions’ (172).

This ‘theory of value’ is what he argues produces objects of art, and I would extend this reasoning to recipes or dishes as such objects, although Malinowski himself does not state it this way. In many ways, Malinowski’s ideas coincide with Gell’s. Malinowski also defines art objects, which consist of work not done ‘under the spur of necessity, or to gain their living, but on the impulse of talent and fancy, with a high sense of enjoyment of their art, which they often conceive as the result of magical inspiration’ (172). He later concludes that ‘value and wealth exist, in spite of abundance of things, that indeed this abundance is valued for its own sake....[I]t is not rarity within utility which creates value, but a rarity sought out by human skill within the workable materials’ (173). Because of the ‘disproportionate amount of labour’ spent on such objects, they become ‘a kind of economic monstrosity, too good, too big, too frail, or too overcharged with ornament to be used, yet just because of that, highly valued’ (173). It does not take too broad a leap to be able to extend this idea to the realm of culinary labour and the elaboration of dishes.

The skill required in culinary labour is the kind of technical mastery which Gell refers to as necessary for the production of an artwork, and also for the homologous technical systems which bring about the (re)production of society:

As a technical system, art is orientated towards the production of the social consequences which ensue from the production of these objects. The power of art objects stems from the technical processes they objectively embody: the *technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*. (1996: 44)

When Gell poses the example of the Trobriand canoe board whose design is believed to possess magical power to encourage generosity in kula trading, he explains that the power of the design is not so much a psychological effect (eye-spots), although some

such effect can be proven to exist. It is the fact that the generous act is attributed to the artistic nature of the canoe board which gives it its power. This is similar to his example of the Anga eel traps (1999). These traps are constructed to be far more sturdy and complicated than is actually necessary to trap an eel. The trap, therefore, reveals the Anga belief that the eel is so powerful that its trap must be particularly clever. Thus, the trap is a repository of eel-power, and at the same time is the source of the eel's power. With regard to Mexico, for example, this is very much like men's restrictions on women. Strict regulations of women's movements, often glossed as *machismo*, actually reveal the high value placed on women's chastity, which is, in effect, a means of containing and curbing women's power over men.

The social efficacy of an elaborately prepared meal performs a similar function. At first glance, the requirements to cook dishes from an elaborate cuisine may appear oppressive, tying women home when they would rather be out. On the other hand, women as well as men value flavourful food and 'traditional' or 'authentic' methods of preparing it. It thus appears as if the motivations for producing good flavours are as simple as personal satisfaction combined with the desire to satisfy others (family, spouse, friends). Good flavours make happy eaters. Preparing what is considered a proper meal is analogous to proper nurturing, and this is empowering in the sense that family ties are tightened when food is shared. A good wife strives to cook well for the sake of her husband, her in-laws, her children, and ultimately, herself.

The correlation between a woman's desire to cook food with good flavour and her love for her family is not such a simple thing, however. Skillful cooking does not lead to social empowerment so directly. It is only convincing after understanding other social situations where women's power and value are questioned. Nevertheless, control over feeding the family is the place to start. If cooking is artistic practice, then a cook has the creative freedom to make decisions at this level, which may have wider significance at other social levels. She does not have to cook herself, but at least she has the intention to provide good food somehow (see chapter five). Related to this, there are marked dishes, different from the daily fare, which are served when there is a special occasion, such as a birthday, wedding, or funeral. Invariably, this used to be *mole*, a complex flavoured sauce made of up to two dozen or more ingredients, which is also complex to prepare. Serving an elaborate dish commemorates an occasion as special by transferring its value.



Nowadays (within the last ten or fifteen years), since it is very expensive to make *mole* for hundreds of people, in its place, most families who hold large celebration banquets serve *carnitas*, *mixiote* or *barbacoa* (see chapters four and eight). The menu very rarely varies beyond these three choices. These dishes are also technically difficult to prepare, yet they are more economical than good quality chiles and all the other nuts, seeds, spices and myriad ingredients necessary to make a proper *mole*. However, since the relation between *mole* and *fiesta* is: *mole* is to *fiesta* as *fiesta* is to *mole*, i.e., they mutually imply one another (*mole* ⇔ *fiesta*), oftentimes people serve a small amount of *mole* with *tamales* after the main course so that guests do not leave without their '*mole de fiesta*'.

*Mole* may be considered as one of the culinary treasures or works of art of Mexican cuisine, but the principle of applying the highest standards of technical mastery and excellence of flavour is in practice when a person interested in good cooking prepares any food. In Mexico, dishes are defined by the sauce rather than by the meat or vegetable which is in it. This is why *salsas* are the most important part of a Mexican meal. There must be a *salsa* or at least some chile on the table for people to enjoy their food (*tortillas*, beans, vegetables, meat). Chile is equivalent to *salsa*, which is also equivalent to *mole* (and also *adobo*, which is used to make *mixiote*). A famous quote is: 'Without chile, Mexicans do not believe that they are eating', and Primy also spontaneously told me the same, '*Sin chile no come uno*'. Good food means good flavours, and in many ways this depends on women (good cooks) who make good sauces.<sup>19</sup> This is why a special occasion meal is served with a flavourful, highly valued, elaborate sauce (*mole*) rather than a regular *salsa*.

For all meals in general, it is not enough for the food to provide nutrition and to be edible. It is also important for it to be palatable, for there to be *salsa*, that is, flavour, which results directly from the culinary mastery that a skillful cook possesses. In Mexico, the culinary matrix of intentionalities involves the planes of social organizations such as the *mayordomía* and *compadrazgo* (see chapter six), and also the family sphere which is based on love (see chapter three). Rather than being fed, one is eating a meal prepared by someone caring or is eating a meal with particular social significance. As will become evident in chapter five, the ideal relationship between a man and a woman is that between husband and wife; by extension, the ideal food is a

meal cooked by a woman (wife and mother) for her husband and children. Since women's virtue and moral value is also attached to her ability to suffer for her loved ones, both men and her children (Melhuus 1992, and see chapter five), the efforts of her labours (her cooking) is also highly valued.

Also, food that is thought of as 'very Mexican' are usually dishes which use autochthonous utensils or ingredients, or ingredients which are grown or bred on local land (e.g., locally reared sheep, *borregos criollos*, for *barbacoa*). In particular, these dishes are considered to have the best flavour. Mexican street food is another highly valued part of Mexican cuisine, and is also considered to be flavourful. In Milpa Alta, there are no cinemas, theatres or any other public venue of entertainment, other than the market. This makes eating *tacos* in the market a major source of fun: '*La mayor diversión es ir a comer tacos en el mercado*'. This appears to contradict the value placed on home-cooking, but as will be explained in chapter five, the logic of love and lovers symbolically makes street food an illicit delight, because it lies within another social dimension of family eating.

The above discussion should help as a guideline for reading the further chapters of this thesis where I go into greater depth about the social processes which revolve around food preparation and food sharing. What I hope to have conveyed here now is the idea that flavour is actually the most *functional* aspect of food, and its nutritive benefits are secondary. If it has superior flavour, good food fixes the eater's mind to the cook (or host). The flavour performs a sensory trick which makes the eater believe that he is attached to the maker of the food (cf., for art, Gell 1996, 1999). In a way the power of the cook is highlighted by chefs or non-professional individuals who become known for their cooking and who make a living or make a social life (respectively) out of this fame (cf. Munn 1986). It is also expressed in the importance and the forcefulness of hospitality in Mexico (or in Milpa Alta, in particular). Accepting food offered to you, whether you like it or not, is so important in Milpa Alta that many people attend parties with a plastic bag or tupperware hidden in their handbags, so that they can take home whatever is served to them that they are unable to eat.

In a sense, the food transaction takes precedence over the particular food served, if it must be received regardless of personal taste. That suggests that flavour is irrelevant

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Stoller (1989: chapter 1) where he writes of the social meanings behind serving a bad sauce among

to proper social behavior, but in fact it is most relevant. Its relevance is evident because whether a cook is successful or not, a cook tries to serve only foods of superior flavour to a guest, that is, with the highest technical skill possible. Failing that, if a guest comes without warning, a host/cook serves what there is at home, and what is served at home also is prepared with technical mastery, that is, she continues to aim for the ideals of flavour. Furthermore, there is prestige allocated to a cook and her family when she is known to be an extraordinary cook. For this reason, there are many good cooks who hide their culinary secrets viciously, and the emotional outcome is that she is considered to be 'greedy' (*envidiosa*), a concept which is taken to be the opposite of loving in Milpa Alta.

An eater's appreciation of a masterfully prepared dish can be summed up once more with a quote from Gell (1996) which describes that the ultimate meanings of a work of art may be embedded deeper in social processes than the initial aesthetic effects:

In reconstructing the processes which brought the work of art into existence, [the spectator] is obliged to posit a creative agency which transcends his own and, hovering in the background, the power of the collectivity on whose behalf the artist exercised his technical mastery. (51-2)

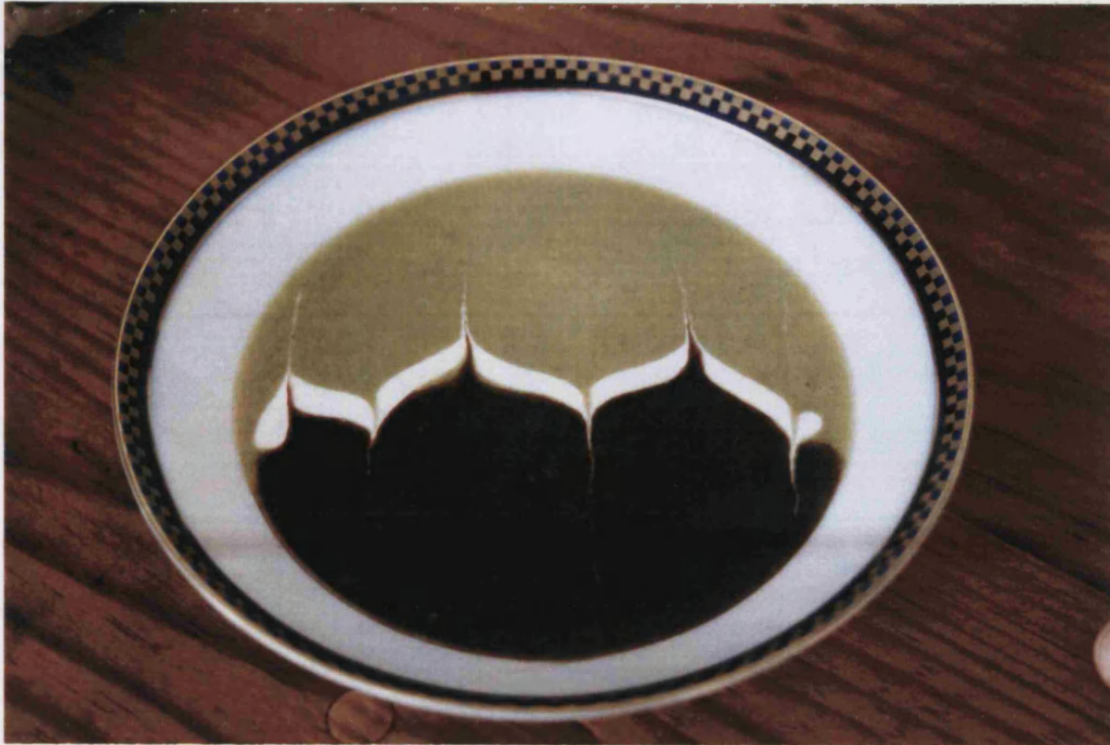
## 2.6 Conclusion: the meaningfulness of food

Food carries meaning and foodstuffs can be social or cultural symbols. My aim here is to illuminate some of the deeply symbolic meanings of food by focusing on the preparation of dishes, rather than on direct metaphorical connections between foodstuffs standing for other things. I follow Gell's theory 'to explore a domain in which "objects" merge with "people" by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons and persons *via* things' (1998: 12, orig. ital.) What better domain, therefore, can this framework be extended to than to food and eating, wherein social settings exist for people to eat together, making social relations between persons via the meal, and with the food literally 'merging' with these persons as they eat it. In this way, neither the artwork and the ideas and meanings surrounding it, nor the social relations that are generated, are ignored. '[T]he anthropology of art cannot be the study of the aesthetic principles of this or that culture, but of the mobilization of aesthetic principles (or something like them) in the course of social interaction' (4).

Thus I avoid discussion of semiotic relations such as corn with blood or chiles with penises (in *albur*). Instead, my research focuses on the meanings of interrelating cultural forms – the corpus of cuisine, women’s domestic and extradomestic roles, and social interaction and hospitality in fiesta and quotidian occasions. Thinking of food as art which is based on action (Gell 1998) allows for using Nancy Munn’s conception of ‘meaning’ that is not static: ‘actors construct this meaningful order in the process of being constructed in its terms’ (1986: 6). What Mexican cooking actually appears to ‘mean’ is a harmonious family and socio-cosmological life. Women do the cooking, and the cuisine demands a certain discipline and lifestyle which partly structures the daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly timetables of women as well as men.

By nature of being artistic, cooking is creative. This means that it is not a pre-determined, externally controlled activity. It *is* controlled, but the one in control is the artist, or the cook, herself. Thus, cooking is an activity which depends upon creative liberty, and this liberty extends beyond the walls of the kitchen. In pursuit of culinary ideals, women (and culinary professionals, including *barbacoieros*) are willing to make sacrifices which others may not understand. It may seem irrational for a family to hold large-scale fiestas when there is not enough money to finish building the house. Or it may seem to be too much effort for a woman to spend two days preparing maize and fillings to make a few hundred *tamales* for the family when it is also possible to buy the dough for *tamales* already prepared. Easier or cheaper alternatives seem to be unacceptable when superior flavours are the goal and this goal is within reach.

In pursuit of this goal, women also have license to move beyond their restricted spaces, and they have the autonomy to make important decisions for their family’s social life. Also, a work of culinary art can act as a trap, attracting others to the food and to the cook, securing a husband, actively mediating between social members to make (proper) social interaction possible. Thus, with their (proper) cooking, women exert power over their men, their families, their communities, society. With this in mind, it is possible to explore a cuisine, in this case, Mexican, through the technical processes of cooking, as well as the technical processes of social life and social reproduction. In short, using the perspective of cooking as art, this thesis is about the social relational matrix surrounding the achievement of flavour and the development of cuisine.



3 Black bean purée marbled with cream of chile poblano soup, prepared by Chef Ricardo Muñoz as a first course, Comedor Ejecutivo, Torre de Rectoría, UNAM.



4 Frying a stuffed chile in its egg batter (*capeado*), prepared by Chef Ricardo Muñoz.

## Mexican cuisine and Milpa Alta in context

When I was in Mexico, I found food (cuisine) and eating (gastronomy) to be subjects of serious concern. In this chapter I provide background on the cuisines of Mexico in general, largely drawing from what I learned in the centre of the city among chefs, students and researchers of Mexican gastronomy. Yet here I would also like to focus the discussion on Milpa Alta since the data I collected prior to my stay in Milpa Alta mainly served as thorough preparation for the culinary life that I encountered there, and on which I have developed my argument.

After the usual introductions, the first thing asked about me when I was brought to anyone's home in Mexico was invariably, 'Does she eat chile?' No one thought to ask whether or not I could eat a lot or if I ate meat or fish or vegetables. The second question was usually, 'And does she eat *tortillas*?'

Along with beans, chiles and corn (most commonly in the form of *tortillas*) are the basis of Mexican cuisine. Many people subsist on little more than these three ingredients. Having said this, several varieties of each exist and even during prehispanic times, they were known to have been prepared in a number of ways in order to make them palatable or even edible.<sup>1</sup> The Aztecs of central Mexico had military and political power over other groups in the region from whom they demanded tribute, mainly of foods, which added variety and breadth to their diet with comestibles that they did not grow themselves. Not all indigenous groups were equally affluent, but the availability of various foods impressed the conquistadors who came and saw the great markets of Tlatelolco, where all sorts of plants, animals and insects were being sold for food, as supplements to the basic diet of corn, beans and chiles. Spanish sources of the period attest to an abundance of foodstuffs (especially Sahagún 1950-1982 [1590]), but Sonia Corcuera (1981) points out that the raw ingredients were still limited, so the variety of foods recorded by Sahagún was actually a result of culinary expertise.<sup>2</sup> The foods still boiled down to being variations of chiles, *tortillas* and *tamales*. Nevertheless, without question there was creativity, imagination, culinary art and a search for sensual, or gastronomical, pleasures (30).

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<sup>1</sup> See Sophie Coe's brilliant book, *America's First Cuisines* (1994). See also Muñoz, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> 'The culinary merit is perhaps more if one considers, analysing the texts carefully, that the variety [of foods] was not as great as it first appears at first sight' (Corcuera 1981: 29, my trans.).

The gastronomy of Mexico continues to be based on corn (maize), beans and chile, and with the addition of ingredients and cooking methods which were introduced during the Spanish colonial period, the repertory of Mexican cuisine expanded further.<sup>3</sup> Cuisines evolve as cooks experiment with new ingredients and learn new ways to process and combine their raw materials for different occasions and effects. Those flavours which are favourable are repeated and remembered, and culinary knowledge and expertise grows. As described in Mexico, cuisine is ‘a living body in permanent process of transformation’.<sup>4</sup>

When Cortes arrived in Mexico, there was agricultural abundance. The Aztecs had sophisticated farming techniques (*chinampas* and *milpas*) and more sophisticated gastronomy. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1500-1582 [1590]), a Franciscan friar who came to Mexico in the sixteenth century, meticulously collected material to describe the Aztec (Náhuatl) way of life, including everything that they ate. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, there were no pigs, cows, chickens or sheep in Mexico. Neither were there onions, garlic, coriander, cinnamon, cloves, nor many other herbs and spices which are widely used in Mexican cookery today. Milk and its products were unknown, as were cooking methods using fats, such as frying. The diet of the ancient Aztecs was largely based on maize and supplemented with beans. They also ate turkeys, fish, small game, insects and a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, pulses, seeds, tubers, wild mushrooms, plants and herbs that they collected or domesticated for food use.

With such a rich gastronomic history, it therefore may sound odd that many Mexicans nowadays seem to believe that their food is limited to being extremely hot, spicy, and generally indigestible to non-Mexicans. Non-Mexicans might add that the food is greasy, heavy, basically unpalatable. Once in Mexico, however, and also from reading cookbooks which document the actual regional cooking, travellers and aficionados find that Mexico still has a rich, varied, digestible, even delicious, cuisine. There are subtle as well as forceful flavours, ranging from the simplicity of ingredients best eaten raw (like *pápaloquelite* or small *avocados criollos*, whose skin is edible and tastes subtly of anise) to complex stews or preparations made of dozens of ingredients (like *moles* and stuffed chiles). As Diana Kennedy, grande dame of Mexican cookery writing, wrote (1989: xiii):

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive compilation of papers on different aspects of the cultural/culinary influences between the Old and New Worlds, see Long 1996. For a lighter account, see Sokolov 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Marco Buenrostro, from a talk in Mexico City’s Universum, 29 September 1997.

The foods of regional Mexico are in a gastronomic world of their own, a fascinating and many-faceted world, but alas, far too many people outside Mexico still think of them as an overly large platter of mixed messes, smothered with a shrill tomato sauce, sour cream, and grated yellow cheese preceded by a dish of mouth-searing sauce and greasy, deep-fried chips.

Kennedy, as well as other cookbook authors, most of them non-Mexican (Bayless 1987, Gabilondo 1986, Kraig and Nieto 1996, Zaslavsky 1995, among others) have worked hard to dispel the idea that the foods of Mexico are anything like the food of popular *taco* and *enchilada* restaurant chains. To illustrate what the food you might find in Mexico is like, an example may be helpful. There is a traditional soup from the central region known as 'squash blossom' or '*milpa* plantation soup', '*sopa de flor de calabaza*' or '*sopa de milpa*'. The soup is made of the products of the *milpa*, that is, with fresh maize kernels, squash blossoms, the herb *epazote*, poblano chiles, and sometimes *nopales*, green beans, and *huitlacoche* (black corn fungus). Sometimes the soup is thickened with *masa* (nixtamal), dough for making *tortillas*. It can be encountered in anybody's home, but recently it is also served in posh restaurants serving *nueva cocina mexicana* (Mexican *nouvelle cuisine*).

In many parts of the country, and especially in Mexico City, there are different types of Mexican cookery. Apart from the regional divisions, another way to classify the different available food is as follows: there is home food, *comida casera*; traditional and innovative restaurant food, *cocina mexicana tradicional* and *nueva cocina mexicana*; and street food, *antojitos* (or *comida callejera*). There are also simple eateries or cafes which serve home-style food (*comida casera*) which are called *fondas*. The number of restaurants serving Mexican cuisine has been rising in the last five or ten years, directly related to the growing interest in reclaiming a sense of what is Mexican, and an awareness that one thing that they can own as uniquely theirs is their cuisine.<sup>5</sup>

Chef Ricardo Muñoz described his country and its cuisines, saying, 'In Mexico we cook tradition'. I am sure that most Mexicans would agree with him. Stories and flavours of the past are reproduced in Mexican kitchens, and culinary knowledge, like other cultural knowledge, is passed down from mother to daughter, from family to family. Most people who cook are women who willingly spend most of their waking

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<sup>5</sup> National pride and identity are qualities which a people's cuisine can sometimes help determine. See Pilcher 1998, Appadurai 1988, Brown and Mussell 1985.



hours toasting nuts and seeds, roasting, peeling and grinding chiles, and some pat out their *tortillas* by hand. The rest of the things they do each day are fit in around the time that they take to prepare and eat their meals.

### 3.1 Perceptions of Mexican cuisine

**Mexican cuisine is something like a historical novel  
which has a gorgeously wanton redhead on its dust jacket.**  
- Richard Condon. *The Mexican Stove*. 1973: 13.

As soon as a foreigner expresses an interest in Mexican food, he or she immediately is invited to someone's home, to visit an aunt known for her cooking, or at least to go out for *tacos* or *quesadillas* in the street. Mexican hospitality (like in many other cultures) reveals outstanding generosity and the focus on being well-fed. It is an arena for expressing love and care for others. Women often make sure that everyone in the house is well-fed even if she herself is left hungry or if she is feeling tired or ill. Sharing food is considered polite and proper behaviour, and offering food that she has prepared can be thought of as a means of expressing her offering of herself.<sup>6</sup> '[T]he essence of Mexican hospitality is to socialize with an epic-scale family of relatives and friends. It is true not just of the wealthy families, but from one end to the other of the social scale' (Martínez 1992: 69).

Even without showing particular interest in food, foreigners are readily invited to taste local delicacies and to be overfed.<sup>7</sup> In Mexico, many people take food very seriously, even if they are not culinary professionals. They are proud of their regional cuisines, and even people who do not cook enjoy talking at length about what to eat, which foods go well together and where to find good food. It always impressed me that each person I met always had an anecdote or recipe when food became the topic of conversation, which was rather often. Each recipe, aroma, flavour, fruit, readily came with a story, rooted in tradition, history and legend.

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<sup>6</sup> This is also related to sex, as will be explained in chapter five. Food and sex are the strongest human desires, and these are ideally fulfilled in the relation between husband and wife. More generally, outside of marriage, a rejection of food is a rejection of the host or cook. Yadira told me that one day her four-year-old daughter was annoyed with her and she told Yadira that her soup was watery, had no taste, and that all the food turned out horrible and insipid. She knew that this would be the easiest way to hurt Yadira's feelings, but rather than get upset at the attack, Yadira told me that she just had to laugh, because she was impressed at how her daughter could pick up on this sensitive issue at such a young age.

<sup>7</sup> For an amusing account of overfeeding and Mexican hospitality, see Condon and Bennet 1973: 9-12.

While making *mixiotes* for one party where they expected a hundred guests, all the women in Don Arturo's household, from teenage to old-age, gathered around the table to help. They reminisced about certain meals served during specific occasions, and each person remembered who or whose mother it was who had prepared this or that dish. They even compared it to who had done it better for another fiesta, or who regularly makes it well. Speaking of fiesta food eventually led to discussing *mole*, the quintessential celebration dish. In Milpa Alta almost all women make their own *mole* from scratch. The reason they do so is for the sake of quality control. Commercial ones, they told me, are stored where rats may run, and they throw in the stems of the chiles, instead of discarding them. When not done properly, the flavour is marred and cannot compare with what is made at home.

Most people have vast culinary knowledge which they never write down. They know how to make certain dishes or how to combine foods because of repeated practice, or from talking with one another. Sometimes seeing a certain fruit, receiving a specific type of cured meat, or finding wild mushrooms may spark a person's memory. Once I had mentioned that I had been to the main market of Mexico City, *La Merced*, and had seen egg-laying hens for sale there. They were cut open down the middle and their unlain eggs were on display. These unlain eggs are called the *huevera* and my friends in Milpa Alta were able to tell me of different ways of preparing them. Miguel proceeded to relate to me how his mother would kill hens and save the blood and tripe to cook with the *huevera*, the recipe of which he described in detail. Doña Margarita and Primy told me how they would usually make *tamales* with them, and they soon ordered an egg-laying hen from the butcher and prepared the *tamales de huevera* for my next visit.

Another time, Yadira came home very excited because a work colleague had given her a present of *calostro de vaca*, the curds made from the colostrum of a cow. This first milk was difficult to acquire, and because of its rarity few people knew that they could be eaten. Her friend had recommended that she cook it with onion, *epazote*, and green chile, but Yadira had never eaten *calostros* prepared in this way. She recounted to me how her mother used to prepare them sweet like *chongos zamoranos*, but she tried her friend's suggestion and found the savoury *calostros* delicious. Like anyone else, she was not averse to trying new methods and new things. Not everyone strictly follows recipes when cooking. When it is necessary to do things quickly, people improvise with the food they have at hand, with a little imagination. 'It is not because

we want to stop following traditions’, it was explained to me, ‘it is so that we can use up what is in the fridge’.

### **The cultural significance of chiles**

Among the three main ingredients in Mexican cuisine —corn, beans and chile— the most culturally meaningful of the three is the chile. ‘Food and cuisine can characterize a culture, and ours has been and continues to be characterized by our daily and widespread consumption of chiles.’ (Muñoz 1996: Foreword). In Mexico, chiles are used primarily for their distinct flavours, and not only for their heat. It is in Mexico where the most extensive variety of chiles is used. In their green, ripe or dried states they have different flavours which are cooked or combined for different effects. Chef Ricardo Muñoz, who is known as an authority on Mexican cookery, wrote (1996: 10, my trans.):

The chile is the heart and soul of Mexican food. To each broth or stew that does not contain chile, we add some hot salsa at the table. A very complex dish begins by roasting and/or grinding chiles, and it is the chile that gives the peculiar and definitive accent to many meals. It is the ingredient that can determine the flavor of a dish.

Some writings on Mexican cooking insist that the ancient Mesoamerican victuals were based on a holy triad of corn, beans and squash. In ancient and present-day Mexico this triad appears to have survived, except that with the exclusion of the chile, it fails to adequately describe Mexican cuisine. Food historian Sophie Coe (1994: 38-39) asserts that:

This triad was invented by foreigners and imposed on the high cultures of the New World, and the proof of this is to be found in the omission of chile peppers, which the outsiders viewed as a mere condiment, while the original inhabitants considered them a dietary cornerstone, without which food was a penance.

This attitude of the Spanish conquistadors is analogous to the anthropological treatment of seasonings (as mentioned in chapter two).

The possible reason why squash has prominence is because of the traditional style of planting cornfields. Since beans and squash are intercropped between the lanes of maize, it is clear that these three crops are basic foodstuffs in the Mexican diet. This view is valid, but limited in perspective, because any Mexican interested in eating would place the chile

above the squash in a list of priorities for the dining table. The power of the chile in this Mexican 'culinary triangle' is wonderfully described by Zarela Martínez, a New York restaurateur, who enthuses that:

Chile is history. It has outlasted religions and governments in Mexico. It is part of the landscape, literally.... It belongs to the *holy trinity* that has always been the basis of our [Mexican] diet: corn, beans, and chile. Without each other, none of the three would be what it is. Corn is an incomplete protein, beans are difficult to digest. Together they would be good basic sustenance, but hopelessly monotonous. Chile makes the gastric juices run for a dinner of beans and *tortillas*. It also provides the vitamins they lack, especially vitamins A and C. The combination of the three makes a nutritionally balanced meal. It's magic. (1992: 218, emphasis added)

It is true that Mexican cuisine uses many kinds of chiles in diverse ways, too numerous to list here,<sup>8</sup> and chiles are more significant in Mexican life than in their use as flavouring for food.<sup>9</sup> Janet Long, who wrote on the cultural significance of chiles in Mexican societies, further states that in Mexico

Labourers as well as bankers enjoy chiles and consume them daily. They are the common denominator among the social classes, which forms the base of national identity. The act of consuming certain foods or condiments may be a means of defining a cultural group. It serves the same function as the regional costume or language – it identifies a person as a member of a cultural group. (1986: 4, my trans.)

Diana Kennedy echoes Bartolomé de las Casas who wrote in the sixteenth century that without chiles Mexicans did not believe they were eating, 'Indeed the *chile* has played such an important role in the economic and social life of the country that many Mexicans feel their national identity would be in danger of extinction without it' (Kennedy 1989: 460).

### **One more comment on food as art in Mexico**

As I have explained in the previous chapter, it is in common consciousness in Mexico for cuisine to be thought of as art, and cooks as artists. In casual conversation, as well as in published material on Mexican cuisine, cookery is frequently labelled as an

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<sup>8</sup> For an idea of the variety of uses of chiles in Mexican cuisine, see Muñoz forthcoming, sections on chiles; Andrews 1984; Kennedy 1989: esp. 459-484; Bayless and Bayless 1987: esp. 33-49, and 328-338; van Rhijn 1993, to name a few.

art, and Mexican cuisine is considered as a particularly fine art in relation to other cuisines. Not only this, the Mexican cuisine at issue is the traditional everyday food, not food exclusive to very wealthy homes and restaurants. This is exemplified in the uses of the two most important ingredients of Mexican cuisine, corn and chile. 'The cooking of corn in Mexico with all its elaborations and ramifications is, and always has been, within the realm of the highest culinary art, beyond that of any other country' (Kennedy 1989: 4).

This is particularly the case for those who investigate Mexican cuisine and with reference to the local traditions of the majority of the population. 'The imagination at work in the use of local ingredients means that eating is not the domain of the rich in Mexico. Culinary tradition here is really peasant food raised to the level of high and sophisticated art' (Cowal 1990: 1-2). Looking at any of the recently published books on Mexican cooking will convince any reader that the Mexican cuisine of the masses is as complex and sophisticated as those better known internationally, like the French and Chinese. The basis of Aztec cooking was developed to high art, and by the nineteenth century 'Mexican cooks sought the essence of their art not in formalized techniques but in popular traditions' (Pilcher 1993: 234). It is these popular traditions which are the culinary techniques and gastronomic knowledge that have been passed down the generations from the family kitchen.

Victoria Cowal's work on the living culinary traditions of Mexico shows how cuisine has been important in Mexican history, and she traces its development and growth. She wrote (1990: ii),

Out of all the incredibly rich traditions that weave their way throughout the story of Mexico, the one that has survived the most intact is its culinary one. Cooking is a manifestation of the history, culture and art of Mexico and has been since the days when the development of agriculture first allowed the people to form communities and therefore dedicate their energies to higher pursuits than the struggle for their daily food.

This is not to say that a discussion of Mexican cuisine is a study of affluence. The richness of Mexican gastronomy is popular and accessible to most people in the country. Those who trust Diana Kennedy's great culinary knowledge of Mexico have been convinced of this. She has travelled throughout the country collecting recipes

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<sup>9</sup> See Long-Solis 1986, and also Coe 1994, Lomeli 1991, Martínez 1992, Muñoz 1996, among others.

from people of all economic classes. From the beginning of her publication career, she has always stressed the importance of understanding ingredients and learning authentic cooking methods, because 'this, with its strong peasant roots, is the *haute cuisine* of Mexico and as much time and trouble should go into its preparation as into that of any intricate French dish' (1990: 3).

Choosing to define Mexican cuisine as art was not an automatic or consistent idea over the years.<sup>10</sup> It has been easier for twentieth century foreigners to say this than it has been for foreign settlers to Mexico from the time of the Spanish Conquest. Pilcher (1998, 1993) described how wealthy Spanish criollas would secretly eat *tamales* and other Mexican snacks because they enjoyed the flavours but did not want to let anyone know that they were eating these sensual Indian foods. Among the upper classes it was almost considered sinful to enjoy the aphrodisiacal flavours of the native cuisines (1998: 55-7). This attitude appears to have deterred few from changing their eating habits, however. The culinary traditions of the colonials mixed with those of the natives, resulting in what some have called a *mestizo* or creole cuisine. 'Ironically, this cuisine of sublime blasphemies was elevated to art by the sixteenth century nuns who experimented with pagan New World flavors while the Inquisition raged outside their convent walls. More than four centuries later, proper schoolmarms ... passed this style on to a new generation of women' (Valle and Valle 1995: 41).

Describing the flavours of Mexican cuisine as sensual or sublime hints at the correlation between food and ideas about love, discussed in the section that follows.

### **3.2 Food and love**

The point about food and love in Mexico is that all kinds of people explicitly relate them to one another. The kind of love they are talking about is not just romantic, nor is it just a love of eating. When people talk of love, *amor*, they refer to many facets of love, which are conceived of as necessary for producing good food.

This is not something that is unique to Mexico, I am sure. If pressed, good cooks from any culture might say that the reason they cook well is because of some kind of love. A statement like this cannot always be taken literally, although it may be tempting to do so. This love may be interpreted as an affection for the people who will be eating,

or as a desire to eat well. It may be that a good cook treats ingredients in a particular, loving way, to bring out each ingredient's best qualities. This depends on an interest in understanding each foodstuff well, and how it reacts with others. It involves understanding the history of a dish or an ingredient, and knowing how or why certain things are used together, what 'marries well' or not. It may also be that a good cook cares about following a recipe properly, which could be called a sort of love of cooking. Also, there is an easy correlation between food and romance. Wooing couples of several cultures often practice courtship or romance with private meals (out or in) as preludes to other things.

So relating food with love in Mexico is not so unique, but it is the expression of it which I believe to be pertinent. A young banker once tried to explain to me his relationship to food, saying, '*La cocina mexicana es para él que siente, él que ama*', 'Mexican cuisine is for he who feels, he who loves'. There are three types of orgasms, he told me—the carnal, the spiritual, and the gastronomical—and these three are encapsulated in *mole*. This comment may sound exaggerated, and I was unable to elicit a clear explanation from him, but my banker friend was not the only person I met who talked of food in this manner. It also appears that you need not be born Mexican in order to feel so strongly about their cuisine. Richard Condon (1973: 3), by far the most effusive writer on Mexican cuisine, described it as

... the most exalted food ever to appear in the Western Hemisphere, ... it becomes evident, when the glorious plunge is taken, that to cook and eat Mexican food is to celebrate sensuality in every great chamber of this textured, perfumed, delicious, beautiful, and memorable gastronomic antiquity.

Mexican food is an aphrodisiac which excites the passion for living. It courts, seduces, ravishes, then cherishes all five senses (as well as the sense of most worthy accomplishment) by treating each as if it existed alone, as if all satisfaction were dependent upon this one sense, while it orchestrates all five into complex permutations of sensation.

The only way to understand this is to try cooking and eating Mexican food. From my own experience, before ever having been to Mexico, reading traditional Mexican recipes intimidated me. I had to dedicate myself to learning about the cuisine and the people before I felt confident to put together a complete Mexican meal. Some

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<sup>10</sup> Defining what is 'Mexican' has been hard enough (see Pilcher 1998, Juárez 1993, Laudan and Pilcher 1999).

cookbooks suggest sample menus or traditional accompaniments, which are helpful, but this does not compare with having the experience of cooking and eating in Mexico with Mexican people to give you a sense for the cuisine. The most well-known US chef who specialises in Mexican cooking, Chef Rick Bayless, takes his restaurant staff to Mexico every year so that they can experience the cuisine first-hand. Since he respects Mexican culture and cuisine highly, he considers it necessary to stay in touch with the country to be able to better reproduce the traditional cooking back in Chicago. For him, as discussed further below, this attention is the most that a restaurant can do to approximate the love that emanates from home cooking.

In a way, the same can be said if you wish to cook well in any cuisine. You need to care enough to find out about proper techniques, as well as about the history and culture of the dish and the people. As Chef Ricardo says, 'You have to love *la tierra*', the land. 'You have to be involved with the culture'. Another Mexican chef, who herself does not specialise in Mexican cuisine, says that you need to be born with it in order to cook it properly, to understand and to reproduce it. This is why there are few good Mexican restaurants in Mexico and abroad, she says, 'because they are just chefs; they learn to reproduce the food – but not from home – without love'.

In Mexico, therefore, the correlation between food and love seems natural and obvious, in a deeper sense than may appear at first. When talking of Mexican dishes, both professionals and non-professionals, in Milpa Alta and elsewhere, specifically mentioned love as their special ingredient added to produce better food. They speak of it without being asked. During occasions when I have praised someone for their cooking, he or she has readily volunteered the secret, that the reason his or her food is good is because of love. The attention and care that goes into cooking well is most commonly defined as a form of love. Friends from different backgrounds have told me their culinary secret, saying, 'I cook with love', '*Yo cocino con amor*'. Chef Ricardo says this, and he also adds that he cooks with passion. And Chef Abdiel Cervantes told me that he is a lover of Mexican cuisine, '*soy un amante de la cocina mexicana*', and his success is because of his genuine fondness, '*cariño*', for Mexican cuisine.

I must add here parenthetically that I did not make a formal survey of people who were considered to be good cooks and what they claimed were their culinary secrets. In fact, I never asked anyone directly, 'what's your secret?' When I complimented people on their cooking, which I did often, the cook sometimes dictated me a recipe, and



sometimes said that her secret was 'love'. I recognised that this could be a clever culturally sanctioned means of hiding culinary secrets, but after further experience I decided that attributing their success in cooking to 'love' was a deliberate and apt conceptualisation of producing superior flavours in cooking. In addition, professional chefs were less prone to describing the source of their success as 'love'. They might talk of having a passion for food, in general, but they were more likely to relate their cooking skills to 'art' or to their being 'professional'. These people were generally the chefs who were not singled out as specialists in Mexican cuisine. Those chefs who were, like Chef Ricardo and Chef Abdiel did talk of 'love', each had profound childhood memories or training that influenced their cooking. They grew up cooking Mexican food, helping their mothers, who sold local food commercially or who often prepared food for large parties. In fact, Chef Abdiel was a 'self-taught' chef, who became successful in Mexico City without any formal culinary training.

To prepare basic Mexican dishes there are some laborious culinary techniques that need to be learned, preferably by demonstration and practice. Making raw *salsas* and different kinds of cooked or part-cooked *salsas* with fresh chiles or dried chiles require different methods and skills. To make the egg batter, *capeado*, for coating stuffed chiles, the technique is similar to making a soufflé. For another example, Yadira insists that it is better to use too much oil to fry rice well before adding water or broth, even if you must drain off the excess oil, rather than use too little oil and sacrifice the flavour and texture. Another friend, Toño, who used to cook for a *fonda* in Veracruz, showed me how he makes refried beans, *frijoles refritos*. It took him almost 45 minutes to fry and mash onions with the *frijoles de olla*, boiled beans. He said that he learned to cook by watching his sister cooking as he grew up. Though she did not set out to teach him to cook, he loved to watch her, and he noticed how she respected food, and that it is important to allow foods to take their own time to reach their optimum points.

Since traditional Mexican cooking techniques are quite involved, it is not uncommon for a cook to spend most of the day preparing the day's meals. Various complex and specific techniques need to be mastered, and much effort and time is needed to prepare almost anything that people eat daily. Before industrialization (and now, in some households, in spite of industrialization), women had to spend several hours a day boiling dried maize kernels, then grinding them on a basalt grinding stone,

*metate*, to make a soft dough before patting them out into flat round cakes, *tortillas*, and baking them. Sauces had to be prepared with the stone mortar and pestle called the *molcajete* and *tejolote*. The grinding action of the stones produces a more even, textured *salsa* than an electric blender, which slices, rather than grinds, the ingredients, making a choppy and more watery sauce. Most people I came across in Mexico would still insist that a *salsa* made in the *molcajete* tastes better than one made in a blender. Some restaurants even serve *salsas* from *molcajetes* in order to show their dedication to achieving the ideal flavour. This is one reason why a sincere interest in cooking, in the flavours, the raw materials, and the finished dishes, is necessary to cook well. As aptly expressed in one cookbook, ‘The pervasive fact about Mexican food is that it is not only for people who like to eat; it is, even more so if such a thing were possible, for people who like to cook’ (Condon and Bennet 1973: 16).

One friend of mine who studied Mexican gastronomy explained to me that Mexican cuisine could never truly be accurately or well transferred to a professional restaurant kitchen. Mexican cuisine requires an emotional investment from the cook, and casual observation reveals that careless cooks produce careless results. ‘Mexican cuisine is very personal, very human. [When cooking] you are always thinking of your family or of the person for whom you’re cooking. When you remove the personal aspect from Mexican cuisine its flavour changes; it cannot be commercialised’ (Ricardo Bonilla, personal communication).

Chef Ricardo tried to explain to me his idea of love when cooking Mexican food: ‘You don’t cook just for the hell of it; there’s something to transmit through the food. It is something very very personal, so hard to explain that the only way to express your feelings is through action.’ He continued that ‘Every single thing you do in the pot, you do because it has a reason.’ When a *salsa* comes out very hot, *muy picosa*, the explanation often given is that the cook was angry or that she lacked love. When the *salsa* is watery, the cook was feeling lethargic, lazy or dispirited, *flojera*, *sin ánimo*, *sin amor*. As Chef Ricardo always emphasised, the emotional state of mind of the cook is always revealed in the outcome of the cooking.

Cooking with love was Chef Ricardo’s favourite topic of discussion. ‘*La comida es una verdadera manifestación del amor*’, he said, ‘Food is a true manifestation of love’. He explained that when you truly love someone, not necessarily in a romantic sense, with pleasure you might say, ‘*Te voy a cocinar un mole para tu cumpleaños*’, ‘I will make you a *mole* for your birthday’. It is a way to assure your friend that you will

provide the best for him or her. Ricardo emphasised the Mexican saying that a woman catches a man via his stomach, *a un hombre se enamora por el estómago*, or *un hombre se conquista por el estómago*. Saying, '*Te voy a cocinarte algo*', 'I will cook something for you', means '*te quiero mucho*', 'I love you very much', but not in a sexual sense. A cook '*invests*' many hours to preparing food for others, he added (orig. emph.). It is a way of expressing how much you love someone, because all dishes denoted as special take a very long time to prepare. This is why the time it takes to prepare it is an 'investment'; it is an investment in the social relationship between the cook and the intended eater (recipient). Cooking with love combines the pleasure of cooking with the pride of culinary knowledge and the sentiments that are transmitted to the eaters.

It was stressed to me by several others that it is this personal aspect which is vital to understanding Mexican cuisine, both for cooking and for eating. Another student of gastronomy told me that her greatest complaint about many publications on Mexican cuisine is that they are recipe books with few explanations. Descriptions of how and why the recipe came about or is used in this way for a particular occasion, in a particular place or the feelings and choices that are involved in the preparation, the positioning of the people who are cooking and eating; these are all part of Mexican cookery, and ought not to be edited out. What Mexican people eat signifies much more than filling their stomachs (Fabiola Alcántara, personal communication). Specific flavours and dishes have meanings and memories, and these sometimes are highly personal, and may reveal cultural traditions. As Marion Trutter (1999: 9) wrote, 'To savor a nation's culinary customs is to experience the unfolding of an entire culture'.

On 2 September 1997, I attended a festival of Mexican cuisine held at the cookery school, Ambrosia, in Mexico City. There, restaurateur and cookbook writer, Chef Rick Bayless, gave a talk on his ideas about Mexican cuisine and how to translate it for use in restaurants outside of Mexico. He said that to properly cook 'authentic' Mexican food, it is necessary to cook with the passion, security (*confianza*), and the generous spirit of Mexican cuisine. In his speech, exalting the traditional regional cuisines of Mexico, he also mentioned the impossibility of making real Mexican food in restaurants. The flavours of Mexico cannot be fully achieved unless the human factor is there, but failing that, attention to top quality ingredients and meticulous workmanship may compensate.

Home cooking must be transferred to the restaurant kitchen, and it must be part of the curriculum in cooking schools, the way it is, instead of trying to copy the European model. It must be prepared properly from the beginning, as it is done in your grandmother's home; but in restaurants, of course, without the [added ingredient to finish the dish], the *sazón* of love. Therefore, the best ingredients must be used. To imitate other more famous cuisines will not do.<sup>11</sup>

When he mentioned love, he called it a '*sazón*'. The word *sazón* literally means flavour, but is used to connote a special personal flavour which individual cooks contribute to the food to make it come out well. This word is used to explain why no two cooks ever produce the same flavour, although they may follow the same recipe or were taught to cook by the same person. '*Cada persona tiene su sazón*', every person has his own personal touch. It is something inexplicable that cannot be learnt, but must arise from within, from a person's heart. And that personal touch that is necessary for good Mexican cooking is love.<sup>12</sup>

Cooking with love implies showing respect for the food, for yourself, and for the eaters. When a woman says, 'I cook with love', she really means it, and observing what she does to achieve her culinary goal shows that love can be enacted or expressed in different ways. It can mean she will anticipate an event and slowly collect the ingredients she needs from different sources. It can mean she is willing to spend a lot of time to prepare the different ingredients separately, in its own time. It can mean she is willing to spend more than her weekly budget on food, or will buy a piglet several months before a fiesta so that she has time to fatten it up and be able to feed a hundred people. It can mean she cooks enough to have abundant leftovers so that several *itacates* can be given away to guests who could not attend the fiesta, or to give to those who did come whom she holds in high esteem.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The talk was in Spanish, and his exact words were, '*Hay que trasladar la cocina casera a la cocina restaurantera, y debe ser un currículo en las escuelas de cocina, tal y como es, en vez de tratar de copiar el modelo europeo. Deben prepararlos bien de principio, como en la casa de la abuela, pero en restaurante, claro, sin el sazón del amor. Entonces, debe utilizar los ingredientes mejores. Imitar las cocinas famosas no sirve*'.

<sup>12</sup> Both Primy and Chef Ricardo have curiously noticed that when they personally get involved in the cooking, using their hands (*mano, sazón*), their customers/diners somehow notice the difference. When they merely supervise the cooking, but do not have direct contact with the food, diners may still think the outcome is very good, but when they *are* in direct contact, diners sometimes comment on just how good the food turned out that day.

<sup>13</sup> Notions of love and notions of respect may be conflated, though they are not synonymous; showing your love for someone can sometimes be expressed as showing proper respect (further described in chapters five and six), just as serving *mole* to *compadres* and other honoured guests is a sign of respect.

Thus it seems that the kind of love necessary to cook Mexican food is an all-encompassing love. It involves both a cook's love for the people he or she is feeding, as well as a love for the cuisine and the foodstuffs he or she is preparing.<sup>14</sup> Aída Gabilondo, mother of Zarela Martínez, and author of *Mexican Family Cooking* (1986), also wrote about the importance of love for good cooking. She recalled the teachings of her mother who

was a loving cook: no rough stirring or pouring. She insisted that food resented being rudely handled and that finished dishes would show any mistreatment....

Years later when I started teaching cooking in my home town, I remembered her words, and when I wrote a recipe on the blackboard or dictated it to my students, I always ended the list of ingredients with the words, 'Sal, pimienta, y amor'. Salt, pepper, and love. (5)

That food must be respected and treated with love is an idea which still lives in many parts of Mexico, including parts of Mexico City like Milpa Alta. A good example of this is how to cook *tamales*. A *tamal* is a steamed bun made of coarse maize beaten with lard and enveloped in corn husks (or in other areas, banana leaves). *Tamales* are eaten for breakfast or as a snack for supper, on any occasion. There are many kinds of *tamales*: sweet ones, flavoured with fruits, and savoury ones, filled with meat or fish, with red *salsa*, green *salsa* or *mole*, or they have strips of roasted chile and onions, cheese, *nopales*, and many others. Without a filling, they are called *tamalates*, and are a traditional accompaniment to *mole*.

*Tamales* are also as essential to celebration as is *mole*. Preparing for a fiesta in Milpa Alta, families usually make at least two types of savoury *tamales* as well as some specifically for eating with *mole*. They either make *tamalates* or *tamales de frijol*, made of black beans and blue corn, or *tamales de alberjón*, with dried yellow peas and blue corn. One or two days before a celebration, the women of the extended family gather together to prepare the doughs and then to make the *tamales*. For small celebrations, a family makes at least 200 *tamales* because these are given away as well as eaten in large amounts during the days of the feasting.

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<sup>14</sup> All aspects of gastronomy require love, from the tilling of the soil, through to the sales to the cooking and eating. On markets in Mexico, Nancy Zaslavsky (1995: 1-2) wrote, 'From the covered marketplaces in major cities to once-a-week open-air markets in small towns, markets are the hub and heartbeat of their people. The people who sell their corn husks, their tiny wild avocados, and their red-skinned bananas are proud and passionate about their work. Let's face it, they're not making a fortune. What motivates them

There are certain rules which must be followed so that the *tamales* will cook properly. Firstly, the person who arranges the *tamales* in the earthenware pot or aluminium steamer may not leave the house until the *tamales* are cooked. He or she may or may not be a member of the family, but what is important is his or her presence in the house. The pot or steamer, called a *tamalera*, must also have its bow. This is a piece of corn husk which needs to be tied on the handle of the *tamalera*. Without it the *tamales* will not cook. Thirdly, no one in the house must get angry. If anyone in the house loses his or her temper the *tamales* will not set because they will be angry, as well. An angry *tamal* opens up or the lard drips out of the wrapping. To remedy this, the angered person has to spank the *tamalera* and then dance around it to make the *tamales* happy again. Another option would be to throw dried chiles into the fire so that their seeds burn, as the smoke emitted removes anger.<sup>15</sup> People in Milpa Alta swore that these methods were true, although no one could give me an explanation for them.

Diana Kennedy herself believes in these culinary methods. She said that you must sing to *moles* in the same way that you must talk to your plants.<sup>16</sup> The reason, she explained, is because the ancestors had more contact with food and so their wisdom must be respected. These practices must have come about because the ancestors had a deeper and more personal understanding of and relationship with their foodstuffs, and therefore were able to work out the best ways to achieve optimal flavours. Kennedy's outlook and attitude towards cuisine is more holistic than many other cookbook writers or culinary investigators, as she has built up an ecologically friendly oasis in her home in Michoacán. There she raises bees for honey and grows her own wheat, maize, mushrooms, and all types of plants from the whole country. Her love of the art of Mexican cookery eventually led to her greater understanding of and care for environmental issues, which, when put into practice, render superior culinary results.

### 3.3 *Mestizo* culture, *mestizo* cuisine

Thus far I have indicated some of the social embeddedness of Mexican cuisine, but further explanation is necessary. Mexican culture and cuisine are strongly linked to religion and the evident presence of native and foreign influences.

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is their love and respect for quality products, and they're determined to keep those traditional values alive in today's freeze-dried, shrink-wrapped world'.

<sup>15</sup> The ancient Aztecs used chile smoke as a punishment for naughty children (Coe 1994). They made them breathe it to remove their anger, as well (Clendinnen 1991: 53).

<sup>16</sup> This is from a talk she gave at the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana on 3 June 1996.

To understand Mexican culture you must see at first hand how the Catholic faith melded with a system of pagan beliefs to make a uniquely, truly Mexican religion. The same melding holds true for our distinctive cuisine. It is *mestizo* – ‘hybridized’, ‘of mixed blood’, a concept central to our identity – and it took time to develop. (Martínez 1992: 1)

This cultural mixture is actually more complex than just described, and has inspired countless works on the confusion that resulted from the unlikely and presumably incompatible combination of native (Indian) and Spanish. Perhaps the most prominent, and pertinent, are the writings of Octavio Paz, Roger Bartra, and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla.<sup>17</sup>

*The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Octavio Paz (1967) is one of the most influential analyses of Mexican *mestizo* culture, where he tried to define ‘*Mexicanidad/ Mexicanism*’. Paz argues that Mexican character is dominated by a feeling of solitude, a product of the confusing conditions of *mestizaje*. Mexicans wear different masks, putting on faces to hide not only their solitude, but also their fears and sense of inferiority. It is the colonial history of Mexico that has resulted in the collective inferiority which, in men, is manifested in *machismo* (exaggerated manliness and aggression) and stoicism. Two powerful images of women exist in Mexico, La Malinche and La Chingada. La Malinche is an Aztec woman who served as an interpreter for Cortés, and who later became his lover and bore his children. When Cortés tired of her, he abandoned her. She is the ultimate traitor. La Chingada is the victim of the violent rape of Mexico by the Spanish colonialists. She is the weak and passive mother of Mexican *mestizaje*. In their own ways, each were victims of the Spanish Conquest, and have given birth to the lost character of *mestizo* Mexicans.

In Roger Bartra’s (1987) point of view, he considers La Malinche and La Chingada to be one and the same, the violated mother of Mexican *mestizaje*. The Virgin of Guadalupe represents the other powerful maternal image in Mexico, but her image is not opposed to that of La Malinche. They are two faces of the same person, and they represent the duality that exists in Mexico. La Malinche is the ‘Great Pagan Prostitute’ and the Virgin of Guadalupe is the holy suffering mother. A dark-skinned Virgin, her image was taken from the Aztec goddess, Tonantzin, and reinterpreted by the Spanish as a Catholic virgin, in order to encourage conversion to Catholicism. Both in their own way are venerated and

representative of Mexican women (205-224). They are the mothers of Mexican men (or Mexican people) who are searching for their lost nation, or lost Eden.

Bartra argues that the image of *lo mexicano*, Mexican people, being inferior (and hopeless) only makes sense if *lo mexicano* is compared to an external and unreachable other, the European. Rather than hiding behind masks, *lo mexicano* could be better understood by using a different metaphor. He represents *mestizo* Mexico as an *ajolote*, which he calls the 'amphibian of miscegenation'. Native to Mexico, the *ajolote* is an unattractive myopic animal, rather similar in form to a tadpole, with eyes on opposite sides of its head, long feathery gills and very short legs. It reaches sexual maturity in its larval state, thus epitomizes a repressed potential for metamorphosis, for development. Some species of *ajolote* lack the hormone for metamorphosis, but when it is injected, an *ajolote* will develop into a salamander. Since it normally remains larval and reproduces itself without being fully grown, it is said to have perennial infancy.<sup>18</sup> The image conjured with the *ajolote* is of a nation of immature individuals, who may eventually self destruct, just as the real animal is nearing extinction. This is what Bartra considers to be a better symbol for Mexican national character. The *ajolote* is trapped in a 'cage of melancholy' whose only escape is the magical realism of literature. An *ajolote* is believed to let out a plaintive wail as it dies, not unlike the image of the melancholy *mariachi*, belting out a desperate song with all his strength.

Bartra criticises the 'mythical' image of *lo mexicano* which is an imaginary construction of a unified whole. It represents the dominant, imaginary character, rather than the more complex reality that exists. Part of the problem, he argues, has to do with Western conceptions of duality, the coexistence of and fundamental differences between urban/civilized and rural/primitive. Many 'civilized' people believe primitives, i.e. indigenous people, exist in a space without time. It is as if Western or civilized people have a linear, progressive time, and the rural, indigenous, primitive, have a vacuum of time. It is because of this that the rural ceases to progress, and tradition can be observed in this purgatorial timelessness. In fact, what is being observed is an imaginary ruralness, imposed by an imaginary dominant culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Some other works which investigate identity and *mestizaje* are Aguirre Beltrán 1979, Friedlander 1975, Pescatello 1973, and Sandstrom 1991.

<sup>18</sup> The ancient Aztecs associated the *ajolote* with the god Quetzalcoatl, because of its appearance like a plumed serpent. It was and still is eaten when it can be caught, thought to be particularly effective against respiratory illnesses, but it is now almost extinct. See Muñoz, forthcoming, for more details on *ajolotes*.



This idea of the 'imaginary Mexico' is the starting point of understanding Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's major work on Mexican national identity, *México Profundo* (1996 [1987]). Mexico is normally thought of as being a *mestizo* nation, as if all individuals were part Indian and part Spanish/European in race and heritage. Physically, however, urban *mestizos* are sometimes indistinguishable from rural Indians. This is because they are not physically different. Bonfil Batalla argues that rather than a cultural or physical mixture, what has occurred is a 'de-Indianization' of Indians, which he defines as 'a historical process through which populations that originally possessed a particular and distinctive identity, based upon their own culture, are forced to renounce their identity, with all the consequent changes in their social organization and culture' (17). What has been called *mestizaje*, 'mixture', is actually de-Indianization, that is, 'ethnocide' (24).

The real distinction between Indian and *mestizo*, therefore, is a recognition of the 'cultural patrimony' that encompasses the Indian cosmos. More than the use of autochthonous language, it involves a system of self-sufficiency and connection to land and community, in cyclical continuity of the social and political system. This is the *México Profundo*, the true, and deeply meaningful Mexico which actually exists and continues to propagate the cultural heritage that has been passed on since precolonial times. It exists in spite of the imposition of the dominant idea of what is the national character, the politically accepted, but imaginary, *mestizo*, Mexico. In fact, the process of *mestizaje* or cultural fusion that is supposed to have occurred in Mexico has never really happened. The existence, indeed the flourishing, of the Mesoamerican civilization has been denied since the arrival of the Spanish. Thought to have been obliterated by five hundred years of colonial domination, it is actually alive in the rural communities and in some Indian pockets of urban areas. It has been coexisting with the Western model, resulting in a cultural 'schizophrenia' to the point that there are many Mexicans who call themselves '*mestizo*' but fail to recognize that they are culturally and socially part of the *México profundo*.

Bonfil continues to convincingly outline how to recognize the underlying Indianness in many local communities, whose customs and practices belie the survival of prehispanic practices.<sup>19</sup> His work ultimately has a political aim to reconstruct Mexico, both socially and politically, by enforcing a cultural pluralism, which recognizes and empowers the diverse ethnic communities throughout the country. As a model for

social reform, his ideas may not be so viable, but for understanding the current social conditions of Mexico, his work stands out as insightful and undeniable. For the purposes of this study, it is useful to keep in mind his argument that the *mestizo* nature of Mexico was never fully achieved. This is not to say that it is impossible for *mestizaje* to occur. He makes clear that his position is that the cultural fusion in Mexico is possible, but premature as long as the existence of Mesoamerican lifestyles and civilization continues to be denied. Something similar can be argued for Mexican cuisine and gastronomy.

When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the sixteenth century, they raped and pillaged the nation, and made their own settlements, renaming the country as New Spain. There are various accounts of how the Spaniards were impressed with the beauty and abundance of the Valley of Mexico, and also of the feasts that the Emperor Moctezuma offered to them and ate himself. Cowal's unpublished study, *Food in the History of Central Mexico* (1990), further shows how the Spanish who came during the Conquest were only partially forced to adjust to the foods of Mexico (90-99). The settlers eventually accommodated themselves within the existing culture. 'After the Conquest was complete, each soldier got his own house and a native cook'. She continues that:

at first the civilization was too highly developed and the populace too numerous for the Spaniards to ignore the native cooking. Soldiers, used to a modest, bland diet of bread, mutton, lentils and a few vegetables, adapted to the Mexican diet, partly out of necessity and somewhat because of taste choice. (Cowal 1990: 93)

As the Spanish established themselves in New Spain, they also established firm roots for the Catholic church. The Spanish friars were the first to learn the local languages for the purposes of evangelization, and it is through their writings that we have any knowledge of the social and culinary systems of the precolonial period. Working with already existing local systems, both religious and political, the Spanish adapted their own religious rituals and demanded tribute, to control the natives. However,

In spite of the Spanish impositions, during this time nothing supplanted the basic Indian diet of corn, beans and chilies. Many of the products that were brought over had to be grown by the Indians for tribute....

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<sup>19</sup> See Descola (1994) for an ethnography of an Indian community in Peru, the Achuar. His study lends support and credence to Bonfil's concept a hidden Indianness.

They farmed these foods, especially wheat, for commerce, but for personal taste and cultural choice they stayed basically with their own food. (Cowal 1990: 97)

Within the convents, Spanish nuns had to learn to use the local products, as much of what they were used to cooking could not all be imported from Spain. The idea of an 'emerging *mestizo* cuisine' (Valle and Valle 1995: 62) or of 'baroque cuisine' comes directly from the convents.<sup>20</sup> There is no denying that there was a sharing of culinary influences which flourished during the colonial period. The convents were wealthy laboratories of gastronomic experimentation. 'The excesses and inventiveness of convent cooking reflected Mexico's diverse flora and fauna, the omnivorous appetites of its inhabitants, and, above all, the power and wealth of its religious orders' (63). Yet in spite of this, the basis of Mexican cuisine remained the same as it had always been, corn, beans and chiles. 'But among the Aztec elite maize appeared in so many forms that it is hard to imagine them suffering from the monotony which we envisage when told of a culture which has a single staple food and eats it every meal of every day' (Coe 1994: 113).

Given the sophistication of both the native and foreign colonial cuisines, the process of *mestizaje* is not a simple fusion of Indian and Spanish, therefore. Cowal points out that 'Spanish cooking was already a mixture when it got to the Americas. Eight centuries of Arab influence had left their mark' (1990: 90). What exists in Mexico is what Rachel Laudan defines as a Local Cuisine, made up of different components that:

have now blended together to form ... a new and coherent cuisine... That is, not by the gradual evolution of some original cuisine rooted in the soil (though that does happen) but by the shocks and changes of immigrants. ... Not just the Spanish but the French, the Lebanese, the Germans, the later Spanish refugees from the Civil War, the Mennonites, the Italians, have all had much more impact than the usual indigenous/colonial story would lead one to believe. (Rachel Laudan, personal communication)

Cristina Barros stated that Mexican cuisine is 90% indigenous and ten percent of other influences.<sup>21</sup> 'The most delicious cuisines are those with more indigenous influence'. She asserts that the indigenous cuisines of Mexico did not undergo the

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<sup>20</sup> On how *mestizo* Mexican cuisine came about, see also Valle and Valle 1995: 39-41.

<sup>21</sup> Cristina Barros is a published authority on Mexican cuisine. This is from a talk in Mexico City's Universum, 29 September 1997.

miscegenation that most people claim. There were few Spanish who arrived during the conquest, and they influenced the local cuisines, which integrated the new flavours and foodstuffs, but the bases remained Mexican.<sup>22</sup>

Taken from this viewpoint, and keeping in mind Bonfil Batalla's definition of the *México profundo*, it is possible to consider Milpa Alta to be an area of *México profundo* because of its traditions, the extensive farmlands, the vegetation and the low population density. The inhabitants are conservative and proud of their ability to maintain the ways of their ancestors, *como los de antaño*. 'In Milpa Alta there exists a lucky cultural renaissance that seeks to recover their indigenous and communal root' and this accounts for the 'cultural vitality' of the region (Gomezcésar 1992:12).

To throw a spanner in the works, Yadira pointed out to me matter-of-factly that the traditions can only be continued to be maintained while the community had enough money to spend, '*las tradiciones siguen mientras hay dinero*'. Without extra money for consumption, Milpaltenses would not bother to buy new costumes for the *chinelos* dances during carnival, or so many decorations and flowers for the Days of the Dead, or enough pigs, sheep or chickens to feed the hundreds who feast with them on *carnitas*, *barbacoa*, or *mole* during fiesta time.

### 3.4 Eating out

When a family does not eat at home in Milpa Alta, more often than not, they buy snacks (*antojitos*) in the market or on street corners, or they eat at other people's houses during fiestas (of which there are many). A few Milpaltenses told me, with some pride, that there are only two restaurants in Milpa Alta, and that these cater mainly for the outsiders (from Mexico City) who work in the municipality, rather than for locals. All other residents go home for their meals, or if they really wish to eat out, they travel to the centre of Mexico City. As for other entertainments, there is no cinema in Milpa Alta, either, although there is one small café called the 'Jarro Café' (as in 'Hard Rock Café', but with a *jarro*, a clay jar used like a mug, as its symbol).

It is strongly felt that in general, food prepared at home is better, and if food is bought ready prepared, the food of the *pueblo*<sup>23</sup> has better flavour. I once went to a

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<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Juárez (1993) argues that the bases of much contemporary Mexican cuisine are European.

<sup>23</sup> The word '*pueblo*' refers to a small town or village, usually in a non-urban context. In the case of Mexico City, which is made up of several residential districts, these are called *colonias* in the central, more urbanized areas, and in the edges of the city the divisions of the municipalities are called *pueblos*

*barbacoa* restaurant in the city, and I brought some of the leftovers to Milpa Alta with me. I had thought that the *barbacoa* that Primy and Alejandro made was much better, more flavourful and of higher quality, although the restaurant *barbacoa* was quite good. When we warmed it up and ate it, the whole family was unanimous in their opinion. The *barbacoa* was fine, but it just was not as good as what they made themselves at home. Primy's young son said that they must have used goat meat instead of lamb, and his grandmother agreed. Apart from this, they were also appalled at the price charged at the restaurant, which was double the price per kilo that they charged in their market stall. The meal concluded with the opinion that this was a commercial *barbacoa*, made for wealthy customers who did not eat it regularly. (Also note that these *barbacoa* restaurants offer entertainment with a town fiesta spirit, described in chapter four.)

In the centre of Mexico City there is a growing number of restaurants offering traditional Mexican cuisine as well as contemporary modifications of French culinary techniques merged with Mexican ingredients and cooking principles. This is what is known as *alta cocina mexicana* (Mexican haute cuisine) or *nueva cocina mexicana* (Mexican nouvelle cuisine). Professional cookery has become as fashionable and prestigious as it has become in the USA and the UK in the 1990s. The cooking schools in Mexico City are growing, and it is even possible to obtain a university degree in Gastronomy, which includes international cooking skills and culinary history, among other subjects. Moreover, the greatest interest amongst young students is in studying traditional Mexican cookery, recovering the recipes of their grandparents, and the remote ('authentic',<sup>24</sup>) recipes of the provincial towns, of the *pueblos*. There are many more Mexican food festivals aimed at wealthy urban *mestizos* than ever before, and more and more books are being published about 'real' Mexican food.

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(which may be further subdivided into *barrios*). Using the word '*pueblo*' to describe the residential area where you live actually has other connotations that living in a '*colonia*' does not. When you say that you come from a *pueblo*, this implies a connection with a community of people who share a common hometown. Most from the more central *colonias* of Mexico City are not quite as engaged with their neighbours and co-inhabitants in the way that those from the *pueblos* of Mexico City and other parts of the country are involved in one another's lives. Furthermore, one's life can easily be contained within the boundaries of one's *pueblo*, in spite of work-related movement and interaction with other parts of the city.  
<sup>24</sup> In a thought-provoking article, Rachel Laudan (2001) questions the meaning of 'authentic' cuisine. She argues that depictions of traditional recipes as rural and natural is romantic nostalgia, and that the foods we think of as traditional and authentic actually depend upon the modern, industrial, global economy that supporters of the 'authentic' criticise. (More generally speaking, see also Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.)

I had considerable contact with professional chefs in Mexico City, some of whom had trained in the Cordon Bleu in Paris or in the Culinary Institute of America in New York. Whether they were specialists of French cuisine or California cooking, they often talked about Mexican food, and of the new and exciting Mexican cookery that was emerging. However, in spite of their support of experimentation and fusion, they still had great appreciation of what they sometimes called the ‘simple’ food, the food of the *pueblo* or of the market. A great cocktail party could turn into a brilliant party if there are a few dishes of *quesadillitas* or *taquitos* (mini *quesadillas* or *tacos*) amongst the other *hors-d’oeuvres*, for instance. Another example related to me was when one chef made a complex green sauce that he was serving with duck in his restaurant which specialised in *nueva cocina mexicana*. He was not completely satisfied with his sauce so he asked Chef Ricardo for some advice on it. The latter suggested adding a bit of this and that, recommending other cooking tips. After following these suggestions, the resulting sauce was so much better that he called up Chef Ricardo right away to thank him and to ask him how he knew what to do. ‘I just told you how to make a traditional green *mole!*’ was his response.

Traditional cookery is always associated with a ‘traditional’ way of life, which is itself connected to the small towns, the *pueblos*, with their links to the land. Milpa Alta is such an area where proper cooking is all about proper eating, in the right social (and gastronomical) context, whether it is eating casually at home or when eating out (that is, in another’s home) for special celebrations.

### **3.5 Eating in**

Before focusing on Milpa Alta, I spent several months in the centre of Mexico City, learning about local cuisines, tasting everything. I wanted to try all the available fruits and vegetables, and to learn to cook what Mexican people ate at home. I was immediately impressed with the flavours of Mexico that I had never come across before my arrival. After meeting Chef Ricardo, who guided and taught me about the arts of Mexican cookery, my introduction to the cuisines of Mexico was intensified. He took me to different markets in the city, all his favourite street stalls, cafes and restaurants, and he introduced me to friends who took me into their homes and prepared all sorts of delicious meals for me.

One day Ricardo took me with him to the kitchen where he worked and told me he would prepare me a typical breakfast. We were having *chilaquiles*. He made a thin

*salsa* with tomatoes, onions, chiles and water, which he liquefied, poured into hot oil and let it simmer with a sprig of *epazote*. The day before he had cut up leftover *tortillas* into eight wedges and left them to dry overnight. That morning he deep-fried them to make *totopos* and left them to drain. When the *salsa* was ready, he tossed them in to coat them evenly and warm them up. He arranged a mound of the *totopos* onto each plate, topping them with thin slices of white onion, crumbled white cheese (*queso fresco* or *de canasto*) and a dollop of thick cream (*crema de rancho*, *crème fraîche*). He told me that he sometimes liked to put a bit of fresh coriander on top, but that it was not really necessary. We were ready to eat.

At first I stubbornly refused to believe that every Mexican family made some version of *chilaquiles* on any regular day. How could something so divine and laborious be everyday breakfast food? Eventually, after asking many people and later living in different Mexican households, I realised that it was true. Daily meals in Mexico could be elaborate and varied for no reason other than the pleasure of eating and savouring different flavours. Busy families made it a point to prepare delectable dishes for daily meals, even if there was little time to linger over them. This was emphasized to me when I lived in Milpa Alta, where I got to know people who were not culinary professionals, yet who delighted and even insisted on high gastronomic standards.

From my experience in Mexico City, cookery is considered as an art, and also thought of as a craft. It follows that we can think of cooking as artistic production, and specialised production of a certain dish can be thought of as artisanship. *Barbacoieros*, people who live off the production of *barbacoa*, are artisans or artists who specialise in producing a particular taste for a particular dish. Achieving this in the most pragmatic way allows them to conduct a business based on the production of this dish or object of art. Gell (1998) has demonstrated how the nature of an object of art is defined by its social use. As will be shown in the chapter that follows, *barbacoa* can be thought of as an art object whose preparation both defines and is defined by the social relations between the different people needed to prepare it and the projected consumers. Furthermore, in this chapter I hope to portray the daily pursuit of gastronomic quality in ordinary life by describing how a typical week might pass in the lives of *barbacoieros*.



5 *Mole poblano* with Mexican rice (*arroz rojo*), served in a restaurant in Mexico City.



6 *Barbacoa* as served in a restaurant, served on a maguey leaf, accompanied by green salsa and *salsa de chile pasilla*, *chicharrón*, *pápaloquelite*, coriander leaves, *antojitos*, *guacamole* and *consomé de barbacoa*.



## Barbacoa in Milpa Alta

*During my first extended visit to Milpa Alta, I stayed with the family of Kiko and Yadira, whose main means of livelihood was the production of nopales. Kiko and Yadira were both teachers in local elementary schools, but this seemed an occupation for the sake of dedication rather than of sustenance. The nopalera was their business, and one of the first things they suggested me to do was to accompany them one morning to harvest nopales. We got up before dawn so that we could cut the spiny cactus paddles before they were warmed by the sun. If they were too warm they would not last the rest of the day without refrigeration. The experience was so gruelling that I mentioned that I might prefer to make barbacoa my industry rather than growing nopales for a living. I said this was because I enjoyed cooking more than farming. 'Are you sure you know what you're saying?' Yadira queried as she observed my face.*

*'Well,' I added, a bit cautiously, 'I have never seen the whole process of preparing barbacoa, but I imagine it cannot be as painful as walking through narrow lanes of cactus picking the spiny paddles in the freezing cold...'*

*'No,' she agreed. 'You haven't yet seen the matanza [slaughter] and so you don't know what you're talking about.' So Yadira took me to pay a visit to Primy, who could tell me all about barbacoa.*

### 4.1 Eating barbacoa

The word *barbacoa* refers to a preparation of pit-roast meat which has been used since before the Spanish arrived in Mexico (Muñoz forthcoming). It is a slow cooking method for meat wherein whole animals are buried for several hours or overnight to cook in a pit lined with aromatic leaves and filled with hot coals and spices. In the central states the meat is flavoured with the fleshy leaves of the *maguey*. The meat typically used is lamb (*borrego*, usually one- or two-year-old sheep), pit-barbecued in a cylindrical clay- or brick-lined oven. Depending on the region and tradition, there are also *barbacoas* of rabbit, chicken, pork or goat (kid).<sup>1</sup> Since the whole animal is used, including the head, and because of its long, labour-intensive preparation and cooking process (described below), it is considered to be festive food, reserved for special

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<sup>1</sup> For a beautiful description of preparing *barbacoa* in Oaxaca, see Kennedy 1990:117-128.

celebrations or weekends. Whilst it is more commonly prepared as a cottage industry by families called *barbacoieros*, there also are restaurants in Mexico City which exclusively serve *barbacoa* with its traditional accompaniments.

These *barbacoa* restaurants offer a complete celebration with the meal. Urban families who avoid eating in the marketplace frequent these restaurants for family celebrations, such as birthdays or anniversaries. There is usually space for at least 400 diners, although smaller parties are welcome. A cultural show with dancing and singing of *ranchera* music gives the place the festive air of a *cantina* or countryside fiesta. Customers can order traditional snacks such as *gorditas* or *chalupitas* as their starters. Although these are *antojitos*, typically eaten in the streets, these restaurants offer them because a large part of their clientele rarely eat street food. Ordering them would be indulgent, however, because *barbacoa* is tasty and complete enough the way it is normally served and it requires little more to be satisfying.

The traditional way to eat *barbacoa* is to have a bowl of the *consomé de barbacoa*, a flavourful broth consisting of the meat drippings which have amalgamated with herbs and spices during the long cooking process in the pit. This is served with boiled rice and chickpeas stirred in, and the eater has the options of squeezing in a little lime juice and adding chopped onions, coriander leaves and *salsa* to mitigate the richness of this intense soup. It is usually eaten accompanied with *tacos* or *flautas* of the succulent meat. The *flautas* are usually served with a drizzle of green *salsa*, *crema espesa*, and a sprinkling of grated white cheese. There are *salsas* offered on the side, usually a red and a green one (often either a typical *guacamole* or one made with avocado and green tomatoes, or sliced avocado may be served), and a *salsa borracha* made especially for *barbacoa*. The *salsa borracha*, meaning ‘drunken sauce’, is a black sauce whose colour comes from pasilla chiles and it is drunken because it is made with *pulque*. The *salsa* is served in a bowl decorated with crumbled fresh white cheese and green olives. Sometimes there is also a side dish of *nopales compuestos*. The meal is served with warm corn *tortillas*, and can be eaten as a late breakfast, as the main meal at lunchtime or as dinner.

**Commercial green salsa for barbacoa**  
*Ma. Primitiva Bermejo Martínez*

green husk tomatoes, raw  
green chile de árbol, stemmed  
garlic  
avocados  
onion  
salt

Grind all together in a blender or with a mortar and pestle

When eating *barbacoa* in the market, the busiest time of day is the late morning. Customers find a space in front of the stalls and order *consomé de barbacoa* and *tacos* or *flautas*, which are ordered by the piece. Stalls typically offer bowls of both red and green *salsas* (but not the black *salsa borracha*), sliced limes, chopped onions and coriander, and sometimes dried oregano. Some customers order their favourite cuts of *barbacoa* by the kilo instead of by the *taco*, and are given a stack of warm corn *tortillas* on the side. Others order the meat to take home with a small plastic bag of the accompaniments.

In Milpa Alta, many families prepare *barbacoa de borrego* for a living. *Barbacoieros* can be commissioned to slaughter and cook the lambs that another family has bought or reared, but they regularly prepare several animals to sell in markets every weekend. Around 3000 sheep are slaughtered and prepared in Milpa Alta each week although the livestock are raised elsewhere (DDF 1997:22). Other areas in the region famous for making *barbacoa* are Texcoco in the state of Mexico and parts of the state of Hidalgo. Cooking styles and flavourings vary regionally, but the methods are basically the same. For the Federal District of Mexico, the main provider of *barbacoa* in the markets is Milpa Alta.

#### **4.2 *Barbacoa* makers in Milpa Alta**

Although nowadays many Milpaltenses have specialised professional jobs or at least training requiring higher education, it is safe to say that at some time in their lives, and even throughout their lives, they all are somehow involved in at least one of the major businesses of their area. Villa Milpa Alta is divided into *barrios*, each of which specialises in particular trades. In Barrio San Mateo these are *nopal* farming, pork butchery (*tocinería*), and especially the cooking and selling of *barbacoa de borrego*.

On Friday nights the streets of the *barrio* are infused with the aromas of the meat and spices which manage to escape from the sealed pit ovens in the back yards of *barbacoiero* families. The smell begins to fade as the sun rises and the *barbacoa* is transported to markets in all reaches of Mexico City. The *barrio* appears almost deserted as most people are busiest during the weekend, and those who remain behind are at home making the preparations for the sales of the following day. Since most of the houses are surrounded by walls, it is impossible to see what is going on behind the gates, although locals know which families live in which houses and what their trades are.

The first family in Milpa Alta to produce *barbacoa* for a living in the 1930s was the Jurado family. Doña Margarita told me that they raised their own sheep which they would leave to graze in the mountainous pastures of Milpa Alta. She had memories from the 1940s of how the Jurados brought their flock down from the mountains once a week. They scattered the whole street with salt from one end to the other, and fed the animals with salt and water. In those days there was no running water in the houses yet, and at every corner and in areas where maize was grown there were taps so that water could be collected for home or agricultural use. The *barbacoieros* built corrals around these watering taps so that their sheep could graze there and leave their droppings. This way, when water was needed for the fields, the dung could be easily collected for use as fertilizer. Now that few people cultivate maize and fewer still rear their own sheep, this practice has died out, as running water has become normal in most homes. Almost all *nopal* growers now use cow dung to fertilize their fields.

In Milpa Alta over the decades the *barbacoa* business boomed. Economically, Milpa Alta began to blossom and its residents began to send their children to school to become professionals in other careers rather than stay home to help with the family business. Pork butchers (*chiteros*<sup>2</sup>) continued to earn a good living both selling raw meat and *chicharrón*, and making *carnitas*, but most people looked up to *barbacoieros*. As *mole* became more and more expensive to prepare for large fiestas, *carnitas* and *barbacoa* grew in popularity as typical fiesta favourites, and *barbacoa* ranked higher in prestige than *carnitas*.<sup>3</sup> It only takes three hours to make *carnitas*, since pork is a softer meat than mutton, whereas *barbacoa* needs to be cooked all night. *Barbacoa* is more laborious and also has more flavourings, thus is valued higher. This is an example of Gell's 'halo effect of technical difficulty'. The greater the difficulty of access to an object (of art), the higher its value (1996: 46-49). *Barbacoa* became the trade of highest honour (above butchery and *nopal* farming), not only because of the value of the product, but also because of the financial prosperity associated with its sales.

It is still common in Milpa Alta for three generations to live in one household. The extended family is the basic family unit, although many young couples aspire to build their own houses separately from their parents(-in-law). When women marry, they usually move to their husbands' house, and live there until they can afford to build their

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<sup>2</sup> This term is sometimes used in a derogatory manner.

own.<sup>4</sup> Some build their houses adjacent to the husband's parents, whilst others buy a new plot of land in another area of Milpa Alta. It is rare for Milpaltenses to buy land outside of Milpa Alta, although they might resettle in a different barrio or town.<sup>5</sup> Families remain close nonetheless, and visit often, at least to the husband's family. Upon marriage, there seems to be an unspoken expectation that women are to loosen

### Carnitas

#### José Arenas Berrocal

Yadira's brother, José, learned to make *carnitas* by watching others. The first time he prepared it for a fiesta, it turned out so well that his sisters congratulated him as if he was a young girl, saying, 'Now you are ready to marry!' (José was divorced and had two adolescent sons.)

One whole pig (about 20 kg.) serves around 140 people. For this recipe José used 2 medium sized pigs.

The pig must be cut into large pieces - legs, loin, shoulders, ribs, skin - and marinated in vinegar for several hours to overnight

In a large cauldron, heat abundant lard until boiling. Add meat in this order: first legs, then shoulders, loin, ribs, with skin on top, covering all the meat.

When the lard comes to a boil once more, add around 5 large cans of evaporated milk, the juice from around 40 oranges, and the peels of 5 oranges. You may add garlic, but this is optional.

Allow the meat to boil until it is very soft. Add saltpetre to redden and flavour the meat.

Serve with hot *tortillas* and red or green *salsa*.

their ties with their natal families. It is not that they no longer belong to their natal households, rather that they must try their best to assimilate to and prioritize their husbands'.

An elderly lady told me, 'a woman always changes her profession or trade (*oficio*) to that of her husband'. This is not exactly true, as some women are already working in a similar sort of business as their husband's before they marry. Also, some men learn the trade of their

wife's family if it is more lucrative, such as *barbacoa*, for example. Whatever the precise statistics may be, it is acceptable and even expected, at times, for a woman to give up her job and dedicate herself to housework and children or to change her profession in favour of her husband's.<sup>6</sup> Doña Margarita's *compadre* was a *barbacoiero* and his wife was a primary school teacher, but on Saturdays she went to the market to sell the *barbacoa* because he had to stay home to prepare the meat to sell on Sundays. In spite of having her own profession, the woman was expected to help her husband in his line of work, '*siendo profesionista, la mujer tiene que ayudar a su esposo*'.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter eight for an understanding of fiesta food.

<sup>4</sup> If a husband moves into his wife's house, he is often teased for being *mandilón* (tied to the apron strings) or called *ciguamoncli* (cf. chapter five). He is not met with disapproval, but perhaps with some ridicule at times.

<sup>5</sup> For a clearer understanding of attachment to land, see writings on neighbouring areas such as Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan 1994.

<sup>6</sup> She often is also expected to change her cooking style, in order to suit her parents-in-law and the rest of her husband's family. Also see chapter five.

Alicia was a similar case in point. She met her husband Marcos when she was eighteen. She was from the Barrio de la Concepción of Villa Milpa Alta, and she met Marcos when she was participating in a theatrical performance which the youths of her *barrio* prepared for the celebrations of the Days of the Dead. Some of her friends from the play introduced her to their friends from other *barrios*, and Marcos was one of them. At the time, she was studying at the National Pedagogic University (UPN) and he was studying accounting. Although she had not wanted to get married until she finished her studies, he did, and they eventually married when she was 22. She added, 'I don't know if it was because I did not take care or if I don't know much about these things, but oh! surprise – I was pregnant!' She never finished her degree because of the baby, but she had no regrets.

Alicia got a job in a primary school and Marcos wanted to continue studying, as well, but then his father took ill so he decided to help with the *barbacoa* business. By this time Marcos's older brothers had married and set up their own households in land that their father had given to them. So Marcos was the only son left to take over the business. In any case, he realised that he earned more working in *barbacoa* than in working as an accountant. Since he chose to dedicate himself to the *barbacoa*, he worked hard from Friday to Monday, but on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday he had no work. He tried to supplement the family earnings by getting a part-time job in accounting, but he had to give this up. The office often wanted him to come in on Fridays, but his priority was his *barbacoa*.

After Marcos's father died, the business was his main inheritance. There used to be a lot of land in the family, but as the generations passed the pieces of land inherited became smaller and smaller. Marcos's father decided to divide his share of land for the six older siblings when they married, and to Marcos, the youngest, he left the house, *barbacoa* market stall and business. This arrangement worked reasonably well, but Alicia and Marcos truly desired a plot of land of their own. Not only was land of high value in Milpa Alta, they also wanted land so Marcos could work on it during his free days midweek. It was impossible for him to get part-time work for those three days, so rather than stay idle, as he has been, he would rather work the land.

To reach this goal, Alicia worked doubly hard so that they could save up enough money. She taught two shifts at the primary school and also helped with the *barbacoa* when she was at home. She had most free time on Saturdays when she did housework and laundry (although I suspect that she hired help for this, as well), and she chopped

vegetables for the business. On Sunday she helped to sell because it was the busiest day in the market and they had a second stand on this day of the week. She rarely had anything to do with the meat nor with stacking or unloading the oven. This was men's work, she told me, although I know that she knew how to do the same work and sometimes helped Marcos with the oven when necessary. Alicia was willing to work this hard for the sake of her family until they could afford to invest in land. Since she had so little free time she did not want any more children until then. She focused her energies on work to help her husband preserve his profession as *barbacoiero*.

Not only are women expected to prioritise their husbands' business, but they are also expected to defer to their wishes in other matters. Primy told me how her foster mother often used to beat her and her sisters as they were growing up, yet she still loved her because she was her mother.<sup>7</sup> Once she told Alejandro that she wanted to visit her (foster) mother on her birthday, but he forbade her to go. He said that she had never treated Primy or her sisters well, so why should Primy waste her time and effort for her? There, in her new home with Alejandro and his family, she was treated well. No one ever beat her and she had a place where she belonged. So Primy did not go to visit her mother, but she still regretted not going. She did not say so, but she said wistfully that Coty was lucky because Miguel never prevented her from visiting Doña Margarita. Coty never asked for permission to come to visit her mother; she usually simply told Miguel that she was going, and he never objected. In this case, perhaps his leniency with her had something to do with his having learned how to prepare *barbacoa* from her family, thus they had a particularly close tie with them.<sup>8</sup>

It is rare, though not unheard of, for men to learn the *barbacoa* trade from non-family members. Alejandro told me that he taught his *compadre* how to prepare *barbacoa* when he was 39, but few men start out in a new business like this at an older age. In his own family, Alejandro's grandfather's brother first learned to make *barbacoa*. He was illiterate, but with his business he maintained a comfortable lifestyle, and so he taught his younger brothers the process, thus beginning the tradition in their family. Unlike others who come from greedy (*envidiosa*) families, Alejandro and his family were open to teach anyone who was willing to learn how to make *barbacoa*.

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<sup>7</sup> Primy's true mother lived in the state of Michoacán with her husband. When Primy's father passed away her mother left her five daughters in the care of her sister, whom Primy came to call 'mother', although the sisters were always aware of who their true mother was.

Many Milpaltenses lacked trust in others and feared that spreading their knowledge would only encourage competition, and the ultimate destruction of their own business ventures. Alejandro was different, but he only taught people who were sincerely interested. One of his cousins approached him, asking him to teach his twenty-year-old son-in-law. The young man had recently married Alejandro's niece and needed something to do to occupy his time. He failed to put in much effort, however, was not serious and seemed reluctant about the work. Alejandro found him to be ungrateful as well as lazy, so Alejandro stopped teaching him. Besides, he added, the boy had long hair and an earring, and seemed uninterested.

Typically, children learn the process of preparing *barbacoa* from their parents. Their skills are built from a young age, so they become knowledgeable specialists as soon as they reach adulthood. The trade has been described to me as 'a tradition that one passes down to the new generations'.<sup>9</sup> For those who grew up with the traditional trades of Milpa Alta, if they do not study, the business (or technical skill) is left to them as an inheritance, as in the case of Marcos, above. From the age of about five or six, children are taken to the market to help in the sales, buying more *tortillas* when they have run out or helping to wash up the plates and cookware at the end of the workday. As soon as they reach puberty (from around twelve years of age) they begin to help with the preparation work as part of their family chores. Already as children, boys are trained to help their fathers with the meat and girls are trained to help their mothers with the vegetables and *salsas*. Boys learn by helping their fathers to remove and clean the entrails (*despanzar*), but not to slaughter. At fifteen or sixteen they begin to cut the fresh meat, and a few years later they learn to kill.

Single men never make *barbacoa* for a living, however. Until they marry, young men might help their parents with the family business, but they usually go to university or might take on another job elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> After marriage, it is not uncommon for young men to set up their own *barbacoa* business apart from their parents. Their new wives then begin apprenticing themselves to their mothers-in-law. Until they marry into the family, however, these women never get involved. As the girlfriend of the son of a

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<sup>8</sup> I am speculating here (see Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan 1994 for more cases which support this description). It is probably also likely that there is no set pattern, and unfortunately I do not have any quantitative data on how many married women have frequent contact with their natal families.

<sup>9</sup> '*Es una tradición que le va dejando a la nueva generación*'. Using this phrase to describe something seems to indicate its importance in Milpa Alta society. (See chapter three.)

<sup>10</sup> Recall that going to university is a luxury only recently acquired with the increased economic prosperity in Milpa Alta.



*barbacoiero*, a woman might sit with her future mother-in-law as she is busy cleaning or chopping vegetables, and she might lend a hand, but nothing is expected of her. As soon as she is married, though, she must take over as much of her mother-in-law's work as she can.

Should a *barbacoiero* wife become widowed or abandoned, she can still carry on with the business, even if she has no sons. There are men who dedicate themselves solely to slaughtering animals, playfully called *matadores* or otherwise referred to as *trabajadores* (workers). These men may also be hired if a *barbacoiero* has little space in his backyard or if he routinely prepares large amounts and has no sons to help him. The *matador*-workers are in charge of the *matanza*, the slaughter. They are also responsible for washing the entrails and chopping them. This is the same work that is done in the official slaughterhouse, the *rastro*, but at home it is more sanitary. The *rastro* was constructed in order to control and improve the standards of hygiene, but it seems to have been a wasted effort. In the *rastro* the work is done slipshod and so in spite of government efforts, it is a filthy building whose employees live in constant fear of 'los de sanitación', the health and sanitation inspectors. Most *barbacoieros* prefer to do the slaughtering at home even though it is illegal because they have control over how the meat is cut and how well it is cleaned.

In spite of modern conveniences and new regulations, the traditional means of food preparation are generally preferred over modern shortcuts. This attitude applies to *barbacoa* preparation, as well as to many other culinary techniques. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to live with a family who takes pride in the flavour of their product, rather than in the size of their profit. With Primy and Alejandro, I learned to prepare *barbacoa* in the traditional manner. They sometimes varied their methods of preparation, depending on availability and price of ingredients, but they tended to always return to the traditional. The description that follows is based on the first time that I witnessed the entire process but it is representative of how families make *barbacoa* at home. It illustrates some of the compromises that might be made for the sake of the business, but also how daily meals can still be rather elaborate. During my last visit to Milpa Alta, Primy and Alejandro stopped using the *perol* and tended to buy slightly younger sheep so that they could cook exclusively in the pit-oven, but I describe both methods of cooking for the sake of familiarization with the options. The following section is a rundown of how *barbacoa* is prepared at home by professionals in the trade.

### 4.3 The process of preparing *barbacoa* in Barrio San Mateo, Milpa Alta

Primy and Alejandro used to farm *nopales*, but a few years before the death of Alejandro's father, in the early 1990s, they began to help with the *barbacoa* to carry on the family business. Yadira introduced me to them as a foreigner who had come to Mexico to study chiles, and who was fascinated with Mexican food in general. This, as always, elicited a positive response, and Primy embarked on a detailed description of the *salsas* that she made to serve with *barbacoa*. 'What would you like to know?' she asked me, '¿*la comercial o la buena?*', 'the commercial sauce or the good one?' She carried on describing different forms of service, different dishes that can be made with *barbacoa* meat, and then invited me to watch her remove the meat from the oven the next morning. She continued explaining the cooking process before she interrupted herself and said that no, this was all wrong. '¡*Este es como empezar con el postre y terminar con la sopa!*', 'This is like starting with the dessert and finishing with the soup!' she exclaimed. One cannot, she elucidated, learn about *barbacoa* without seeing everything from beginning to end. I must come, she insisted, and stay with them to observe the whole process, starting from *la matanza*. Only after I have seen it all, then we can talk about *salsas* and chiles.

**Salsa pasilla – 'la buena' - for eating  
barbacoa on special occasions at home  
Ma. Primitiva Bermejo Martínez**

*chile pasilla*, cleaned, stems and veins removed  
oil for frying  
garlic, peeled  
orange juice, freshly squeezed  
salt  
olive oil  
green olives  
*queso canasto* (a fresh white cheese)

Heat oil in a frying pan. Pass the chiles through the hot oil once, then drain. In the same oil, fry the garlic cloves until golden. Blend together chiles, garlic and orange juice. Add olives, salt and a drizzle of olive oil, to taste. Mix well. Pour into a serving bowl. Decorate with crumbled cheese.

#### **Thursday: *La matanza* (The slaughter)**

For the family whose trade is to make and sell *barbacoa*, the work week begins at seven o'clock every Thursday morning. This is almost considered as a late start in Milpa Alta standards, since most people are up and working by five a.m. Alejandro and Primy dressed in old jeans, short-sleeved shirts and long rubber boots. It must have been around 2°C outside but they knew they would not feel cold. They were prepared for a physically demanding and dirty job.

Alejandro led a young sheep to the centre of the covered concrete and brick slaughter yard behind the house. The slaughter area is separated from the rest of the

patio by a low wall reaching halfway up towards its roof. It is far from glamorous. The space is about three by six meters in area. From the ceiling hung eight large hooks fastened to a wooden beam with thick twine. The ground was paved in concrete, in one corner there was a water tap with a long hose attached and along one wall there was a low concrete-lined drain. Alejandro placed a large aluminium basin in the centre of the space. Beside this he positioned a rough hewn wooden stool. He then sharpened his knife with his sharpening steel and lay the lamb on her side, her head resting on the stool. Holding her muzzle shut, he deftly punctured her throat with the tip of his knife.

For about five minutes he squatted by the lamb, allowing her to bleed into the basin. She bucked her hind legs once in a while in silent protest, so Alejandro held her body still until she stopped bleeding and lay limp. He sharpened his knife once more and after feeling for a soft spot in the neck joint, he sawed off her head. He then proceeded to saw off one lower hind leg, scraping away the fur to reveal the bone with its characteristic hole, and then he hung the body by the leg bone on one of the ceiling hooks. Hanging the carcass this way makes it easier to clean the whole animal, allowing all the remaining blood and whatever may be left in the oesophagus to drip out onto the ground. Alejandro then went to get another lamb among the group huddled at the far end of the slaughter area, and the process was repeated.

Although the actual killing was finished, *la matanza* could also be interpreted to refer to all the proceedings of the day. Apart from the slaughter, it consisted of taking apart and cleaning the animals, work which is shared between husband and wife. While Alejandro continued to slaughter the rest of the livestock, Primy took the steel and sharpened her own knife. She stood by the decapitated animal and felt for the soft cartilage in the joint of the other hind leg. She cut off the other three feet and tossed them towards the drain. She scraped away the fur of the other hind legs so that the carcasses could be hooked through and hung by both legs. Then she cut more of the fur and peeled it down so that it hung in a thick fold just below the hip. She did not attempt to pull further as the hide is heavy and toughly attached to the flesh, and she lacked the physical strength to remove it completely. She left the detachment of hide from flesh to her husband, and so stood aside and waited. When Alejandro was ready he tugged the coat off each animal, pulling it inside out with all his strength and using his body weight for the final yank. A soft popping noise was made as the body separated from its skin at the neck. He slung each hide on the low wall and carried on with the slaughtering.

Primy brought a small plastic pail of water towards each animal and washed the blood from the neck, *el pescuezo*. From the pail she pulled out a rectangle of gauze and wrung out the excess water. She tore off about a half metre's length and carefully wrapped the *pescuezo* with the gauze, covering the hole and tying it well. She explained how important this was because when the meat is still fresh the blood and bile that may remain in the throat attract large flies which enter the *pescuezo* and may become embedded there. This can ruin the meat, giving it a bitter flavour. She could not explain why they tended to enter the small neck hole rather than the large opening she made through the abdominal area when she gutted them, but in any case the *pescuezo* must be protected with gauze. Having clarified this, she proceeded to slice a long vertical hole through the centre of the skinned carcass and she began to pull out the entrails. This is the start of the real cleaning process, *despanzar*. I asked if there was anything I could do to help, but Primy and Alejandro told me that this was not a job for me and that it would be best to keep my distance to avoid getting dirty as the odours emitted may stick to my clothes. I decided to listen to their advice and observe from a short distance.

First Primy pulled out the stomach, *la panza*. The *panza* is one of the most important parts of the lamb. It is cleaned and later stuffed with the tripe and other innards mixed with herbs and spices. It is tied closed and cooked in the pit oven along with the meat to be later served in *tacos*. The *panza* is much bigger than I expected it to be, about eighteen inches long and eight inches wide, and it was a funny grey-green colour. It is covered with a layer of fat, the caul, *el redaño*, which Primy describes as being like a cloth, '*como una telita de grasa*', and in fact it looks like a square of pale pink lace<sup>11</sup> and can be peeled off the stomach in one piece. Primy warned me to get out of the way and she carried the *panza* to the far corner of the slaughter area where there was a large metal rubbish bin. There she emptied the stomach, squeezing out the part-digested fodder and gastric juices. The smell was rancid and repulsive, and as the contents of the *panza* splashed onto the ground I understood why the two of them wore long rubber boots and why I was recommended not to participate at this stage. Primy hosed the *panza* inside and out, and tossed it into another aluminium tub before returning to the carcass.

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<sup>11</sup> In other parts of Mexico the caul is also called '*encaje*' which literally means 'lace'.

Primy proceeded to unravel the small intestines, *la tripa delgada*. These are at least twelve metres long and she pulled them out as if she were measuring yarn, swaying from side to side, catching each arms' length in either hand. As soon as she had all the tripe looped in her hands she cut one end, keeping grip of the other end, thus holding the centre of several separate lengths of intestine. She knotted them together at the centre, securing them to keep them under control lest they slip away and get tangled and lost amongst the rest of the innards. Then she squeezed out any waste that may have remained before tossing them into the aluminium tub with the *panzas*.

Next to remove is the large intestine, *la tripa gorda*. Primy positioned the pail in front of the animal and pointed the large intestine towards the pail. Alejandro placed the hose in the anal passage at the top of the animal and sprayed a strong stream of water which went straight through the intestine and flushed out most of the *suciedad*, dirt. Without this gush of running water it is more difficult to extract the waste products from the intestine. Primy then cut it off and dropped it into the pail with the rest of the offal.

Each part of the animal was systematically removed in its turn—the uterus, *la matriz*; the gall bladder, *la vesícula biliar*; the liver, *el hígado*; lungs, *pulmones*; heart, *corazón*; the bladder, *la vejiga*. The uterus was quite small, about the size of the palm of one's hand, but when we got to the last lamb slaughtered I had the good fortune to witness the discovery of a pregnant one. We felt lucky to have this find, because pregnancy causes the uterus to develop. Since each of the entrails is chopped up and used to stuff the *panza*, one stuffed with a developed uterus tastes much better than one with an undeveloped one. The developed uterus forms nutritious pink *bolitas* (these 'little balls' actually look like tiny pink donuts). They are attached to its inner lining and they make the stuffed *panza* tastier and juicier. Pregnant sheep are particularly special because usually when the stockbreeder knows that a sheep is pregnant, she is not sold for slaughter as she will eventually provide young (i.e., business).

Primy slit open the uterus to show me the foetus, telling me that she used to collect them in jars of alcohol whenever she came across them because a friend of hers used them for the science class she taught at a local school. The foetus was fully formed and floated in its amniotic gel which could be removed like a little ball and preserved in alcohol or formalin. After saving the foetus Primy rinsed the uterus inside and out and then threw it into the tub of entrails.

The final step was to slice open the hearts and lungs to remove all traces of blood from the veins and arteries. This is extremely important because when blood is cooked it becomes a dark unappetising colour and although this does not affect the flavour of the meat, it may put customers off. While Primy was completing this process, Alejandro carried the cleaned carcasses, now referred to as being *en canal*, to an airing room where he hung each by one leg to dry the meat overnight. The meat needed hanging so that it matures a little and so it can be cut cleanly.

Primy rinsed everything quickly, then at last, it was time for breakfast. Later each offal meat must be cleaned thoroughly with cold water to remove all traces of dirt. Primy stressed to me that each section must be well cleaned individually. Any dirt that remains gives an unpleasant bitter flavour to the meat and *panza* when cooked, and so must be expunged. Cold water must be used even if the weather is freezing because using warm water risks spoilage. Furthermore, cleaning must be done with bare hands otherwise it is impossible to reach the inner folds of the meat. The heads are left to soak and the *panzas* must be blanched so that the bitter stomach lining can be removed. Only then were we free to sit in front of the television to watch the football.

#### **Friday: Mise en place (preparations); *sancochando la carne* (pre-cooking the meat)**

Alejandro told me that Friday is the heaviest day for women in the *barbacoa* trade. Indeed it is the most labour-intensive because all the preparations for the cooking and serving of the meat are done on Fridays, and almost all of this work was done by Primy. Her mother-in-law helped, as well, but Primy was in charge.

The day began early, as usual. Primy went to the market to buy vegetables, chiles and herbs for the cooking process and also to make the *salsas* that will accompany the meat. I arrived at their house before seven a.m. and Primy was already away at the market while her mother-in-law was at home preparing breakfast. I stayed and helped make breakfast in the airing room where a simple industrial gas cooker was set up. The cooker was like those found in food stalls in the market, made of a metal frame, about waist height, that supports two large gas rings that can accommodate very large pots and pans. We were having *chilaquiles verdes* for breakfast that day. For green *chilaquiles*, Doña Margarita made a green *salsa* with the chiles and green husk tomatoes (*tomates* or *tomates verdes*) that are also used for the *barbacoa*.

Primy returned from her shopping with sacks of white onions, green tomatoes, carrots, chiles, coriander and various other foods. After breakfasting on the *chilaquiles*

with *teleras* and hot milk with coffee or chocolate stirred in, we went straight to work. Primy put all the tomatoes to soak in a plastic basin to soften the husks for easier removal. She brought out three little painted wooden chairs with wicker seats for me, her mother-in-law, and herself. We all sat outside with the tomatoes and three plastic strainers, and set to peeling off the husks as we rinsed them. Primy separated them into the three containers, one for the *panzas*, the other two for the green and red *salsas* that she would make.

Meanwhile, Alejandro was at his butcher block chopping all the *menudencias*, the innards, that the women cleaned so thoroughly the day before. (I do not think he did much else that day.) Primy rinsed out the coriander and *epazote* and left the herbs to soak in water. We carried on preparing the vegetables, chopping onions and carrots, removing stems from the fresh and dried chiles, and just chatting away. At the same time, Primy and her mother-in-law began to prepare lunch. We roasted green *poblano* chiles over coals to peel and slice them for *rajas con crema* (strips of roasted chiles with crème fraîche and onions). When this was done it was time to pick up the children from school.

As we walked home from the school we passed by a *tortillería*, a small shop selling machine-made *tortillas*. There we bought a kilo of *masa*, the maize dough used to make *tortillas*, so that we could make *gorditas pellizcadas* when we got home. These *gorditas* (also called *sopes*) are a type of snack food that is often eaten in the street. Alejandro asked Primy to prepare them for me so that I could taste as much typical Mexican food as time allowed. Primy kneaded the dough and with the help of a *tortilla* press and her two small sons, we made thick *tortillas*. After baking them on a hot *comal*, we pinched them several times on one side (*pellizcar* means to pinch), rubbed them with melted lard, and topped them with refried beans, crumbled *longaniza* (a type of sausage), green *salsa* and crumbled white cheese. This was our starter for lunch on that day.

Alejandro pounded chicken breasts to make *milanesas* and his mother hauled out the heavy stone *metate* to make breadcrumbs for the chicken. She used saltine crackers instead of bread because she preferred the effect of crushed crackers to breadcrumbs. I asked her if she always used the *metate*, a tool that dates to prehispanic times. I had heard that some people still used them, but nowadays, especially near cities, few people did so because of the effort and physical force that was required. She told me that for small tasks, such as grinding these crackers, she would use it. Otherwise, unless there

was a power failure, they used an electric blender for making sauces and for larger tasks.

Lunch was a feast for me, although it was standard fare for them. We had *gorditas* to start, then breaded chicken with boiled carrots with cream, and *rajas con crema*. As always, there were *tortillas* and *salsa* to accompany, and beans in their broth at the end. The meal was washed down with an *agua fresca de limón*, water flavoured with a variety of sweet lime that they picked off the tree in the garden. Although I would have the tendency to linger over such exquisite food, in a busy *barbacoiero* household such as this one, there was a lot of work to be done after eating.

We returned to the vegetables we had been cleaning and set aside the tomatoes and chiles for the *salsas*. For the green *salsa* we peeled avocados, chopped coriander and combined them with the green tomatoes, *chiles serranos*, onions, garlic and salt. Primy

**Commercial red salsa for barbacoa**  
**Ma. Primitiva Bermejo Martínez**

6 kg. green husk tomatoes, boiled  
¼ kg. each of dried chiles: *chile mora*, *chile de árbol*, and *chile guajillo angosto (pulla)*, stemmed, toasted on *comal*, rinsed  
3 medium onions  
10 small cloves garlic  
salt to taste

Blend all ingredients together.

processed them in the blender in stages because she was making large amounts for the business. She then proceeded to make the red *salsa* in which she used three types of dried chiles—*chile morita*, *árbol seco*, and *pulla* or *guajillo angosto*. She toasted these on a hot *comal* and warned me to keep clear of the smoke since the chiles always made

her cough and sneeze.<sup>12</sup> The red *salsa* was more popular than the green in the stand where they sold *barbacoa*, so Primy had a ten-gallon pail for this. She boiled some green tomatoes and put the toasted chiles to soak in the cooking water. She filled the pail with the tomatoes and chiles along with salt and other ingredients. Since she needed to make a larger amount, far beyond the capacity of a domestic blender, we took the pail to a *salsa* mill, *molino de salsas*, a short walk away.

When we returned home Primy had to prepare the stuffing for the *panzas*. Preparing the *panza* is always the women's responsibility, as are chopping and cleaning vegetables and herbs, but women look after the softer and more complex cooking, like making the *panza* filling and the *salsas*. Men in the *barbacoa* trade are supposed to be responsible for the slaughter and preparing the meat, as well as filling and unloading the oven. Primy approached the now-dried carcasses (*canales*) and cut off the udders and



kidneys to chop up and add to the rest of the *menudencias*. She also had procured some pork fat to add to the filling mixture so that the *panza* does not get too dry during the cooking. Into the mixture she threw chopped green tomatoes, *epazote* and onions, and she beat all of these together with her forearm (in the same way that one beats lard for making *tamales*). When these were well incorporated she added powdered chile guajillo and salt and beat it some more. The *panzas* were now ready to be stuffed and she commented to me as she filled them that to her each one looks like a human foetus since it is shaped like a head and body.

At the same time she had been boiling rice and chickpeas, which are traditionally served with the *consomé de barbacoa*. She drained and separated them into two containers, mixing the grains, one for Saturday's and another for Sunday's sales. She also prepared the herbs and spices that go in the tub for the *consomé*. Whilst Primy was doing all of this detailed work, Alejandro pulled out his chain saw and cut the lamb into pieces – the leg, *pierna*; ribs, *costilla*; the backbone or loin, *espinazo* or *lomo*; the shoulder, *espaldilla*; and the neck, *pescuezo*. He lay these out on the work table in the middle of the room and decided which pieces would be cooked for Saturday, which for Sunday, and which for Monday. Primy marked them with string which she tied around small bones so that she would be able to distinguish amongst them when the meat is already cooked. Then she stacked the *perol*.

The *perol* is a large aluminium bin, around 75 centimetres in diameter and one and a half metres tall. This is used to steam the meat over a gas flame, *sancochar la carne* (literally, to parboil the meat), a method developed because of the shortage of firewood in recent years. For the sake of ease, most people these days finish cooking the *barbacoa* in the *perol* rather than use the traditional pit in the ground or brick oven, *horno*. There is, however, a notable difference in flavour between the *barbacoa de perol* and *barbacoa de horno*. To overcome the problem of firewood, Primy and Alejandro part-cooked the meat in the *perol* and then finished the process in the oven so that the meat obtains the smoky flavour of the coals. On Saturdays they sold *barbacoa de perol*, but on Sundays, Mondays and special occasions they prepared the *barbacoa de horno*.

The pieces of meat must be arranged in a specific order so that they cook properly. First the tub for the *consomé* is placed at the bottom so that the juices drip down into the

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<sup>12</sup> As already mentioned, during Aztec times, children were disciplined by being made to inhale chile

herbs and spices. In the *perol* the meat is steamed, so water is added to the basin at the bottom. Then an iron grille is positioned above the tub with some special cooking film to prevent bits of meat from falling through. Next, the *panzas* are set down, then the heads and necks, since these all take longest to cook and need to be nearest to the heat source. The rest of the parts are stacked in accordingly and the *perol* is closed and left over a strong gas fire for about twelve hours.

#### **Saturday: *Prendiendo y llenando el horno* (lighting and stacking the oven)**

At four o'clock every Saturday morning it is very important that Primy get up and check the meat in the *perol*. She must ascertain that the *consomé* is sufficient or has not overflowed and that the meat is cooking nicely. At five a.m. the meat should be cooked well enough. She removes what will be sold by her husband in the town this morning and puts in more meat to pre-cook for the *barbacoa de horno* to be sold on Sunday and Monday.

I had asked to be awakened at four a.m. so that I could check the *perol*, as well, but I got up rather late, about seven o'clock. Alejandro had long gone to the centre of Mexico City to sell and Primy had gone with her two sons to watch their football match in their playing field nearby. Alejandro's mother gave me a sandwich for breakfast and a pint of hot milk in which I stirred some *café de olla*, traditionally prepared coffee boiled with abundant water and flavoured with cinnamon and, if available, crude sugar, *piloncillo*. She accompanied me with a sandwich of her own, which she made of sliced bread (*pan bimbo*) spread with cream, and filled with ham, avocado, and pickled jalapeño chiles. Then she asked me to accompany her to do her errands.

For women in the *barbacoa* trade, Saturday morning may be spent doing any sort of tasks and chores. While waiting for Primy and the boys to return home, I helped Doña Margarita wash the dishes from Friday and we went to buy food with which to prepare lunch. Before all this, however, we attended to the oven.

Alejandro had brought home *pencas de maguey*, the succulent leaves of the maguey plant. Each of these leaves, or *pencas*, can reach up to two metres in length and about 30 centimetres wide at the base. They are thick and spiny at the edges, tapering to a fine point like a needle. In fact, all parts of different varieties of maguey plants, both *pencas* and sap, have been used extensively and exploitedly all over Mexico since prehispanic

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smoke as punishment (Coe 1994: 63-4).

times, for preparing food, weaving cloth, and even making alcoholic drinks (like *pulque*, and different varieties are used for *tequila* and *mezcal*). They are essential in the preparation of this type of *barbacoa* as they both protect the meat from burning, as well as add flavour and help to seal in moisture.

The *pencas* must first be shaved at the base so that they are evenly thick and pliable. Then they must be toasted to mellow their flavour and bitterness. So we proceeded to light the oven by the side of the house. Doña Margarita lit the coals that had remained in the pit with scraps of cardboard and burnt *pencas*. When a bright fire was smoking in the oven we laid the fresh *pencas* across the top, turning them and even hanging them halfway into the oven so that they roasted evenly. This step took a good hour or so, and meanwhile we carried on with other household chores.

Primy came home and prepared the *comida* quickly. Today it was less elaborated than on Friday. We had *sopa casera de tallarines con crema*, a typical home-style soup with short noodles in (red) tomato broth, served with a swirl of cream. To follow was *guisado de jitomate*, a (red) tomato-based stew with chicken, courgettes and strips of roasted and peeled chile poblano. All of this was served with warm corn *tortillas* and there were beans to follow if anyone wanted some. Primy and Doña Margarita were not the first to comment that it was so nice to feed me because I eat everything without trouble and one can tell that I actually *enjoy* the food.<sup>13</sup> This last point seemed to be particularly impressive to them, because Mexican food is believed to be notoriously difficult for foreigners to eat in general. Thus, my being able to eat together with them aided in my inclusion into their trust; being able to enjoy their food, and therefore understand the flavours, makes one less foreign and is a means of acceptance.

Just before we started to eat, Primy lit the pit-oven with firewood. She filled the cavity with dry logs and with old newspaper she grabbed a fistful of tallow, that she collects every week from the meat. With this she ignited the wood and left it to burn while we ate. After lunch, we unloaded the meat, *la carne sancochada*, which had been pre-cooking in the *perol* for a few hours and Primy showed me how to wrap the *panzas* in *pencas* of maguey. Each *panza* is placed individually in the centre of a toasted *penca*. The sides are folded inwards and the lot is tied with string with the edges turned in so that none of the *panza* is exposed, and they are protected from burning. Then we

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<sup>13</sup> 'Come de todo, y además come ¡con gusto!'

checked the oven, and by now the logs were reduced to red hot embers, *la pura brasa*. It was 5.30 p.m. It was time to stack the oven.

Primy and Doña Margarita did this in the same order as in stacking the *perol*, only this time the sides of the oven were lined with *pencas*, no cooking film was necessary and no water was added for the *consomé*. When all the meat was properly arranged, Primy lay the caul on top to cover all the meat so the fat could drip down as it melted and keep the meat moist. Lastly, more toasted *pencas* were lain, and then they slid the heavy steel cover over the opening. The two women pulled out a square of canvas filled with sand to shroud the cover. They spread the sand evenly to block any cracks so that absolutely no steam escaped the oven, otherwise the meat failed to cook properly. Finally, an old cover and empty basins were arranged on the edges to secure it and weight it down. Then we left the *barbacoa* to stew in its own juices all night.

#### **Sunday: *Sacando la carne* (taking out the meat)**

At five in the morning I was awakened for the final stage of the preparation of the *barbacoa*. Primy was already unloading everything, separating the meat into plastic crates lined with wax paper and the toasted maguey *pencas* from the oven. She placed the heads and *pescuezos* into separate pails and when she finished pulling out the *panzas*, she waited for Alejandro to come and reach into the oven for the tub of drippings, now full of *consomé*. They loaded everything into the back of their truck and by 5.30 a.m. they were on their way to the market near the centre of Mexico City where they sell the *barbacoa* in their stall.

Alejandro's stall has been in the family for three generations, and he and his wife expected, or at least hoped, that both of their sons would maintain it when they came of age.<sup>14</sup> Already they took their seven-year-old son with them to sell. Their second son was still too young to accompany them, but he told me that he was dying to go. On a Sunday the children considered this to be a special treat. Both Alejandro and Primy would go to the market together as it is always their busiest day. Alejandro sold meat, heads and *panzas* by the kilo, while Primy made and sold *tacos* and *consomé*, and also usually acted as cashier. She picked the meat from between the neck bones and used any other loose meat to fill *tacos*. They stayed in the market all day until all their

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<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, Alejandro hoped that one of his sons would become a traffic policeman and Primy hoped they would study medicine. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they are supposed to stop making *barbacoa*!

products were sold and sometimes only returned home at seven or eight o'clock at night.

### **Saturday, Sunday and Monday: *A vender* (to sell)—How lucrative is *barbacoa*?**

Monday is usually a fairly light day for selling in the market, but several *barbacoieros* sell nevertheless. *Primy*, like other wives of *barbacoieros*, might or might not accompany her husband on these lighter sales days. This depended on her mood and other commitments. The best days for selling *barbacoa* are Saturday and Sunday.

Since *barbacoa* is a heavy dish and is expensive, few people eat it in the market midweek. Preparing it everyday would be too much work to be worth the earnings. If a holiday such as Christmas or Easter happens to fall on a weekday, however, all the *barbacoa* stalls are open. These are the days when most people decide not to cook at home and there is good business for *barbacoieros*. Otherwise, another opportunity to sell or eat *barbacoa* midweek is to go to a nearby *tianguis* (roving market) on the day when it is designated in a certain area.

To increase their sales, *barbacoieros* find themselves in a competition of flavour. In order to improve the quality of their product, however, economic constraints weigh heavily. Because of the unstable

#### **Barbacoa**

I used to think it inconceivable to prepare *barbacoa* at home unless I dug a pit in the garden and grew my own magueyes. Then one day I decided to try making it, and was pleasantly surprised that the flavour I achieved approximated the real thing, although there was little *consomé*. Banana leaves may substitute maguey leaves, since there are some forms of *barbacoa* prepared with them, but there is no real substitute for *epazote*, which I do grow on my windowsill. The following recipe was the result of my culinary experiment.

*Serves 3-4.*

1 metre banana leaves (optional)  
1 kg lamb shoulder (or leg)  
3 bay leaves  
large handful of *epazote*  
handful of coriander, chopped  
6-8 dried red chiles (de árbol, ancho, morita, guajillo)  
1 onion, sliced  
1 leek, sliced  
3 cloves garlic, sliced  
2-3 tomatoes, chopped roughly

Preheat oven to 180°C (gas mark 5/375°F) for about one hour. Meanwhile, wash the banana leaves and then pass them over a flame or dry griddle to soften them. They will change colour slightly and become more pliable. Use them to line a heavy casserole with a lid, where the piece of meat will fit. Combine the rest of the ingredients and place in the casserole. The meat may or may not be raised on a wire rack. Rub the meat with the garlic, herbs and chiles, if desired, and pour a little water into the pot so the meat does not dry out when cooking. Wrap the meat with the banana leaves before securing the lid, and place it in the oven for about 2 hours, or until the meat is very tender. Sprinkle with salt after cooking is complete, and serve with hot corn tortillas, chopped onions, chopped coriander, limes, avocados, and salsas.

Mexican economy (*la crisis*) as the value of the Mexican peso fell to a fraction of its worth against the US dollar, the price of livestock multiplied, particularly since much of it is imported from Australia and New Zealand or from the US. The market price of *barbacoa*, however, could not increase at similar speed because wages failed to keep up with the falling peso. Thus customer spending reduced and luxury goods such as special foods became less frequent expenses.

Discussing the vendor-client relationship with me, Primy explained that there are certain people who become regular clients and who thus are given special treatment. She would recognise them and know what they will usually order or consume at one sitting. Sometimes she gave them slightly larger *tacos* or if they ordered to take away, she would give them a pint of *salsa* without charge. Since the economic crash in 1994, she has noticed that some of her regular clients no longer come every week as they used to. When they do come, though, they retain the same consumption pattern as before. The increasing price of her product does not make a customer buy or consume a smaller amount of *barbacoa* each time he comes to eat at her stall, but rather decreases the frequency of his visits.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the price increase affects their sales.

So if *barbacoieros* charged a fair price for their product, taking into account the rising prices of their raw materials, their selling price would be beyond the reach of their customer's spending power. Whilst the supply of *barbacoa* might remain the same, the demand would decrease considerably as fewer would be able to afford it. This forces the price of *barbacoa* to remain low in spite of higher production costs, thus reducing the profit margin for the producer and forcing him to tighten his belt. He cannot stop making his product, as it is his trade and main or only means of livelihood.

Doña Margarita told me that her husband used to make *barbacoa* in the *perol*, but it was Alejandro who insisted that they switch to use the pit oven instead because the resulting flavour is so much better. To prepare *barbacoa de horno*, however, involves more physical labour as well as more expense, because firewood costs more than gas, both in money and in effort. The direct consequence of the greater investment of work and money is that the quality of their product increases and it becomes less commercial, more of a luxury good, and of course more expensive. Still, they are not willing to compromise now and go back to making *barbacoa de perol*, as that would be a

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<sup>15</sup> This is an indication that people tend not to make gastronomic compromises.

lowering of their standards. They might lose some of their regular clients who are accustomed to a superior product, although there is a likelihood that newer clients may not mind the difference. Although using the *perol* would greatly increase their profit margin, they are unwilling to produce an inferior product for the sake of making more money.

This attitude, naturally, does not help to solve the dilemma of the lightning coin purse. Primy explained to me how household spending has changed since the crisis of December 1994. Until the eighties, to sell *barbacoa* was very lucrative and many men in Milpa Alta and especially in San Mateo learned the trade in order to better support their families. This is why, she pointed out, there are many big houses in San Mateo.<sup>16</sup> Most of the money they needed to build their houses came from high *barbacoa* profits. Now, however, times are bad economically. Before, if you earned Mx\$100, you spent 20 or 30 pesos and saved the other 70. But then things got more difficult. You spent 50 and saved 50. Then it reached the point where you spent 70 or 80 and kept 30 or 20. Then you spent 90 and kept 10. Now, you spend all the 100 pesos and ask the vendor in the market if you can pay the remaining 50 pesos next week because you have spent more than your budget allows.

### **Tuesday: *La limpieza* (cleaning) and *a marcar el ganado* (marking livestock)**

Tuesday is when wives do the major cleaning of the oven, *perol*, and all containers, as well as all the work areas and utensils used. Sometimes Primy, as do many other wives of *barbacoieros*, hires another lady to help, so Tuesday is dedicated to cleaning and returning everything to normal.

In the meantime, the husbands go to the *ganadería*, the ranch where the livestock is sold, to choose and mark the sheep that they will later buy for slaughter. Few raise their own livestock since land and labour has become more scarce in recent years. It is also cheaper to buy the animals that are brought over from the US or Australia. For the sake of flavour, some *barbacoieros* are willing to pay a little more to buy *borregos criollos*, locally reared sheep. These graze freely and eat what they wish instead of enriched industrial feed. The local sheep are smaller and leaner than foreign livestock, and also

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<sup>16</sup> In Milpa Alta, several houses were left unfinished. In the 1950s most families lived in simple one or two room dwellings (Madsen 1960), but by the 1980s and 90s many families began to build larger houses as they became more prosperous from selling *nopales* and *barbacoa*. Some later found themselves unable to buy all the materials necessary to complete building because of the economic crisis which upset their financial planning and expected earnings.

have better flavour because of how they are raised. They are more difficult to prepare, because of their size and expense, but all *barbacoieros* agree that they are worth it.

For personal consumption, all *barbacoieros* prefer pit-roast *borregos criollos*. This is indisputably the tastiest and best quality *barbacoa* that can be made. For the sake of business, however, some compromises are necessary to increase the profit margin. Although goat meat can be used as successfully as mutton, with a similar preparation process, most *barbacoieros* find goats more difficult to work with. Since they are much smaller, they need to be treated more gently, and they render less cooked meat per kilo of raw. They also have a singular odour, which remains if the meat is steamed in the *perol*, although it disappears when it is cooked in the oven. Whilst both male and female goats and sheep may be used, sometimes male goats retain their odour ('the smell of a man', as Doña Margarita described it) even after cooking in the *perol*.

Thus, vendors prefer lambs, and they must be neither too fat nor too thin. If they are too fat there will be a huge lump of fat behind the kidney or distributed throughout the meat. During the cooking much of it melts away, resulting in less kilos of meat to sell. Up to five kilos of fat can be extracted, meaning five kilos less profit. Also, clients prefer meat to be less fatty. But if the lambs are too thin, the meat does not come out well after cooking. It becomes too dry and does not look good. When I talked with Primy about *barbacoa*, she always stressed how the meat must be physically appealing, without unappetising dark spots, splinters of bone or irregular cuts. She also insisted on absolute cleanliness. The meticulous elimination of all the *suciedad* from the entrails of the animals, and later scrubbing down the work areas and the regular weekly cleaning indicate how essential this step is. The quality of the meat depends on the quality and cleanliness of the ingredients.

Other women married to *barbacoieros* emphasised this to me, as well. To uphold this value, many families in San Mateo slaughtered their own livestock themselves, in a walled area in their yards, a few metres from the house. As has already been mentioned above, it was technically illegal to do this. The government had set up an official slaughterhouse, *rastro*, which was meant to monitor the sanitation of animal slaughter. I visited the *rastro* with Alicia, and I was appalled with the state of the place. There was blood all over the floor and animal foetuses strewn about instead of being discarded properly. Since Alicia knew someone who worked there, we were let in without trouble, but when I started taking photographs, an official approached us and told me that I needed signed permission to do so. We explained that I was a foreign student



investigating *barbacoa* in Milpa Alta, describing my research as if it were a high school project. The man suddenly said that he had the authority to grant me permission to take photos and he would allow me to continue this time, but next time I ought to write a formal letter of request. Later Alicia told me that he had no authority whatsoever, but had surely begun to panic when he saw my camera thinking I was a spy for the health and sanitation department.

### **Wednesday: Rest**

Wednesday is the day of rest for *barbacoiero* families. This is spent like a typical Sunday for anyone else, unless there is a major holiday midweek, in which case they would prepare more *barbacoa* to sell on these special days. Otherwise they are free to relax and hold their own or attend other fiestas which mark life cycle events in the family.<sup>17</sup>

## **4.4 Conclusion**

From the first time that I observed and participated in the preparation of *barbacoa* I was fascinated with the process. There was a distinct division of labour between men and women, with the main responsibility lying in the marital couple, particularly the wife. When I later learned, as mentioned above, that only married couples prepare *barbacoa* for a living, whilst single men and women only helped their parents but had separate careers, it was evident that this was an industry that had significant social effects. But I had not realised how much the preparation of the dish affected the way that *barbacoieros* interacted socially with others.

When a couple decides to dedicate themselves to *barbacoa*, they commit themselves to working excessively hard during weekends and having free time in the middle of the week, when most people are very busy working. Whatever the weather, they have to work long disciplined hours to continue to earn a living and not to disappoint their customers. Their lifestyles depicted the discipline necessary for the culinary technique in which they were specialised. Order, cleanliness and frugality were the emphasis. After slaughtering, all parts of the animal were used either in the cooking or for other purposes. The sheepskins were sold to make into jackets and rugs,

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<sup>17</sup> See part II.

the bones were sold to make detergents, and the tallow was sold to make soap. All other parts of the animal were eaten. Nothing was wasted.

Their work rhythm dictated some of their values, as well as their timetables. Having the opportunity to socialise at the same times, it makes sense that people of similar occupation should group together. This proximity to one another also encourages competition, so it is unsurprising that issues of trust and envy are highly relevant in a community of people involved in the same business. Families carefully protected their belongings and social standing. Since Milpa Alta is an area of relative poverty, *barbacoieros* seem to be both more attractive as well as more cautious when dealing with others. The recent prosperity associated with *barbacoa* makes the wealth of *barbacoieros* a new value to protect.

The fact that they are concentrated in Barrio San Mateo gives the *barrio* a reputation of being excessively proud and stingy. Those from San Mateo are said to be much less friendly than those of other *barrios*. Women who married into San Mateo often commented to me that they had not been used to how people in San Mateo rarely greeted one another in the streets, nor did they share with each other unless there was a particular fiesta. It was uncommon to borrow ingredients from the neighbours as they were expected to pay for whatever foodstuff they required, even if it was only a bit of sugar or a few *tortillas*. This behaviour was attributed to wealth, and wealth in the area was attached to *barbacoa*. Indeed, *barbacoieros* did appear to have slightly different social lives from non-*barbacoieros*.

The production of the dish encompassed all aspects of their lives, and vice versa. Social values and behaviour seemed encapsulated in the process of cooking or making the food. For example, motherhood is a well known value in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. For *barbacoa*, references to motherhood seemed related to the achievement of better flavours, as in using the developed uterus for the *panza*, although consumers are unable to determine the cause of the difference in taste. Meat preparation could be socialized, or at least socially interpreted. So it seemed tempting, at first, to analyse the preparation of *barbacoa* as if it illustrated a process of social conversion and acculturation.<sup>18</sup> A living animal changed from a natural state to a

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<sup>18</sup> I had been reading works like Ohnuki-Tierney 1993 and Rutter 1993, which deal with more symbolism and the power of specific foodstuffs, to incorporate individuals into society. I have found this kind of semiotic analysis inapplicable to my own ethnographic data.

controlled, socially malleable, edible object. The *matanza* was more than a slaughter, it was the beginning of this social manipulation.

But the problem with thinking of it in this way was that the preparation of *barbacoa* was not a ritual; it was a culinary technique, a craft whose product depended on physical labour, economic constraints, and technical capabilities. Making *barbacoa* was both a source of livelihood and a pursuit of culinary excellence. The goal was to achieve the best possible taste in the most pragmatic way for commercial and gastronomic success. *Barbacoieros* felt little or no attachment to the animals they slaughtered. The animals were simply a source of meat, another ingredient. It is just by the way that they are foodstuffs which are transformed into the delicious parts of the eating experience.

I had known that *barbacoa* was difficult and laborious to prepare, and it had complex flavours. It was precisely the complexity of the flavours and the preparation which made it more than just meat. These were reasons why it was a dish typically eaten at special occasions, or only at weekends. As Gell has shown, differentiating between decorated objects and non-decorated objects, the decoration, he argues, is just as functional as the object itself (1998: 74). Likewise, it can be said that the purpose of eating food is not simply for nourishment. Food requires ‘decoration’ – flavourings or elaborate preparation – just as much as it requires nutrients. The function of the elaboration is to mark the dish, that is, the occasion in which it is eaten, as special.

Since *barbacoa* is an elaborately prepared dish, it can be thought of as a work of art, which is decorated or considered more special or beautiful than other objects/dishes. Because of the technical mastery necessary for its production and the acknowledgement of this virtuosity in its consumption, *barbacoa* can be thought of as an artwork within the corpus of Mexican cuisine. The technical activity of, in this case, cookery, is both a source of prestige as an object (dish) and a source of efficacy in social relations. ‘The work of art,’ Gell states, ‘is inherently social in a way in which the merely beautiful or mysterious object is not: it is a physical entity which mediates between two beings, and therefore creates a social relation between them, which in turn provides a channel for further social relations and influences’ (1996:52).

*Barbacoa* ranks high in the hierarchy of dishes in Mexican cuisine, although it is by no means the highest.<sup>19</sup> Even so, it is exemplary of how social behaviour is affected for

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<sup>19</sup> *Mole* probably ranks as highest.

the sake of concerns over taste and economy. On small scale, the food preparation was a sensual experience, both for men and for women. The actual flavouring and elaboration was often the responsibility of women, since they generally were the ones in charge of the *panza* and the all important *salsas*. If the appropriate pleasurable flavour was achieved in the many parts of the dish, a *barbacoiero* would have greater economic success, which could later lead to greater social success. More customers would buy the product for their own consumption, as well as to share it with others, either in small groups or in large fiestas.

On large scale, *barbacoa* affects the community of San Mateo in Milpa Alta. Before the concentration of *barbacoieros* and their technical and financial success, San Mateo was like any other *barrio* of maize farmers, among many. San Mateo became special because of a special dish (or a special flavour). This higher status then had ramifications on the social relations of its residents with one another, as well as with residents of other *barrios* and towns (the perceived rise in greed and protectiveness, but also in celebration and large-scale sharing).

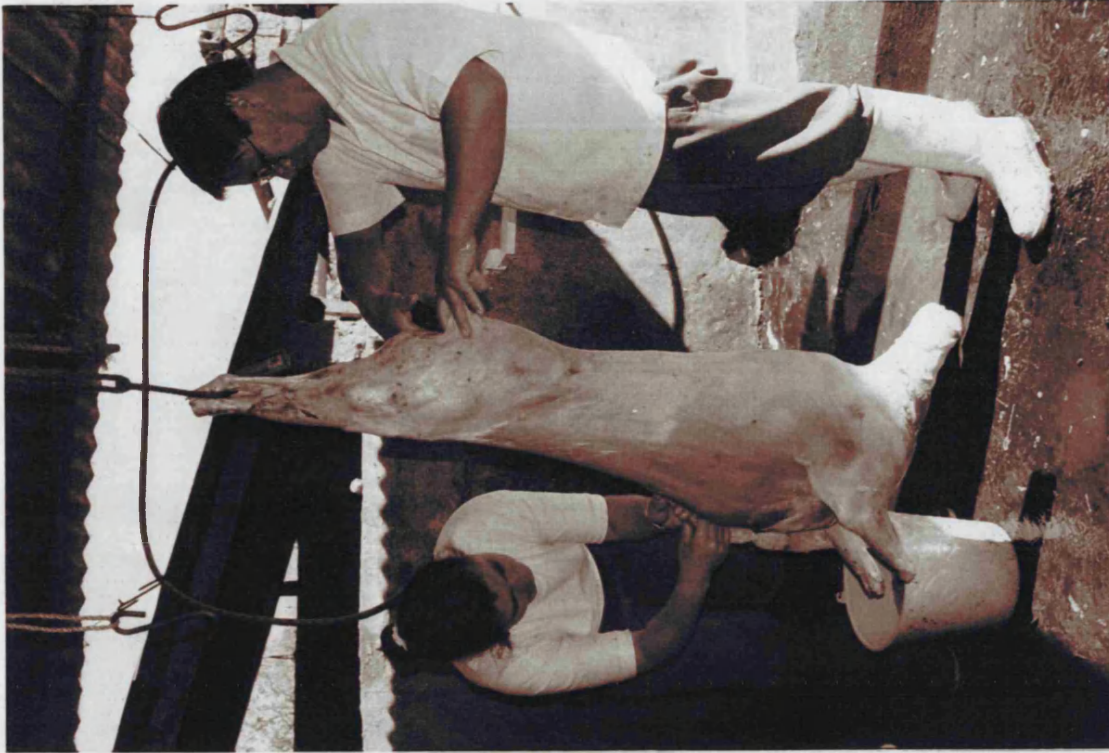
Daily food similarly influences adjustments in behaviour. Women, or cooks, invest measured amounts of time, effort and money in the everyday production of meals, which could be thought of as minor works of art or craft. As shown in the above description of a typical week for *barbacoieros*, women put in much effort and creativity in daily cooking, even though there is little time to relax and savour the flavours of their meals. The success of their cooking affects their relations with the people they are feeding, both with themselves and with one another. Worth noting here again now is that I did not arrive in Milpa Alta with the intentions of observing gender relations, but I could not help being struck by the organised cooperation that I observed during my first few weeks there. In the chapter that follows, women's labour, ideals, and their relations with men will be explored further. In particular, I will describe their roles as wives and cooks, and how the activities prescribed as appropriate for them, and the technical skills they must acquire, affect the way they socialise with others.



7 The *matanza*—Alejandro bleeds a lamb to prepare *barbacoa de borrego*.



8 He pulls the skin off the carcass.



9 Primy and Alejandro flush the dirt out of the anal passage through the large intestines.



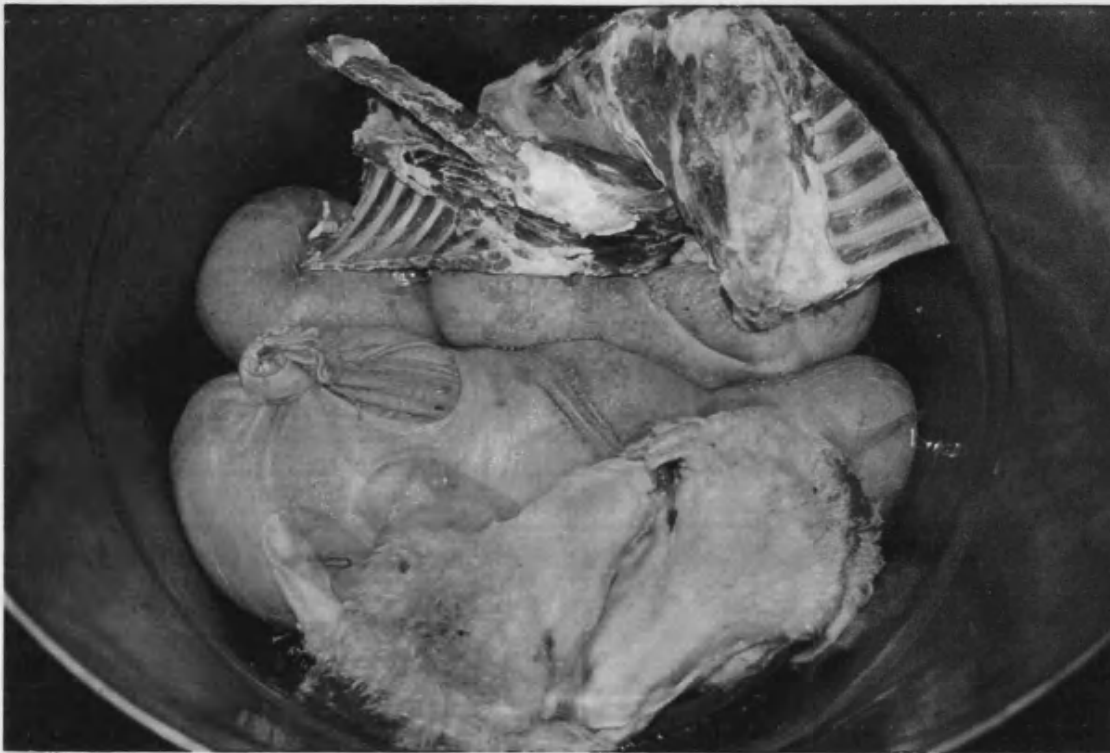
10 A sheep foetus, still attached to the developed uterus.



11 Alejandro chopping offal.



12 Primy beating the filling for the *panza*—offal with onions, green husk tomatoes, herbs and chiles.



13 Stacking the *perol*, here seen with the stuffed *panzas*, heads and necks.



14 The half-cooked *panzas* ready to be wrapped in toasted maguey leaves.





15 Primy stokes the coals in the *barbacoa* pit and has ready the wrapped *panzas* and parboiled meat.



16 The basin that is placed at the bottom of the pit oven contains the flavourings for the *consomé de barbacoa* (*epazote*, onions, leeks, green husk tomatoes, dried and powdered red chiles).



17 Primy covers the filled pit with the caul.



18 *Molino de salsas*, the salsa mill.



19 At 5 o'clock the next morning, Primy removes the cooked meat to take it to the market to sell.



20 Primy making *tacos* of *barbacoa* as she sells in a *tianguis*.

## Women as culinary agents

In Milpa Alta, as in most of Mexico, cooking is usually done by women. It is often assumed to be part of women's work, like housework and looking after children. Household labours are divided between women and men, as has already been indicated in the previous chapter, but this does not necessarily mean that women's work is confined to drudgery and domestic tasks, whereas men's work is always more prestigious since it is in the public domain. In this chapter my aim is to show how women are not simply victims of being born women, subjugated by a *machista* society over which they have little control. Instead, women in Milpa Alta have more choices and means of movement than may appear on the surface, and their responsibility for cooking can be one way that they garner their power within their own, women's, domain. This has also been argued by others before me, and it is not a phenomenon isolated to Mexico. Much recent literature on Latin American societies has shown that power relationships and the production of sociality in domestic and wider social strata result from gender complementarity (Vázquez García 1997; McCallum 1989; Descola 1994; Williams 1985; Hugh-Jones 1979; La Fontaine 1978, esp. Harris and Hugh-Jones in that volume), and in fact, gender is not intrinsically hierarchical nor primarily an 'identity' (McCallum forthcoming, especially ch.7; Melhuus and Stølen 1996), and women's cooking is an activity as legitimate politically as other social activities (for Mexico, see García and de Oliveira 1997, Villareal 1996).

Although this chapter is not strictly an analysis of gender relations in Milpa Alta, gender differentiation is an aspect of life in Mexico which necessarily contributes to the ordering of social life, in the sexual division of labour and in other areas. The compilation of essays on Latin American gender imagery edited by Melhuus and Stølen (1996) emphasizes the need for empirically based analyses of power and gender, and also shows how stereotypical images of the *macho* and the *madre sufrida* (suffering mother) are not fixed and self-evident (see also González Montés 1997). Latin American women are not simply subordinate to men because of an unquestionable *machista* social structure. Words such as '*macho*' encompass complex notions of gender in Latin America. A *macho* cannot simply be assumed to mean a womanizing

man who beats his wife and dominates women.<sup>1</sup> With similar reasoning, neither can women's subordination be assumed.

In this chapter I will try to show how the apparent confinement of women to the domestic sphere is a distorted view of the reality of their social lives, using a preoccupation with food and cooking as a focal point. Even in cases where women appear to be completely subservient to their husbands (*'Es él que manda'*), they are not imprisoned in their kitchens or completely engulfed in household chores (cf. Williams 1985). For those women who take great interest in cooking, for example, one of the secrets of Mexican (and any good) cooking is having top quality ingredients at hand. In demonstration of their dedication to the production of superior flavours in food, many women go to great lengths to collect the right ingredients for the dishes they wish to prepare. In Milpa Alta it is normal to make frequent (almost daily) trips to the market or to different shops for the freshest and best ingredients that they can afford.

For these errands, women do not need to be accompanied, whereas they are usually chaperoned for social outings. When I have accompanied one or another friend or acquaintance on a visit to the market, it has often been a journey with frequent stops to chat with others passing on the street or those working in their perspective stalls or shops. Sometimes we would detour for an ice cream or a *taco* or *licuado* or other snack bought on the street or in the market. Trips to the market are as much a social event for exchanging news and gossip as for stocking up the larder.<sup>2</sup> Only then did I understand the joke (evidently based on truth) that men ask (usually single young) women at what time they are supposed to go out to buy bread everyday. Since unmarried daughters in the family were often asked to buy fresh bread in the evenings for supper, this was a time when they could linger and meet illicitly with their lovers under cover of nightfall and the excuse of a culinary errand.

The clearly defined movements that are considered to be socially legitimate for women are not always restricting, therefore, and they are also in a process of social change. The account I present here, based on my observations among women in Milpa Alta, has more credence when placed in comparison to Levine's (1993) vivid and thorough exploration of three generations of urban women in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Though Levine does not discuss cooking, her work reveals how women have few

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough analysis of the different meanings of '*macho*' in Mexico, see Gutmann (1996). See also Melhuus and Stølen (1996).

opportunities to make friends after marriage as rules of propriety appear to limit and dictate women's social spaces, keeping their world separate from men's. Yet this is not without reason, and not as a result of women's perceived 'natural' subordination to men.

The issue of women's possible subordination (*la mujer sumisa*) was of major concern among several women with whom I spent my time – most notably Yadira, Lulú, and Juanita. The picture that I paint in this chapter may therefore be coloured by their ideas and influence on me, since each of them considered herself atypical among women in Milpa Alta, yet knowledgeable about the majority from whom they were distancing themselves. They were the women who spoke to me most openly about the relationships between women and men, and perhaps they were the kind of informants most attracted to me, since I was an unmarried young woman pursuing a career far from my native domestic context. These three women, in particular, were ambitious and involved in local politics, and though they were more representative of women in their twenties, thirties and early forties, I turned to them for clarification of my observations among other women of different age groups with whom I had contact.

In the sections that follow, I will try to explain how women are arguably the most highly valued half of society (cf. Melhuus 1992), and they use their status in imaginative and subtle ways to assert their power (over men). Central to the argument is the nature of the two most important desires, for food and for sex (see Gow 1989, Gregor 1985). As Gow argues convincingly, it is in fulfillment of these desires that social relations are made or unmade. Women and gender roles are in a processual flux of interconnected relationships that together make up sociality (MacCallum forthcoming, Gow 1991). In addition, the actions that are taken to link people to each other are often creative, culinary, and hence, artistic.

## 5.1 Shared spaces

*A la mesa y a la cama, una sola vez se llama*

To the table or to bed, you must come when you are bid

– Mexican saying

*One evening after Alejandro returned home from marking livestock at the supplier ranch, the family gathered at the dining table to accompany him while he ate. For the first time in several weeks, Alejandro and I were having a conversation. He told me*

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<sup>2</sup> In some cases, this relative freedom could be seen as problematic in regard to relations between jealous

that he had mentioned me to his friend the supplier, José Luis, who was curious about how it was that I was living in Milpa Alta considering that I come from so far away. José Luis had asked Alejandro what I do and what I was like, and Alejandro realised that he did not have a clue.

'But how is this possible?' José Luis exclaimed. 'Does she not live in your house?' Alejandro had no reply. All he knew was that I was interested in *barbacoa* somehow.

'You must understand,' he defended himself, 'that I hardly see her. We greet one another in the morning before I leave, and then again before I go up for bed in the evening. We never talk. I know nothing about her.'

'But who is she? Why does she live with you? How could you allow a complete stranger to live in your house? How did she get there?'

Primy interjected here that did he not simply say that now we have developed a friendship and so this is why I live with them?

'Well,' Alejandro said that he reflected and told him, 'she is the friend of my cousin's wife but I have no idea how they met...'

The above illustrates two things: that kin links and relationships of trust (*en confianza*) may widen one's accessible spaces, and also that women and men may cohabit and yet hardly ever cross paths (cf. Levine 1993, ch. 3). This conversation occurred after I had already been living with Primy and Alejandro for over two months. I had almost exclusively spent this time with Primy or with Alejandro's mother, Doña Margarita. Alejandro was always either out at the supplier's ranch to mark sheep or out (presumably drinking) with friends who were fellow *barbacoieros*. If he was home and the slaughter was finished, he would be upstairs in his room catching up on his sleep or watching television. When I did see him on occasion, if it was not meal time, he might be weighing the carcasses of the lambs or sitting at one end of the dining table with a pencil and calculator. He was working out how much *barbacoa* they would produce with the amount of meat that they had and how much profit would come of their efforts. He was always making his calculations, or was on his way out or on his way upstairs, and so never paused to chat with me. He hardly seemed aware of my presence because his financial situation was his utmost preoccupation at all times.

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husbands and wives. See Levine (1993, esp. ch. 2,3) for more on courtship and marriage.

Alejandro was constantly calculating how much profit he was making depending on the price of livestock per kilo compared with the current selling price of *barbacoa* in the market. Another major worry was that a few months before, they were robbed of their pick-up truck at gunpoint and they desperately needed to save money to be able to buy another one. In the meantime they used a rickety old sedan to transport most of their supplies and *barbacoa* to the market, and Alejandro's brother-in-law would bring the rest to them later. So in addition to general concerns over their daily expenses, Alejandro had the added pressure of his need to buy a new truck. Yet although this makes it unsurprising that he should carry his calculator whenever he was at home, such economic concerns cannot explain why I could spend all of my time in his house and still hardly ever see or speak with him.

In contrast with Alejandro, I was able to get to know two other men fairly well. One was his cousin, Kiko. The other was Miguel. Kiko was the son of a schoolteacher and he too studied to be a teacher (as did his only brother). Apart from his teacher's wages, his wife was also a schoolteacher and contributed to the household budget, and he also supplemented their earnings by cultivating *nopales*. Miguel was from neighbouring Barrio Santa Martha, and for a living he used to sell pork products, but after marrying Coty he learned to prepare *barbacoa* from Alejandro and soon adopted the trade as his main means of livelihood. These three men not only are very different, but also represent three types of men in Milpa Alta.

Alejandro was a perfect example of a *barbacoiero*. He was the breadwinner in the family, he inherited his father's business and his stand in the market. As an only son, he continued to live in his parents' house which he eventually inherited after his father passed away.<sup>3</sup> He asked Primy to quit her job after she married him because he wanted her to concentrate her efforts on their future family. After Primy moved into Alejandro's house, his mother taught Primy her responsibilities in the preparation of *barbacoa* while Alejandro assumed his father's responsibilities and became the head of the household. Yet he always said that his mother was the queen and the household head.

Kiko was unusual in that he was an idealist who valued pedagogy and education much more than making money. He was a schoolteacher, as well as *nopalera* owner.

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<sup>3</sup> This can also apply to a lastborn son. When there are more than one son in the family it is not uncommon for all of them to continue living in the same house or compound after marriage. Often, as the



Instead of spending more time in the fields or investing in more land to be able to grow and sell more *nopales*, he worked hard to achieve his bachelor's degree (*licenciatura*). This was much to the exasperation of his father who thought it wiser to dedicate himself full-time to earning a living rather than completing his studies. But in spite of Kiko's interest in his career, he never neglected his *nopalera*, and he did make a better living from the land than from his teacher's wages. He also consciously avoided behaviour normally construed as *macho*. He encouraged his wife, Yadira, to continue working as a schoolteacher herself, or in any other profession she wanted. He saw his relationship with her as a loving partnership between equals, and he often spoiled her and their four-year old daughter whenever he had the opportunity to satisfy their whims.

Miguel was also unusual for a man in Milpa Alta. He took on the trade of his wife's family instead of continuing with his father's trade in pork, although at that time there were pragmatic reasons for Miguel's decision to become a *barbacoiero*. Soon after their marriage, *barbacoa* was much more profitable than pork, and Miguel and Coty were eager to build themselves a house separate from his parents' house. Now that *barbacoa* was not as lucrative, another career change appeared to be out of the question, however. Miguel continued with this work because he had become a *barbacoiero* and was no longer interested in selling pork products nor in cultivating *nopales*, which would be his two likely employment options. Since he did not complete a university degree, in a way *barbacoa* was the only skill he possessed which he could use to support his family. Although Coty helped in the sales and in other preparations, Miguel did not expect his wife to perform all of the duties normally ascribed to wives of *barbacoieros* nor to enter the labour market so she could contribute to their household earnings.

Thus, in spite of some very detailed and thoughtful conversations with men like Kiko and Miguel, I noticed that they, like other men, would make a point of moving one seat away if I came up to them and sat on the chair beside them. This was a clear indication of keeping a respectful distance which I in my clumsy way failed to realise until much later. Still, as a foreigner I was excused these occasional unintentionally flirtatious actions because of my ignorance of the limits of personal space and how this changes between people of the same sex and between people of opposite sex. Inevitably my research is limited to exhibiting the experience of being a woman in

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elder sons marry first, they eventually move out, and so the house remains with the youngest son, as in

Milpa Alta, since men and women almost seemed to live separately. Their social spaces are rarely shared although they inhabit the same physical spaces. Women in Milpa Alta only mixed openly with men during work, when they met by chance on the street, or when there was a festive occasion to attend. Otherwise, their worlds seemed divided by fear of social stigma and heavy responsibilities which kept them very busy.

## 5.2 Labels and restricted spaces

*¿Qué panadero no alaba su pan aunque esté quemado?*  
*What baker does not adore his own bread even if it is burnt?*  
- Mexican saying

Gossip has been shown to be a social mechanism that is used to articulate and enforce appropriate behaviour (Colson 1974). As a mechanism of social disapproval and control it can restrict movement in acceptable social spaces (Martin 1990, Villareal 1996) but also promotes social order and harmony. Melhuus (1992: ch. 5) gives a discussion of the labels *puta* and *hijo de puta* as insults which highlight a paradox of honour and value in Latin American societies. While men appear to hold honour, and represent their families as the household head, the greatest value in society is placed on women, and it is women's behaviour and morality (their shame) which reflects upon men. Women are a threat to men as 'bearers (if not keepers) of their honour' (80) and men are the 'guardians of women's virtue' (159). The morality of women is linked to the merit of 'suffering [as] a way of life' (160) or a female virtue, which subtly hides their actual power over men.

Melhuus's research illuminates the deep meanings of morality and gender in Mexico, and how the crux is women's virtue. Of central importance is women's roles as mothers in relation to men. This is why calling a man the son of a whore, *hijo de puta*, is a very powerful and very bad insult, whereas calling a woman the daughter of a whore, *hija de puta*, is ambiguous and virtually meaningless. Her morality is better insulted directly, by calling her a whore, *puta*. But there are two other terms, *pendejo/a* and *güey*, which are more commonly used in Milpa Alta for insulting men and women. These express two key concepts of moral judgment, complementary to the labels of *puta* and *hijo de puta*. They are related to the victimized wife of the *macho* man who has other lovers or more than one family, and to the cuckolded husband of the woman who sleeps around.

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the case of Marcos, described in chapter four.

When someone is called *pendejo/a*, it usually means *hacerse tonto/a*, to act stupidly. A woman described as *pendeja*, is one whose husband has one or more lovers, and she accepts it. She either pretends she does not know or that she does not care so much. When a man's wife has a lover, he may be described as being *pendejo*, but a more popular word to use is *güey*. It is one of the biggest insults that anyone could say to a man, although it is also used among close friends to profess one's admiration of another.<sup>4</sup> The word *güey* is derived from the word *buey* which means bull, *toro*. More specifically, it was explained to me that when you describe a man by saying, '*Es un buey*', 'He is a bull', it is because his wife is deceiving him, '*porque su esposa le engaña*'. When you say, '*Se hace güey*', 'He is acting *güey*', it is because it seems that he takes no notice, because he is acting stupid, '*porque parece que no se da cuenta, porque se hace tonto*'. Furthermore, since bulls have horns, a man who is called a *güey* has horns. So by cheating on him with another man, his wife gives him horns, *se pone los cuernos*.

A man who moves into his wife's house after marriage or who is henpecked is teased by others as a *ciguamoncli* or *ciguamoncle*.<sup>5</sup> Although it may not necessarily be the case that his wife dominates over him, or that she has an extramarital lover, since it is the norm for the wife to move to the husband's house, the appearance of the situation is that the man is acting *güey*. Men and women are conceived of as having differing motivations for such lenience over the sexual behaviour of their spouses. The explanation was phrased to me in this way:

Generally a man who acts *tonto* does so because of the depth of his love for his wife. A woman who acts *tonta* does so because she is *pendeja*, so that people will not speak ill of her, to keep up appearances.<sup>6</sup>

The implication of the above explanation is that a man acts 'stupidly' and allows his wife to 'give him horns' because he refuses to acknowledge that her behaviour is making a fool of him. He allows her to dominate, in effect. A woman who acts 'stupidly' is just 'stupid' because she allows her husband to do as he pleases, and she

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<sup>4</sup> This is just like how swear words are used in English when good friends insult one another but are really expressing admiration.

<sup>5</sup> This word is in Náhuatl, and is almost exclusively used in Milpa Alta.

<sup>6</sup> '*Regularmente cuando un hombre se hace tonto es por tanto amor que le tiene para su mujer. Una mujer se hace tonta por pendeja, para que la gente no habla mal de ella, para guardar las apariencias.*'

does not complain so that he continues to appear dominant over her. Inversely, if she was not stupid (*pendeja*) and overly concerned with others' opinions, she would take advantage of her (natural?) right to demand her husband's 'respect' and full sexual attention.

### **Women and suffering**

When a woman's husband is having an extramarital affair, this is considered to be the greatest form of suffering in marriage.<sup>7</sup> At some point in marriage, a husband is thought likely to be unfaithful to his wife, and not the other way around. Alejandro once said to me very bluntly, '*El mexicano toma mucho y le gusta divertirse con varias chamacas*', 'Mexican men drink a lot and like to have fun with several girls'. Not all men are like this, but this is the expected image. Some people would even say that a man who has no lover is not a real man, '*Él que no tiene una amante no es hombre*', and also that if he does not beat his wife, he is henpecked, '*Él que no pega a su mujer es su mandilón*'. Yadira also told me that some women have asked her if she does not feel strange because her husband did not have a lover.

From people's conversations, it appears to be commonplace for men to have affairs, and by extension, some people have told me that single women should beware that men do not take advantage of them. Primy used this example to explain to me what it means to have a relationship of trust, *estar en confianza*. Because of my trust, *confianza*, with her, I could feel secure whenever I was in her home, her home was my home. I had the freedom to come and go as I pleased and to use the facilities and take what I pleased, and I could be sure that no harm would be done to me. I could be sure that Alejandro would never attack me and that I would be protected from other men. Married women apparently need not fear because they have husbands who will defend them, but single women are in danger, as well as dangerous.

So I had been easily adopted as a guest in Primy's and Yadira's homes, exempt from categorizing beyond my obvious status as being a woman. As a curious outsider, several people were happy to share a bit of their lives with me although mainly women engaged me in conversation. In Yadira's case, I was not her first friend to stay extended periods of time in their house. She told me that other women have even asked her how is it that her husband allows her to have single lady friends as houseguests. If they are too close, their husbands either feel jealous of them or may take advantage of them.

That would explain why these women warned her that Yadira may not complain if her husband cheats on her in future, because she is the one who brings the bait into her marital bed.

The way Yadira saw it, most married women are 'not allowed to have friends'. It was either that or they were too busy with their business or family commitments. When I suggested to Yadira that women (and men) embrace the opportunity to talk with someone who has the time to listen to them, she agreed completely. She told me of her own experience of selling cosmetics and jewelry door to door in Milpa Alta. With her friendliness and charm she was often invited into people's houses, which was unusual. She would make appreciative comments to the women who answered the door, and they would eventually invite her in and offer her something to eat or drink, depending on what time of day she arrived. Sometimes she was fed a whole *comida* even if she had already eaten, but she could not refuse her hostess' hospitality.

Usually, these women would also end up talking with her for a long time, telling her their stories, and opinions about things. Sometimes when she would come just to pick up payment for their purchases, they would invite her in, feed her, talk with her for half an hour or so, and then only after some time remember that her purpose there was to collect payment. Some women would ask her to come back the following week, and would engage her in lengthy conversation once more before paying her. Yadira guessed that they treated her like this because she was unthreatening to them, they liked her, and because there usually was no one else around who would sit with them and listen to them, as she would.

Apart from having little free time to talk, men and women who are not married to each other usually keep their distance from one another. While they often had some hours free in the afternoons, men and women usually spent these hours apart. Women relaxed then, by watching soap operas or football on television before it was time to warm up leftovers or prepare a light meal for dinner.<sup>8</sup> It was during this time in the late afternoons that I was often able to chat with women without interruption. One issue about which some women talked in a surprisingly casual manner was physical abuse. An elderly lady told me that her husband was a womanizer and a drunk, but he never hit

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<sup>7</sup> For a vivid comparative account, see Levine (1993, ch. 3).

<sup>8</sup> Conversations in the market often began with a woman calling out to acquaintances, '*¿Qué tal el fut?*' [What's up with the footie?]

her. Then she added, 'No, he only hit me once or twice, but it was because I had done something to deserve it; but apart from those occasions, he never hit me!' Another woman told me that if her husband ever hit her, (and he never has, except for having pushed her forcefully twice), she would have no one to turn to now since her father-in-law had already died and the other men in the family would not be supportive.

Several people generally believe that most men beat their wives, but unfortunately I have no hard facts to prove this. I have been told, though, that if a woman fails to cook or clean, her husband may beat her (or at least she fears that he might, even if he never has given her reason to believe he really will). If he does beat her, she suffers through it, and they do not separate. There are very few divorces and separations in Milpa Alta. This must be because, as Melhuus (1992) suggests in her study of Toluca, Mexico, women have the tendency to attach virtue to suffering. When Yadira's first child was born, she told me that she cried because the child was a girl. Girls grow up to have difficult lives, she explained. When I asked Doña Delfina, who had two sons, if she had wanted a daughter, she replied that at first she had not thought about it, and since her sons were homey and always helped her at home, she never felt the desire to have a daughter. She then added, 'It was better, knowing how a woman suffers, better not [have a daughter]. God gave me two sons, and thanks to God, with them I am happy', *'Ni, mejor, por conocer que una como mujer sufre, ya no. Dios me ha dado dos hijos, y gracias a Dios, con esos estoy contenta'*.

My conversations with women, such as the above, were usually held in the afternoons, when we rested, or in the kitchen, as we prepared meals. From the time when I first met Yadira, I already had an inkling that the kitchen table was an important and intimate part of the house. I was introduced to Yadira by her cousin, who had arranged that we have a meal at her house one Sunday. There were several members of the extended family present, and all the men and some women sat at the table, waiting for the food to be ready and to be served. Yadira remained in the kitchen with the *muchacha*, and her cousin immediately joined her to help. I was told to sit at the table with the men, elders and others, and I sat there, feeling shy and uncomfortable. Soon, Yadira and her cousin called me to join them in the kitchen where they were chatting as they finished chopping onions and heating *tortillas*. The atmosphere of the kitchen was more informal and light, and from that first day I began to experience how the kitchen

table was a site where confidences could be shared, gossip was exchanged, and opinions about specific issues of women's concern could be tested out on each other.<sup>9</sup>

After spending more time in Milpa Alta, I noticed that the late afternoon was the best time for meeting women, although few people visited others without a specific purpose. Most women used this time for themselves, spending it as they wished. Their husbands were rarely around; they were either at work, out with other men, or sleeping at home from having had to stay up all night because of the livestock. This was one reason why there seemed to be little contact between men and women, even in the same household. Indeed there are few occasions when they might find a more intimate moment alone. They may talk and joke in a fiesta setting, but that is a public domain, where chaperones and witnesses abound. If they are married to one another, unless they work together, a man and woman hardly have time to share more than the dining table and the bed.<sup>10</sup> To clarify how sharing spaces may lead to social misunderstanding or disapproval, the following anecdote is an apt illustration:

*One day I commented to Yadira that it is a good thing that Miguel now slaughters his sheep at Primy's house because this way they keep each other company when they clean the offal together. Alejandro and Coty never helped in this rather unpleasant part of the preparation of barbacoa. When it is 2°C outside and it is necessary to scrub intestines inside and out with your bare hands under freezing water, it is more bearable when you have company. Yadira agreed that it was a good thing that Miguel was there to help Primy with such chores, because Primy used to always clean the menudencias on her own, or with Doña Margarita. It was a time of the week for relaxed conversation between Primy and Miguel, and I often sat outside with them and asked them all sorts of questions during this time.*

*Primy and Miguel did get along very well, and not only because they had married into the same family and could relate to one another about being in-laws. Yadira told me that there had been a time when Miguel had to stay away from the house for several months. Since he and Primy got along so well rumours had begun to spread that they*

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<sup>9</sup> For a comparative study written about women's intimate relationships in Norway, see Gullestad 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Note that during the nineteenth century in Mexico, divorce or the break-up of marriage was 'the separation of bed and table' and not the division of a household (Tuñon 1997: 21, and see Arrom 1985).

were having an affair. Although it was untrue, they were forced to avoid each other both in public and in private so as to protect their and their spouses' reputations.

*Aren't people ridiculous? Yadira asked rhetorically. She added that there was even a time when people began to say that she was having an affair with Alejandro. This was because she had a raucous joking relationship with him and she was always making fun of him in front of other people, like during fiestas. She would say that he was lazy, ugly, useless, a typical macho man, and how dare he make Primy do all the work all the time? She teased him, but her intentions were clear – she believed that he abused Primy's nobility and kindness and he ought to respect and even pamper her more. Yadira said that her humorous attacks sometimes made Alejandro reflect on his treatment of Primy and he did treat her with greater respect than he used to. In return, Alejandro teased Yadira about being overweight and bossy. The banter was all in good faith and in good fun, and always in light festive occasions. But people talk and they spread rumours about them, as well, and so for a while they, too, needed to act more subdued with one another. 'But what are people thinking?' Yadira said laughing, 'Do they think I or anyone else would want to have an affair with someone so ugly?!'*

The light-hearted tone that Yadira often used when discussing gender relations was not unique to her. Most people with whom I spoke made jokes and 'naughty' innuendos when they talked of sexual opportunities, both extra-marital or pre-marital, real or imagined. On the much rarer occasion of a woman telling me that her husband had had an affair, or a second family, either she couched the story in terms of woman's suffering, or told me of her little revenge, as in the following anecdote:

*Doña Margarita told me of her jealousy when she discovered that her husband had a lover. She had already suspected it when he would repeatedly come home after midnight without letting her know of his plans to stay out late. As a dutiful wife, she prepared proper meals for him everyday, often cooking his favourites or requests for his comida. When he failed to return home to eat, it frustrated her, but her relatives and neighbours told her she simply had to accept that he was as all other men were. In retaliation, she would wait until he got home, whatever the time, and she would insist that he have his comida. She would rush to the kitchen to warm up the food and would purposely give him large servings, saying that he must be hungry since he was home so late. Although he would have been very full and quite tired, since he had already eaten*



*a full meal with his lover, he was unable to refuse the meal. Doña Margarita would not allow him to leave the table until he cleaned his plate, as he ought to do since it was served to him. Since she had fulfilled her duties as a wife by cooking for him, he had to fulfill his duties as a husband by eating what she had so lovingly cooked.*

Although not common, another form of ‘revenge’ that a woman may undertake if she finds out her husband has a lover is for her to take a lover of her own. On the other hand, a married woman who has a lover is usually scolded by her female friends and relatives. But if a woman finds out that her husband has been cheating on her, her women friends and relatives are likely to tell her to accept the situation, because he is a man, and this is the way that men are. Some women confront their husbands, and also their husband’s lovers. Whether or not this makes men stop their affairs cannot be generalized. From Yadira’s reports, she told me that feelings of jealousy would be understood, but not condoned (cf. Levine 1993). She told me of a young wife who ran to her mother who told her:

Go home and don’t complain. I experienced the same with your father, and look at me. I am still married and have no problems, because I know how to withstand everything. Your father had lovers, but it doesn’t matter. We are women, and this is the cross we must bear. So go home because if you don’t, your husband may arrive and you won’t be there. He is liable to beat you, and you’ll deserve it, for leaving home without permission.<sup>11</sup>

Among those women who have extramarital lovers themselves, Yadira said that they preferred to leave their lovers before they were found out, in order to protect their virtuous image in the eyes of their children. The same did not apply for men. She generalized that for men, to be in love meant sex, and for women, to be in love meant submission (to men, to society’s rules). Although a woman having an affair with a married man ought to be looked down upon, a lover may still be respected in her own way, if her married lover acknowledges her (and their children), thus demands her respect. Otherwise, in Milpa Alta, divorce and single motherhood is worse than having or being an extramarital lover.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘No, regrésate a tu casa y no tienes que quejarte. Yo he vivido lo mismo con tu papá, y mírame. Sigo con mi matrimonio, y no he tenido problemas, porque he sabido aguantar todo. Tu papá tuvo amantes, pero ni modo. Nosotras somos mujeres, esa cruz nos tocó cargar. Y regrésate porque si no, llega tu marido y no estás en casa. Te va a dar tus trancasos, y merecidos por haberte salido sin permiso.’

For men, usually a married man is envied and admired among his peers if he is known to have a lover on the side, especially if she is young and pretty. Men congratulate one another as they talk over a few drinks, or when inebriation inspires confidence and they might ask one another for advice on how to deal with their wife and children, as in the following example:

*Towards the end of a fiesta, Alfonso approached Kiko to ask for advice. Since they shared a compadre, he knew he could confide in him.<sup>12</sup> Alfonso had been drinking heavily and he took Kiko aside to tell him that he had a grave problem. He was 50 years old, married with children, and he had fallen in love with a 25-year-old beauty. He did not know what to do about it. Kiko mischievously decided not to react in the typical way expected of him. He asked Alfonso what he wanted him to do: should he then seduce Alfonso's mistress so that she would lose interest in him, thus relieve Alfonso of his guilt and his 'problem'? Alfonso must have expected praise and then to be offered help to cover up his tracks. Instead, Kiko's response took him aback and so he just had another drink.*

After hearing of this incident, I asked Yadira what she thought about men's and women's love relationships, about men who have affairs, and why they stay with their wives. She could not say for sure that Milpa Alta had many *machos*, but that men who had affairs surely did love their wives. They loved them as mothers, and as 'slaves' to their children, '*Sí, las quieren, pero como mamás, y esclavas para sus hijos.*'. Motherhood being the centre of domestic life kept men with their wives even if they were tempted by others. Women were tempting when they dressed up, wore high heels and short skirts, wore makeup, and cut their hair or left it loose in the modern fashionable hairstyles. Both single and married men found this attractive, so this was why many men forbade their wives from cutting their hair or wearing makeup, to prevent them from attracting other men. Decent women plaited their long hair and did not use makeup. Doña Delfina used to say that only women of the streets wear makeup, '*Sólo las pirujas, las mujeres de la calle, se pintan.*'

What Yadira interpreted as a sign of women's subjugation to men's ideas or tastes, Doña Delfina saw as a moral issue. With their appearance, or at least on the surface,

women could protect their morality, and likewise that of their husbands. The discussion so far suggests that men might have the upper hand over women when it comes to power and permissiveness. But what it also indicates is the centrality of women in the judgment of both men and women, and that this is the source of women's power. My friends like Yadira and Lulú both also said that women who are beaten by their husbands for not fulfilling domestic tasks (with or without hired help), or for not dressing 'appropriately' were partly responsible for those consequences. They allowed their husbands to play the *macho* role. As Lulú put it, 'It depends on the woman; if she becomes submissive, it's because she allows it', '*Depende en la mujer; si se vuelve sumisa, es porque se deja*'.

Therefore, though interpretations may vary, the most important point to note is that many women do feel that they are responsible for themselves, as well as for their families. Blaming themselves for some unpleasant aspects of domestic life indicates that women are the powerful agents, who must take responsibility. They run the family, and by extension, the greater social sphere. Women's power is drawn from the domestic realm, from the venerated role they play in the family. It is epitomized in the mother-child bond, as exemplified by the Virgin of Guadalupe. Women are ready to make great sacrifices for the sake of their children; they would even leave their lovers. As Lulú and Yadira often said, women are the hub of the family, they support as well as benefit and depend upon their family and children. It is for this reason that they are willing to suffer, and to work twice as hard as their husbands. A good woman is a woman who suffers.<sup>13</sup>

### 5.3 Women and hard work

In Milpa Alta the stereotype of self-sacrificing women exists: *la mujer abnegada* is a woman whose husband controls family decisions. *¿Quién es él que manda?*, 'Who is in charge?', is a rhetorical question whose answer is supposed to be the husband. Yet in practice, the response is not so clear. For example, to outsiders, the relationship between Doña Delfina and Don Felipe could be interpreted as one between *mujer abnegada* and *macho*. However they failed to conform to the stereotypical image.

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<sup>12</sup> This is because of the trust, *confianza*, that each of them had with their common *compadre*. As explained in chapter six, trust via links of *compadrazgo* is extendable, and they work like fictive kin links.

<sup>13</sup> Lulú's words were, '*La mujer es el eje conductor, el timón de la familia. Debe a su familia, a los hijos, y tiene que sufrir. Mujeres trabajan el doble de sus maridos. Si no sufren, no son buenas personas. Son persinadas*'. (See also Melhuus 1992, Martin 1990).

When Don Felipe used to work near the Colonia Tepito, and Doña Delfina used to sell pork in the Mercado Morelos, Don Felipe decided that they should move to that area, so they could avoid their two to three hour daily commute each way. He found a suitable flat and made all the arrangements, and all he needed was Doña Delfina's signature, before they could move. She refused to sign the tenancy agreement. She said that she preferred to live in Milpa Alta and to raise her children on their land. Don Felipe tried to persuade her that it would be more practical to move, but she would not. Later, Don Felipe was grateful for Doña Delfina's steadfastness, as he preferred to remain in Milpa Alta, and his children were happier, as well.

In fact, Milpaltense women are normally epitomised as '*la mujer trabajadora*', the hardworking woman. The case of Villa Milpa Alta in particular has made women much more independent and self-sufficient than most people realise. This is directly related to their physical proximity or greater infrastructural communication to the centre of Mexico City, in comparison with the other towns of Milpa Alta. Juanita, a journalist, explained that there is a historical basis to this: during the Revolution, when the men went to fight, the women were left on their own to fend for themselves. They had to earn a living, so they began to engage in business. They sold whatever they had, whatever they could produce, to the people in the centre of the city, so that they could make enough money to afford to feed their children. This habit and attitude towards hard work has remained with them.

The reputation that Milpa Alta women have for being extremely hardworking is held amongst themselves as well as all over Mexico City. One elderly lady, a retired schoolteacher called Maestra Carmen, told me that people in Milpa Alta, especially women, work very very hard, but they have no time to enjoy the fruits of their labour. They work hard to earn a lot of money but hardly have time to spend it, so what good is having all this money? In her case, her husband's family had no land, they did not prepare *barbacoa* for a living, nor did they grow *nopales*. This is not typical for Milpaltenses. Her family all dedicated themselves to education. They lived simply, she said, poorly, but happily.<sup>14</sup> With this statement she implied that typical women of Milpa Alta had unhappy lives, as they were victims of their trades and place of origin.

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<sup>14</sup> In truth they may not live too poorly, as they are not struggling to stave off their hunger. But in comparison with other Milpa Alta families who have successful businesses, and much extra cash for conspicuous consumption, it is unsurprising that Maestra Carmen would describe her family as living 'poorly'.

She illustrated herself as an example of a woman who gratefully did not meet the stereotype of a woman of the area.

She had met her husband, Maestro Manuel, when they were both teaching in a primary school. She came from Tulyehualco nearby but had never been to Milpa Alta before marriage, nor did she know very much about their customs and traditions.<sup>15</sup> Upon marriage she stopped working in order to look after her husband and family, and moved to Milpa Alta to live in his house. She told me this without remorse, and far from a woman doing things simply for the sake of her husband's preferences, she gave the impression of a woman who was content with her choices in life and with her family relationships. She often contrasted herself with Milpaltense women whose families' livelihood were traditional trades.

When she was pregnant, she recounted to me, her neighbour across the road was six months pregnant, as well, and they sometimes would chat when they saw one another in the street. Her neighbour's husband was a *barbacoiero* and she told Maestra Carmen that she often had to stay up until two or three a.m. to keep watch over the oven, even though she was fatigued. Maestra Carmen was surprised at this, as she knew well how difficult and tiring it was to be pregnant. Her neighbour told her that Maestra Carmen was lucky that her husband looked after her and let her rest and repose as any pregnant woman ought to do. She, on the other hand, had to continue working very hard, tending the *barbacoa*.

Other women told me similar anecdotes, but rather than tell me of a *doble jornada*,<sup>16</sup> they spoke with pride of how able and productive their women were. Milpa Alta women admirably sacrifice sleep and other comforts for the sake of their work. Juanita told me that Milpa Alta women never rest, they are very hardworking, '*la mujer Milpaltense no descansa... es muy trabajadora*'. If I were to walk around Milpa Alta at three or four a.m., she continued, I would find many women awake, checking or tending to their pit-ovens for *barbacoa*. By four or five in the morning the market is also alive and teeming with women setting up their stalls and peeling nopales. Supposedly, she added, women in Milpa Alta are submissive, but that is only how it appears on the surface. They are the ones who maintain the economic control in the family.

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<sup>15</sup> She, like everyone else, emphasized to me how different Milpa Alta was from the surrounding areas, because of their traditions and traditionalism.

<sup>16</sup> The *doble jornada*, or 'double workday' is a term used in Latin America to refer to the labour of women who have paid full-time jobs and yet also do all the housework and cooking at home. This term

Most women and men with whom I spoke had similar images and explanations for the economic success of Milpa Alta and this famous characteristic of their women. Yet not everyone agreed on what constituted hard work. Since San Mateo is mainly a commercial neighbourhood, women are encouraged to engage in small or big business alongside or complementary to their husbands'. Newly wed daughters-in-law are better accepted in their husband's family if they are hardworking and take an active interest in the family business.

From living in Milpa Alta, I initially had had the impression that to be a hardworking woman meant to diligently cook and clean, sweep the patio, and launder the clothes. Study fell under another category and education was not really considered to be work.<sup>17</sup> For a woman, to care for the children and elders of the household and to help her husband tend to the family business were not considered as separate issues. Both were assumed under the duties of women, but were also valued as work. In addition to this, several women would describe themselves as housewives, although if asked again, they would say that they were *barbacoieras*, or market vendors (*vendedoras*) or business women (*comerciantes*). In reality, much of the hard work women performed was extradomestic and what was considered to be hard work could be confused between domestic and extradomestic.

When I first started getting to know Yadira, she too told me that the women, in particular, of Milpa Alta have good reason to have their reputation. In her opinion, however, living up to the ideal was not necessarily positive because a woman may work so hard that she never has any time for her children. As a schoolteacher, Yadira was very sensitive to the needs of children, especially aware of how much attention they require. She had much contact with children and teenagers who would cling to her because their own parents never had time to spend with them to listen to their stories, their concerns, to tell them things or share ideas. For Yadira, to be hardworking meant to fulfill the obligations of cooking and cleaning and other household chores, as well as

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has been used to criticise women's entry into the capitalist labour force where they not only were underpaid, but had to do another full day's work at home for their families or husbands.

<sup>17</sup> On an icy day in December, I bundled myself into three layers of clothing and sat outside with Doña Margarita as she chopped vegetables and went about her chores. I often helped her with the onions and tomatoes, but this time I was making a very brief visit. She pulled some hot coals out of the *barbacoa* pit so that I could sit by them and warm my hands as we talked about how unusually cold it was. She told me that she never felt very cold because she was always busy, unlike me, always carrying books and papers. Since she worked, she added, long sleeves got in her way. With this she implied that I never worked, because I only wrote and read, so I always felt cold and needed to wear long sleeves.

to spend time with your loved ones, but have your own independence and career on the side. Although it may appear to be a generally accepted concept that hardworking means cooking and cleaning and nothing more, in Milpa Alta, to be a hardworking woman actually means to be good in business and always ready to sell. Most of the women Yadira knew were very successful in business and hardly spent time with their children.

Amelia (47), for example, was known to be very hardworking. She was from another part of Mexico City and upon marriage, she moved to San Mateo, Milpa Alta where her husband was from. Although she did not immediately conform to all the norms of Milpaltense wives, she was accepted because she was a hardworking woman and was a charming and adaptable person. She worked in the *central de abastos*, the main market of Mexico City where people in the food trade bought their stocks of foodstuffs, either for resale in the many markets or for large eating establishments. She and her husband sold fresh pork, and *nopales*. Since the *central de abastos* supplies products to vendors in other markets, their busiest time was at around four or five in the morning, before local markets open. It took about an hour to drive there from Milpa Alta, so Amelia and her husband would leave home long before dawn and would only return after seven in the evening, completely exhausted. They had little free time but they had good social relations in the neighbourhood, were economically prosperous and were respected and admired by the community.

Amelia's unmarried sister-in-law, Chelita, lived with them. Chelita was in her forties and was unlikely to marry; she was a permanent member of the household and the role she occupied was more like a mother-in-law. She did the housework and cooking when Amelia was out. She also looked after the children, took them to school, bathed and fed them. Amelia and her husband worked so hard that they rarely had time to spend at home, and often only had the chance to kiss their children goodnight before going to bed themselves. Because of this, Chelita took over the duties for which Amelia had no time because she was at work, yet Amelia was the only one who was considered to be hardworking.

Carmen (38) was another example of a hardworking woman. She and her husband owned the first and largest *nopal*-packing factory in the region. They had one of the most economically prosperous families in Milpa Alta and this was mainly because of Carmen's tireless work. When Carmen married Manuel, they had little money, but Manuel had a small plot of land where they grew *nopales*. Like everyone else who had

a *nopalera*, they would wake early to harvest before the sun warmed the *nopales* and then sell them in bulk to distributors who would later resell them in other parts of the city. Carmen was one of the first to think of cleaning the *nopales* of their spines to sell them in smaller quantities directly to the consumers. She would meticulously slice the spines off each paddle and divide them into small bags, packaging them for convenience. The *nopales* that did not grow straight, the *armada*, were usually sold very cheaply since they were undesirable. Carmen would clean them and slice them into strips, ready to use for cooking, so that these formerly inferior *nopales* could be sold for a higher price.

Other women in her extended family began to help her with her arduous task, as the demand for the cleaned *nopales* grew. She soon began to distribute to more and more suppliers and she eventually had to hire people to help her meet the growing demand for cleaned and prepared *nopales*. Their company now supplies major supermarkets in Mexico, and they are involved in ecological research and land sustainability. All of this responsibility required a great time commitment from both Carmen and Manuel. They spent little time at home although they had a large beautiful house, but they had servants to help them maintain it. Carmen rarely took on the role of most women in Milpa Alta, as she was the entrepreneur in the family. Yet she was not considered any less of a woman even though she had no time to cook or to spend with her children. On the contrary, she was admired, as was her husband, because of their economic success and diligence.

Rosario (57) came from another barrio in Milpa Alta. When she was sixteen she eloped with Arturo, a young butcher from San Mateo. He took her to Acapulco one weekend, an act which formalised their relationship, although they never officially married. Arturo sold pork products for a living in the Milpa Alta market. When they returned to Milpa Alta, Rosario moved into Arturo's house and began her new life as a butcher's wife. She recalled how difficult it was to live with her sister-in-law, who seemed to be testing her during the first years of her union. Since Arturo's mother had passed away when he was a child, his elder sister took on the role that his mother would have taken in relation to Rosario. Rosario recalled having to do all the heaviest chores, and always being last priority in the household. Perhaps, she surmised, it was because they had not had a proper wedding.

Rosario would not accept to be treated as lowly at home. Rather than stay in the house all day, she opened a clothing stall in the market. There was always the



possibility to call on relatives or hired help to look after her seven children while she worked hard to earn a little more money. (On the other hand, especially when they would host a fiesta, she took charge of the cooking.) Her income supplemented the family finances and eventually she and Arturo were able to buy a large house and live independently. She continues to work in the market everyday with one of her daughters, although her daughter is old enough to take over the responsibilities. Her social and economic success as a result of her hard work has set an example for her children to follow.

### **‘While Mexico sleeps, Milpa Alta works’**

Milpa Alta women are easily found selling in their market stalls or shops or working in the *nopal* packing factory. They have no qualms about waking up long before dawn in order to attend to the business and make sure that all is moving smoothly. They are willing to remain at work for twelve hours or more, returning home well after dusk, and get up again the next morning before dawn. A commonly heard adage is, ‘While Mexico sleeps, Milpa Alta works’, ‘*Mientras México duerme, Milpa Alta trabaja*’, but some women told me, reiterating Maestra Carmen’s assessment, that the people of Milpa Alta make a lot of money and they work very hard, so they are never able to spend their money. The only times when they take a break and enjoy what they have worked so hard for is when they hold lavish banquets to celebrate such occasions as baptisms, weddings and special birthdays.

Because of the desire to work hard, long hours, Milpaltenses seemed to have an obsession with being late. People were always rushing for something. One morning I was sitting in the kitchen when Doña Delfina and Don Felipe returned from the market. It was just after nine o’clock, and they began to unpack the bread, *tortillas*, squash blossoms, tomatoes, chiles, herbs and other vegetables and fruits that they had bought. I began to help, but Doña Delfina told me to sit down while she prepared the *almuerzo*, which we normally had at around eleven o’clock, ‘because it has already become—’ she was about to say ‘late’ but she caught herself when she realised that it really was still rather early. It was something that I often heard, this expression ‘*porque ya se hizo tarde*’ which showed how people worried excessively about being late.

Food shopping even seems to be expected to take longer than absolutely necessary, in spite of how many people constantly talked of being in a hurry because it was getting late, ‘*hay que apurarse porque se hace tarde*’. The constant hurrying and tardiness is

directly related to how women and men almost always stop to talk with friends, relatives and acquaintances when they see them in the street. Once, when Doña Margarita was making *tamales* and she made her dough a little too thin, she needed someone to go to the *tortillería* to buy some prepared *masa* so that we would not have to soak, boil and grind more maize (*nixtamal*), which would take too long. I offered to go, instead of Primy or one of the children, and I set off without stopping, because Doña Margarita told me not to take too long. When I returned to the house, I was surprised at her surprise at how quickly I had been, because I had done exactly as I was told—go to the *tortillería* and back. Primy mentioned that it was because I walk very fast, but I suspect that it was more unusual not to spend more time chatting with passersby on every outing.

In spite of the long hours working and the constant hurry, Milpaltenses honoured their mealtime and food provision. In fact, it is in pursuit of feeding the family and satisfying the palate that women had the most movement. The hard work described above provides an impression of what women's lives are actually like. Rather than living as beasts of burden for their family, they were allowed substantial opportunities for release from becoming oppressed submissive housewives. As Lulú said, women generate sustenance; they also go to sell and create business, '*La mujer es la que genera el sustento...La mujer es la que se va a vender, que crea el comercio*'. Although hard work seemed to be defined as commerce and extradomestic labour, both paid and unpaid domestic and extradomestic work is acknowledged and valued. Although domestic work appears to be devalued, the cooking and providing of meals is not. Proper provision of good tasting food reflects good motherhood, and likewise, good womanhood.

This must have been the reason why several women described themselves as 'housewives' before acknowledging that they also had small businesses or other commercially-related activities. It was as natural for them to portray themselves as mothers and cooks ('*Me dedico al hogar*'), as it was to call themselves *barbacoieras*, for example. Social expectations required women to provide meals for their families, whether they cooked them themselves or not. Thus, although many women insisted on taking charge of the proper feeding of their loved ones, they could still hire help for the

more tedious domestic chores.<sup>18</sup> As Yadira noticed about most of the women around her, they worked hard at home but often they invested their time in labour that could be better described as extradomestic. They were not simple housewives, but were the drive of the family businesses. Though they lived with some social restrictions, their everyday lives were not necessarily limited. And though they took on responsibilities extradomestically, they still took control of meal provision as a matter of pride, as well as pleasure.

#### 5.4 Everyday cooking and street food

Before she married and moved into her husband's house, Yadira's mother advised her to get up early each morning and to begin the preparations for breakfast as soon as she could. She must try to get into the habit of assuming her role as wife as quickly as possible so that her in-laws would like her and accept her right away. This was a rather daunting idea for Yadira because one of the things she liked least was to get up early in the mornings. But as a dutiful daughter she tried to comply and did as her mother recommended.

During her first days as a wife, her father-in-law, Don Felipe, noticed that she got up very early as he found her in the kitchen at six o'clock every morning. He told her that it was unnecessary to get up so early, but she lied and told him that it was her habit to do so. Eventually, however, she stopped forcing herself out of bed at dawn. Then Don Felipe said to her angrily that here in Milpa Alta *we* start our day early and don't lie in bed wasting time and being lazy! Although Yadira protested and got up when she pleased, she found herself adjusting little by little to the lifestyle in Milpa Alta. Now she usually got up by six o'clock, although on some weekends, she lay in bed longer.

##### Huevos a la mexicana *A typical recipe for almuerzo*

oil  
½ onion, finely chopped  
1 green chile, finely chopped  
1 large tomato, finely chopped  
4 eggs  
salt

Over a medium flame, heat oil in frying pan and sauté onions and chiles until soft. Add tomatoes, raise the heat and cook until well-done and almost dry. Break the eggs into the pan, add salt, and stir until all are well blended. When just firm, remove from the heat. Eggs should still be soft. Serve with beans (*frijoles de olla*) pickled chiles or *salsa*, and hot *tortillas* or bread.

<sup>18</sup> The women who work as cleaning ladies, laundresses or as general household help are not natives of Milpa Alta. They are migrant labourers from poorer states, like Oaxaca, Veracruz or Puebla.

One of the reasons why she changed her sleeping habits was because Kiko had a *nopalera*. An early start is necessary so that he could sell his *nopales* to other vendors so they could begin to resell them by eight or nine a.m. in other markets of Mexico City. Yadira often awoke early in order to help Kiko harvest and sell *nopales*. If she accompanied him, her mother-in-law would prepare their *almuerzo*, a substantial breakfast which could be anything from *longaniza en chile verde* to *chilaquiles* or *enchiladas* or *tortas de tamales*. Otherwise, as his wife, it was her responsibility to feed him his meals.

As soon as the *almuerzo* was over, she would clear the table and start preparing lunch, boiling or roasting tomatoes and chiles, for example, or grinding flavourings and spices, parboiling, peeling or slicing whatever she might need for the *comida*. While she left things to cook she would clean and tidy up the house, tend to her baby or start doing laundry. Sometimes she had a lady come to help her with her household chores, but Yadira always did the major part of the work herself.

When she began teaching the morning shift in one of the local primary schools she could no longer join Kiko in the fields to help him harvest *nopales*. Instead she would get up by six to prepare him a sandwich and a *licuado*. She might cut up some fruit and prepare yoghurt with her bulghur culture and have his *almuerzo* waiting for him when he returned from the field and market to shower. By this time she would be out of the house, teaching, but she would never leave him without something to eat. Doña Delfina, Kiko's mother, would serve him his *almuerzo* when he got back so that he would not be hungry when he went to teach the afternoon shift in another primary school.

As soon as Yadira got home from work at one, she would start preparing lunch. Sometimes Doña Delfina, her mother-in-law, would have helped by charring and peeling chiles or doing other preparations in advance, but Yadira usually did part or most of the preparations of the main meal. The members of the family who were at home would eat together. When the cleaning lady was there, she would eat with them at the same table. A few hours later, when Kiko got home from work, Yadira would warm up the food and give him the same for his supper.

The way that Yadira organized her day was not unusual for a married woman in Milpa Alta. It is difficult to say whether a woman makes plans around her obligations to provide and prepare a meal for her family or whether she dedicates any spare moment

she has to feeding her loved ones and any guests who may come by. Indeed, it reflects badly on a woman if she fails to prepare a home-cooked meal and instead decides to go to the market and buy ready-made food like *tortas* or *tacos* or *tamales*, for instance. Usually those who are found eating in the market stalls so indiscreetly are people who do not live in Milpa Alta, thus have no family nearby with whom they can eat at home. Those eating in the market are people who work in the government or other offices in Milpa Alta, or they are youths having a snack with their friends after school.

To eat in the street indicates that the women of the house are lazy (*'son fodongas'*), too lazy to prepare a meal at home. In Milpa Alta there is even a specific verb for this idea that is only used in the region, *chinaquear*. This concept of shirking one's household, or even womanly, duties is something that few would wish others to label them with. So although there may be times when a woman is too tired, or indeed too lazy, to cook for her family, she tries to be discreet about it. If she decides to buy ready-made food in the market, she most likely would buy it to take away. She could then take it home to eat in privacy so that no one will see her and her family eating in public, to later be able to accuse her of *chinaqueando*.

Whenever Doña Margarita, for instance, suggested to me that we have a meal in the market, she would have a mischievous glint in her eye as she said, *'vamos a chinaquear'*. At the stand she might chat guiltily with the food vendors as if they shared a naughty secret, which was justified because the food sold by the vendor was particularly delicious, and could not be the same if made at home. Mexican street food is one of the broadest ranging parts of the cuisine. In Milpa Alta, most women know how to make many of the foods that can be bought in the streets, like different kinds of *tacos*, *quesadillas*, *sopes*, *tlacoyos*, *pambazos*, *tortas*, *tamales*, *gorditas*, *huaraches*, *garnachas*, and various other snacks. There are some things which cannot easily be made at home, such as *barbacoa* or *pancita*, which are too cumbersome for the domestic kitchen, but knowing who makes them best becomes a source of pride.

Knowing who sells the best quality ingredients at the best price is also desirable and admirable. Women often buy ingredients from several different vendors in the market, because they know who specialises in whichever specific foodstuff they require. They are happy to travel to other towns just to get the right chiles from the right shop or stand, and then travel to another part of the city for the precise kind of cheese or for particular herbs or specific avocados. Sometimes a woman would tell me that the best *tortillas*, for example, could be found at that particular *tortillería*, but since we were in a

hurry and there was a long queue, she was begging my pardon for buying the second best. Another woman might ask her husband to buy some bread on his way home, but only if he could get these specific rolls from that particular bakery, otherwise, she would make something else to eat.

Yadira calls supermarkets where prepared food can be bought '*el paraíso de las fodongas*', 'lazy woman's paradise'. Women ought to prepare food from scratch. She added that the conquest of a man is achieved via his mouth, '*un hombre se conquista por la boca*'. If a man is satisfied with the way a woman cooks, she will always have him in the palm of her hand. A woman must know how to cook and proper women prepare food at home from scratch. Food prepared in the traditional manner with traditional utensils are always considered to be tastier, healthier and also 'authentic.' In Milpa Alta and in other parts of Mexico, I was repeatedly reminded that *salsas* prepared in a *molcajete* were more delicious than those prepared with an electric blender.

The same was true of *tortillas*. *Tortillas* patted out by hand are the best in both flavour and texture. Unfortunately, though, since many women had other work outside of their homes, they lacked the time to make their own *tortillas*. They bought fresh *tortillas* from a *tortillería*, or bought the dough and pressed and baked them at home. The last resort would be to buy prepackaged factory made *tortillas*, commonly referred to as *tortillas de bolsita*.<sup>19</sup> These lacked the texture of proper *tortillas* which have two sides, one thick and one thin, and which inflate when they are reheated. *Tortillas de bolsita* have only one side (or two identical sides) and they look and taste completely different from the other kinds of *tortillas*.<sup>20</sup> They seem pale, raw and excessively soft, but if they are heated for a longer time, rather than cooking fully, puffing up, and later becoming toasted and crisp, as normal *tortillas* would, these simply change from raw to burnt. They were so inferior that most people preferred bread rather than *tortillas de bolsita*.

These sorts of gastronomic discriminations are commonly made in Milpa Alta. Rather than topics of conversation confined amongst food professionals and women who cook, any random person might spontaneously begin an intense conversation about what they ate or what they like to eat. People recall the menus of specific meals with

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<sup>19</sup> Note that in Milpa Alta these *tortillas de bolsita* are actually not easily available, and besides, they are more expensive than *tortillas* from a *tortillería*.

<sup>20</sup> Many thanks to Danna Levin Rojo for pointing out the specific problem with *tortillas de bolsita*.

certain persons several years ago. They describe flavours and other gustatory sensations in detail, frequently making comparisons with how others have prepared the same thing.

When there are large celebrations, some families hire women renowned for their cooking to come to their house and prepare the meal.<sup>21</sup> These women protect their culinary secrets as their greatest treasures. They only pass them to their daughters or very close friends or relatives. They are proud of their cooking abilities, and usually refrain from revealing their true recipes to admirers who ask them how they prepared their delicious dishes. In Milpa Alta, these women are said to hide their secret ingredients in their apron pockets so that no one knows exactly how they cook and no one else can prepare their specialities the way they do. This is why it is prestigious enough to hire the right women to cook for the fiesta, even if the hosts cannot cook themselves.

Sometimes it appears a source of competition (and prestige) to have a member of the family or a close friend who is able to produce a superior rendition of a particular dish. Funnily enough, Yadira said that the most competitive relationship is the one between *compadres*. As I will explain in the next chapter, relationships of *compadrazgo* are characterized by trust, but also by social distance. *Compadres* command greater respect, and therefore need to be more impressed by culinary means. Presenting a well-cooked and tasty meal is both a sign of hospitality and a recognition of the relationship between the host and guest. The closeness that comes with trust (*confianza*) can sometimes lead to less sharing of culinary secrets with those guests who are most honoured, to maintain social distance by showing respect via the value of the food given.

Likewise, when the relationship between cook and eater is very close, like family, the eater is more likely to judge the food as tastier and better because of the social relationship that exists between them. Hence the importance of a home-cooked meal, prepared by a married woman for her husband. The marital relationship is the crucial social relationship, the centre of the domestic sphere and the source of children. Ideally, food is prepared by women for their husbands and children, and other members of the household. The culinary activity of women is a source of social agency which gives deeper meaning to the home-cooked meal, or the food prepared by and for members of the family. Daughters rarely take full responsibility of meal provision, but if they do, it

is again only within the domestic realm. Once they marry, women's culinary agency becomes directed to their husbands and their new households. Failure to feed their husbands can be judged as shirking marital as well as womanly duties, not because of some deep-seated subordination of women to men, but because of the centrality of the marital bond as the source of social (and sexual and gastronomical) fulfillment.

In Mexico, therefore, women are portrayed as the ideal providers of sex and food, capable of great suffering for the sake of husbands, children, and culinary ideals. The intimacy of these social relationships make home-cooking the tastiest, best—somehow construed to be highest in prestige. Eating in the streets thus becomes an illicit pleasure, without the social significance attached to eating in someone's home. So why is it that street food is considered to taste so good? I am suggesting that the clandestine appeal of street food has a deeper significance than just eating out (i.e., not at home). Because of the meanings attached to home-cooking (food prepared by women, primarily for their husbands), to eat in the street is equivalent to having an illicit love affair (equally—or arguably, more—delicious food prepared by others, not one's wife), hence its sweetness.

## 5.5 Womanhood, motherhood and cooking

In Mexico, cooking and anything related to food is readily associated with women, and especially mothers. Although many men in Milpa Alta are involved in food industries, the preparation of food for the home is within the domain of women. Cooking and food provision is a primary part of women's work, as described by a Náhuatl speaking woman of Milpa Alta:

1. There in my house, in Milpa Alta, the men work and the women make *tortillas*, they make food. So when the man arrives and is hungry, all the food is waiting for him. This is how those in my town live.
2. While the men go to work, the women also go [out] shopping in the plaza where people sell meat, beans, maize—all the necessities—firewood, charcoal, fruit; whatever a woman may want at home. When the women return home from the plaza they put the food on the fire to cook. They carry water in large jars or in buckets, and if the husband has already arrived, the woman runs out to buy *pulque*. (Horcasitas 1974:19)

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<sup>21</sup> The word sometimes used to describe such a woman is '*mayora*'. This is used in Mexico City, but not specifically in Milpa Alta.



In the twenty-five years since the above was written, there have been some obvious changes in daily life in Milpa Alta, although the basic structure of social relations appears similar. *Pulque*, for instance, used to be the daily drink of most people in the valley of Mexico. It is drunk plain or cured with fruits and has now become a drink that few have outside of the fiesta setting or the occasional craving. Women no longer have to collect water at a well or communal tap since there is running water in most people's homes, although the tanks are likely to empty in the middle of the day if many do their laundry at the same time. Many women in Milpa Alta have jobs which require them to work outside the home for much of the day. This work is often, but not always, related to the family business. So the men work, and the women work, as well.

Nevertheless, the basic general organisation of the day has remained constant over the years. The rhythm of the house begins before dawn when married women get up to prepare coffee and breakfast for the rest of the family. Their mothers-in-law usually get up early, as well, because it has been their habit for most of their lives to do so. Other women in the household, such as daughters or other in-laws wake early to help with the *barbacoa*, cleaning *nopales* of their spines or other chores. The men in the house also get up early, to get ready to work in the fields, the market or to remove the *barbacoa* meat from the pit. They must go to the *nopaleras* before six, before the sun rises, so

#### Taco placero

When there is little time to make a proper meal, some women buy various foods in the market, to serve *taco placero* or *tacos de plaza*. This is a combination of foods that can be bought in the market or *tianguis* and eaten right there in the plaza as fillings for *tacos*, hence its name. Some people buy food and combine them with what they have at home for making any kind of *tacos*. Some or all of the following foods are offered for *taco placero*, with the essential ingredients marked with \*:

* <i>tortillas</i>	lime
* <i>queso fresco</i>	spring onions
* <i>avocado</i>	beans
* <i>chicharrón</i>	<i>barbacoa</i>
* <i>pápaloquelite</i>	<i>carnitas</i>
* <i>pickled chiles</i>	<i>cecina</i>
<i>salsa</i>	<i>salpicón</i>
<i>cebollas desflemadas</i>	<i>tamal de charales</i>
<i>nopales compuestos</i>	<i>tamal de sesos</i>
<i>pascale</i>	

they need to eat something quick to sustain them until they can have a more substantial breakfast later. *Barbacoieros* sometimes leave the house by four or five a.m. to choose livestock or they get up a little later for the slaughter. Everyone in the household gets up early.

If the children go to school in the morning shift, they must be washed and fed and taken to school by eight o'clock. Then the kitchen must be cleared right away and women prepare the *almuerzo*, which is a big meal. It might typically be *chilaquiles*, *tamales*, various ways of preparing eggs or leftovers from yesterday's

*comida*, complete with beans, *salsa* and *tortillas*. Then there is housework to be done, the children must be fetched from school, and the day's *comida* to be prepared. The

women of each household delegate tasks for each other, cooperating so that the full meal will be ready by two or three in the afternoon, when it is time to eat.

Since most women now buy *tortillas*, sometimes one of the children (boy or girl) is sent to the local *tortillería* with a napkin to wrap the freshly baked *tortillas* so that they stay warm until it is time to eat. Around lunchtime, in the better *tortillerías*, there is often a queue of women and children, and some men, each carrying a basket, napkin, or styrofoam *chiquihuite* (basket or container for storing *tortillas* to keep them warm). After eating, the women of the house clean up and finish their chores. Some do the laundry before the water runs out, or pick up their knitting, or even have to chop onions and coriander for sales the next day. It is usually the women or older siblings who help younger children with their homework. Otherwise, they are free, to relax, shop, do errands, watch television, or hang out with the resident anthropologist.

With specific regard to cooking as part of women's work, the feminist perspective popular in some sociological analyses of food in the domestic realm demonstrates how the task of cooking leads to women's subordination (Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 77-86, DeVault 1991, McIntosh and Zey 1998, Ekström 1991, Murcott 1983, Delphy 1979).<sup>22</sup> By focusing on meal production as a household chore, these studies take food production to be directly symbolic of the reproduction of a social order where women, as wives, inevitably play a subordinate role to men, their husbands. 'Meals can be seen as symbolising the important social relations of power and subordination that exist within the family' (Charles and Kerr 1988: 17). The root of the problem, they argue, is how women's skills, which includes cooking and other domestic tasks, are devalued 'or not regarded as skills at all' (47).

In Milpa Alta cooking is indeed embedded in the domestic realm, subsumed as women's work or women's unpaid labour. This fact might be taken as indicative of women's subordination to men, but in Milpa Alta cooking is actually thought of as a skill worth learning, if not a talent. Some women say they cook to satisfy their own cravings or desires, and whether or not they cook regularly, women take pride in their cooking. Many have told me that they enjoy it, although they may hardly cook at all. For others, of course, cooking is a chore, but then in Milpa Alta, and also in other neighbourhoods, it is not uncommon for families to hire a '*muchacha*' (girl), either as

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<sup>22</sup> Note that most of their findings were based on white middle-class Americans or Europeans.

live-in or part-time labour to 'help' with the more tedious domestic tasks. Women, therefore, are not always forced to prepare elaborate meals for their husbands. On the contrary, many women take on extradomestic work and yet still take control of the cooking for their families. Williams (1985) demonstrates the same phenomenon among Tejanos, and García and de Oliveira (1997) argue the same for another area in Mexico.

When I was talking to one woman about eating and how much she enjoyed it, she said, '*¡La comida es vida!*', 'Food is life!' In this statement, she was referring to both homemade and ready-prepared food, bought in specific places from specific people whom she knew to be good cooks. Enjoyment of flavours was tantamount to a satisfactory existence. Food is life in the sense of the pleasures of eating as a fulfilling lived experience, and not as a nutritional necessity. Making a point to emphasize cooking skills or other gastronomical knowledge indicates that the interest that people take in the flavours of their food makes the person who prepares the food (with such skill) relevant, appreciated, and sometimes even envied.

### **Cooking and marriage**

It cannot be denied that many women assume the role of wife, mother and cook whether or not they enjoy it. The subsequent status of women in relation to men is also arguable, if indeed their status is directly related to their cooking responsibility. Delphy (1979) shows that French peasant women feel a 'moral imperative' to leave the best foods for others (227), and they sacrifice their own wishes for the sake of their husbands, children, fathers. Murcott and DeVault argue similar points, specifically noting that although women are in charge of household organization and cooking, they defer authority to their husbands. Their responsibility to provide a proper meal, a 'home-cooked dinner' coerces them to prepare food according to *his* preferences, accomodating *his* habits; therefore women have no real autonomy within the realm that they supposedly control (Murcott 1983).

In her insightful and critical discussion of how 'feeding a family' is a complex, 'invisible' skill taken upon by women as 'natural' when it is not necessarily so, DeVault explicitly writes, 'The underlying principles of housework must be made visible. The work must be seen as separable from the one who does it, instead of in the traditional way as an expression of love and personality' (1991: 142). Though I agree that feeding a family is a skill and responsibility that is easily taken for granted, both in Milpa Alta and elsewhere, I would hesitate to separate the act and skill of cooking from the cook.

Cooking is a complex and artistic practice, different from other kinds of housework because of the creativity involved. Surely there are few people, if any, who take particular pride in the way that they have cleaned the toilet, for example, and who would wish to share it with others.

Separating the act of cooking or providing a meal for the family from the 'love and personality' of the one who provides it (usually the wife/mother) is in contradiction with the existing ideology of the family, as well as the ideology of Mexican cooking (see chapter three). I do not mean that there is no room for social change, and in fact family and gender ideologies are more dynamic than static, as has been documented well in several recent studies such as Gutmann (1996), Melhuus and Stølen (1996), González Montes (1997), González Montes and Tuñón (1997), McCallum (forthcoming). I think that accepting that cooking is a way of expressing love and personality can explain why it is that many women take on roles that to outsiders may appear as subordinate to their husbands, but which, in fact, may not be so.

In one of the earlier collections of essays published on gender, *Female and Male in Latin America*, Ann Pescatello wrote in the introduction (1973: xiv):

The Latin American family, integral to the historical schema..., provides much latitude and legitimization of behavior in terms of social status, prestige, marital-*compadrazgo* alliances, and the like. The extended family, still widespread and potent in countryside and city, affords the female an extensive amount of influence on the members of her family.

Her collection of papers show that women in Latin America have more movement and autonomy built into their social organization than their US counterparts. She continues:

North Americans, reading the signals of their own cultural bias, tend to view *machismo* as the basic sign of oppression and powerlessness of *latinas*; this, other misconceptions, and attempts to transfer them tend to indicate that North American-style 'women's liberation' will not work in the more 'traditional' societies. (xix)

Thus, when DeVault states that, 'women learn to think of service as a proper form of relation to men, and learn a discipline that defines "appropriate" service for men' (1991: 143), applied to Latin America, at least, this does not necessarily imply a master-servant relationship. I would emphasise further that there is also nothing wrong with having defined gendered roles in the family, since *power need not be publicly displayed in order to be enforced*. As Gudeman and Rivera (1990: 101) write about Colombia,

although women serve food to their husbands or bring them meals in the fields, ‘the people see nothing servile in this’. In Milpa Alta, several women had such an attitude, as well. For example, Doña Delfina told me that before she married she used to take lunch to the peons who worked in her family’s land. This was one of the parts of the day that she enjoyed most, leaving the house and having a chance to socialise a little. Servile status was held by the labourers who worked the field, and not by the wives or daughters of the landowners who prepared food and served it to those men.

Though not followed as a rule, when a girl knows how to cook, she is considered to be ready for marriage, and, by extension, motherhood. If a woman does not know how to cook already, she learns as soon as she does get married, either from her mother or her mother-in-law. She must learn to cook in order to feed her husband, her children and herself. The correlations among cooking, motherhood and family life correspond to ideal images of womanhood. This means that deciding to stay at home and raise a family is a choice that many women are able to make, and they do so largely because of the high value placed on motherhood and family life in Mexico. Not only in Milpa Alta, but in other areas of Mexico, a complete woman is a wife and mother.

Once married, therefore, women are expected to be able to cook. Guille (50) had told me in a conspiratorial tone that she only learned to cook several years after she got married. She was able to keep this secret from her husband, because she used to collect prepared food from her mother’s or sister’s kitchen before her husband arrived home to eat. At the time, she had been ambitious about her academic and later professional career, so she had little patience for the kitchen. She should have been ashamed of herself for not knowing how to cook, she said, but she was lucky to have managed to keep her husband from finding out. Since her mother and sister taught her how to cook little by little, she acquired a similar flavour in her cooking so that there was not too drastic a difference when she eventually took charge of her own cooking.

Alejandro sometimes jokingly criticised Kiko that he could do nothing without his wife, ‘*¡Ni sabe calentar tortillas!*’, ‘He doesn’t even know how to heat up *tortillas!*’ He implied that food provision was a task for women, and that because of this men’s lives were heavily dependent on them.

Miguel and Coty also provide another example of the social significance of marriage and cooking. They were talking lightly about their skills and roles as husband and wife. Miguel said that he knew how to cook, as well as how to clean and wash

clothes, boasting that he could look after himself on his own. ‘¿Entonces, pa’ qué te casaste?’, ‘So what did you get married for?’ Coty asked him, teasing.

‘Para mis niñas’, ‘For my daughters,’ he replied. He could not have had his two children on his own.

In a recent investigation of motherhood and extradomestic work, García and de Oliveira (1997) have found that motherhood is still the main defining characteristic or source of identity for women in urban Mexico. Their study shows how motherhood is considered to be a source of fulfillment for women regardless of social class, although there are also some women who find their reproductive roles as mothers to be frustrating or irritating. For women who feel that their duties as mothers are a burden or hindrance, motherhood has been suggested to be another cause of women’s subordination, tying women to their homes and children when they would rather join the labour force. Yet, neither the desire for a professional extradomestic career or the desire to remain home to raise children (and cook and clean) are ‘natural’ for women. Therefore it makes more sense to hold judgment and first establish the gender ideologies that already exist.

García and de Oliveira demonstrate, and my findings in Milpa Alta agree, that motherhood does not actually stop women from taking on extradomestic work. In fact, it is often necessary for women in the working class to work extradomestically in order to supplement the family income. Levine (1993) also notes that urban Mexican women in the 1990s are more likely to encourage their children, especially their daughters, to pursue more education so that they will have better chances of finding work, should they be deserted by their husbands in future and be left to look after children on their own. Several Milpaltense women mentioned to me that they engage in commercial or professional activities to earn money so that they can finish building their house or to be able to buy a plot of land or to provide things for their children. Finding child minders during their working hours was not usually a problem because of the proximity of relatives in a woman’s extended family and links of *compadrazgo*.

Working class women taking on jobs outside the home do not think of this freedom to work as any sort of liberating agency, but may rather consider it as an unfortunate necessity. Therefore in spite of their capitalist productivity, many women considered extradomestic work to be detrimental to the development of their families. Although some did talk of professional fulfillment, there is a larger percentage of both women and

men in Milpa Alta who neglect to practice their professional careers in favour of 'traditional' Milpaltense occupations. Other women told me without any indication of shame or abnegation that they stopped working after marriage, or in particular after having their first child, because they and/or their husbands thought it best for them to dedicate their time to childrearing. Thus, for the sake of their children, many who can afford to do so may stop working outside the home or engage in work that can be largely done from home. (It is then when some women actually learn to cook, after marriage and becoming mothers. Only then do they take an interest in learning from their mothers or their mothers-in-law.)

With this in mind, earlier work on gender in Latin America should be viewed more critically, without denying the advances these investigations made for a more complete study of both men's and women's lives. For example, Nash and Safa's compilation, *Sex and Class in Latin America* (1980), consider women's subordination to be a problem of capitalist ideology. In their introduction, they wrote:

the relegation of women to unpaid labor in the home is the primary determinant of their subordinate status in modern capitalist society. It is not men who keep women at home—though they may appear to be the most direct oppressors—but the structure of the capitalist system, which benefits from the unpaid labor of housewives or, in wartime, draws upon this reserve labor supply (xi).

The general theme in their anthology indicates that they view women's liberation as a linear progression from domestic duties (or home confinement) to capitalist productive extradomestic work.<sup>23</sup> As just explained above, however, the situation is more complex.

### **Dominance and virtue**

In the introduction to their recent compilation of research on gender in Latin America, Melhuus and Stølen (1996) wrote, 'Neither the fact that women often comply with practices that subordinate them nor the fact that they resist the exercise of such practices can be understood in terms of the exclusively repressive view of power common in women's studies' (20). Melhuus and Stølen's book indicates that the different kinds of dominance and subordination that exist in society can be better understood by pinpointing gender differences first, although they warn against taking

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<sup>23</sup> In particular, see Elu de Lenero (1980) in that volume.

that standpoint for granted without empirical data. That is, gender ideology is in constant flux, yet it continues to organise and perform functions in society. Some of the cases cited in their volume indicate a certain complicity among women, as well as resistance, which undermines the power of the accepted gender imagery.

For example, Villareal's analysis of women beekeepers in Jalisco, Mexico, illustrates how women's social spaces can be restricted by local criticism which uses gender imagery to play upon opinions about male ideals and women's morality. This is echoed in my own findings in Milpa Alta, as described in this chapter. The dominant discourse of male power and female weakness is used very often in reference to Latin America and Villareal argues against this assumption:

In overemphasizing 'dominant' imagery, researchers tend to assume that ideas pertaining to those in hierarchical positions are oppressing passive victims. This can lead to black-and-white pictures which portray the notion of a discourse which is almost solely responsible for the exercise of power and subordination. (184)<sup>24</sup>

In the case that she describes, Villareal demonstrates the interrelating tugs-of-war of power among women and men, women and women, and women and the state. The government encouraged peasant women's participation in an entrepreneurial scheme which required the allocation of *ejido* land, a scarce resource for the community.<sup>25</sup> Eventually land was grudgingly given to the women, largely because of the governmental support of the project. In the community's reaction against this, the women beekeepers were attacked in an indirect expression of dissatisfaction with giving up this land. The boundaries of women's accepted movements were threatened by gossip that labelled them as *libertina* (loose, free) or their husbands as *mandilón* (tied to the apron strings, henpecked, and in effect, therefore, with wives who are loose, free).

Eventually the women were able to circumvent and even subvert some of the powerful images of being good women and good wives (or women vis-à-vis men). They did so by emphasizing their exemplary behaviour with respect to other images of womanhood, such as motherhood and being a good homemaker (which includes cooking). It is helpful to quote at length here to illustrate this point:

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<sup>24</sup> For another source with a similar expression of this general sentiment, see Behar 1993.

<sup>25</sup> *Ejido* land is land that was distributed by the government as a result of the law on Agrarian Reform. Like communal land, it is not privately owned and it cannot be sold.



None [of the women beekeepers] claimed explicitly to be a model housewife, but Petra, the president of the group, often boasted about her cooking skills and was proud of the way she had reared her children, despite problems with her husband, who wanted her to spend more time in the house. Sara (another member of the group) spoke with satisfaction about how good her sons were, the way they went to church on Sundays, but also about her kind and faithful husband, and how she walked kilometres across the fields to take him a hot lunch, then stayed a bit to help out with his chores. She proudly showed her sewing and embroidery to her visitors. Socorro bragged quietly about how she cooked for her family, which was now composed of only boys, since the girls had married out. The idea of keeping their household in 'good order' was often conveyed. (Villareal 1996: 195)

A similar kind of dynamic exists in Milpa Alta, and in many other parts of Mexico. Villareal's case study clearly demonstrates that women can take an active role in modifying their social movements. They do not necessarily succumb submissively to the dominant discourse to avoid forcing direct confrontation. In a similar vein, this idea had already been explored by Stevens (1973) in an article where she introduced the term '*marianismo*' as an opposing force to *machismo*. Basing her research on middle class Mexican women, she argues that rather than allowing themselves to be victims to male dominance, Latin American women rely upon *marianismo*. She defines *marianismo* as 'the cult of the feminine spiritual superiority', which women use to maintain their status in opposition to men's *machismo*, 'the cult of virility'.<sup>26</sup>

Stevens saw these two concepts as specifically Latin American in their most 'fully developed' forms, dynamic gendered phenomena that came about as a factor of miscegenation (91). It is this ideology of a 'real woman' being morally superior and spiritually stronger than men which engenders their abnegation and submissiveness to husbands, fathers, sons and brothers (94-5). Nevertheless, Stevens explains how women use these images to their advantage, gaining support from the community by subscribing to this ideal imagery. She cites examples of the empowerment and support given to a woman who is a victim of an adulterous husband or, in the workplace, preferential treatment for women who are mothers. Case studies such as these two just described above question the kind of power that men wield and the way that women use stereotypical roles to keep this power in balance.

This sort of complicity is what Susan Carol Rogers wrote about in her model of the 'myth of male dominance' (1975). Drawing upon her ethnographic research in a French

peasant village, she argues that the gendered power relationship that exists in such a society is non-hierarchical, although both men and women act as if men are dominant, for the sake of ordering social relations. What is occurring is that men have a 'powerless authority', the *appearance* of power and control, while giving *actual* power to women (728-9). She continues that:

The two sex groups, in effect, operate within partially divergent systems of perceived advantages, values, and prestige, so that the members of each group see themselves as the 'winners' in respect to the other. Neither men nor women believe that the 'myth' is an accurate reflection of the actual situation. However, each sex group believes (or appears to believe, so avoiding confrontation) that the opposite sex perceives the myth as reality, with the result that each is actively engaged in maintaining the illusion that males are, in fact, dominant. (729)

The kind of society around which she developed her model was very much like Milpa Alta, and other rural or semi-rural parts of Mexico. Women are perceived to be powerless and long-suffering, precisely the image of the Mexican suffering and subjugated mother. Also, modernization is a process which is thought to release women from the shackles of their traditions. Rogers shows this to have been argued in relation to France; and in Mexico, it is also believed that the industrialization of tortilla making significantly contributed to the emancipation of women.<sup>27</sup> The characteristics of the French peasant village on the verge of modernization studied by Rogers in the 1970s are surprisingly similar to the organization of Milpaltense society in the 1990s.<sup>28</sup>

In Milpa Alta the family is the basic and central social unit. When there is a life cycle event being celebrated by a member of the community, the entire families of his or her friends and relations are invited to participate. Children are never excluded and they grow up accustomed to intergenerational socializing. Many extended families live in the same compound or at least nearby. Otherwise, they have adjacent plots of land

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<sup>26</sup> As already mentioned, though, the term '*machismo*' should not be so easily glossed as 'virility'.

<sup>27</sup> See Pilcher (1998:99-111), although he also discusses the difficulty in accepting machine-made *tortillas* because of the inferior flavour in comparison to hand-made *tortillas*.

<sup>28</sup> Rogers specifically applied her model to peasant societies which can be shown to have certain components, as follows: '(1) Women are primarily associated with the domestic. (2) The society is domestic-oriented; that is, the domestic sphere is of central importance, at least socially, and has important implications for life beyond the domestic. (3)... most ordinary and important interactions occur in the context of a face-to-face community, where informal relationships and forms of power are at least as significant a force in everyday life as formalized, authorized relationships and power.... (4) Men have greater access to jural and other formal rights. (5) They are occupied with activities which may at least be overtly considered important. ... (6) Men and women are approximately equally dependent on each other

which they either cultivate for a living or later use to build a separate home. Kin ties and *compadrazgo* are made via both men and women, and links via men are not always favoured without specific reason (see chapter six). As for prestige, it is given to families and not just to individuals. One member's right- or wrong-doing reflects upon the rest of the family. In many instances, the prestige, or lack of, is given to men as husbands or fathers, as they are representatives of the family.

What is actually going on is that men's reputations are dependent upon women's behaviour and virtue. This is what Marit Melhuus (1992) calls the 'enigma of Latin American gender imagery'. Mexico is a male-dominated society with its highest value placed on women. There is, therefore, a contradiction between power and value. A man can lose prestige if his wife is shown to dominate over him; he is called *mandilón* or, in Milpa Alta, *ciguamoncle*, or even *güey*. A woman would be insulted directly, as a *puta* (whore) or *pendeja* (stupid). Thus, it is specifically women's domestic, family, or private behaviour which reflects upon the men in their families. If a woman is having an affair with another man, her husband can be insulted by calling him *güey*, and her son may be insulted as *hijo de puta* (son of a whore) for the same reason. Inversely, in a more indirect way, a woman who is virtuous or good reflects upon the men in her family. If a man's wife has a reputation of being a good mother, good cook and housekeeper, her husband commands respect in the community, because his wife also shows him respect.

This is the kind of logic that Rogers draws upon to prove her point about the 'myth' of male dominance.

Because extra-household activities are given the highest prestige, it is to men's advantage to claim the village sphere as their own. It is to the peasant woman's advantage as well, because it leaves her in control of the domestic sphere, which is the central unit of the community and the only sphere over which villagers may have much control. Here we have a power/prestige balance between the two spheres. It remains balanced as long as prestige is accorded to activities and actors in one, while actual power emanates from activities in the other. (Rogers 1975: 747)

## 5.6 Conclusion

The people of Milpa Alta seem to try to resist their incorporation into the urban space of Mexico City, while at the same time wish to benefit from the conveniences of

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economically, socially, politically, or in other important ways. ... the two sex groups are mutually

the capital. Many women work for some time in the centre of the city, yet marriage is still usually endogamous, if not within her own barrio, at least within Milpa Alta. Informal women's groups, such as bible studies or groups of mothers who take their children to youth activities like sports, meet together regularly, providing women a forum for sharing experiences with each other and a strong support network. In other areas of Mexican society, studies on women have shown that they have influential and central networks of power, albeit hidden from public view (Lomnitz 1977, Lomnitz and Pérez-Lizaur 1987). Not only that, as I have described at greater length above, there are different kinds of women's work that they actively engage in, but which they may or may not emphasise in open discussion, depending upon how they wish to portray themselves to men, other women, and strangers (cf. Villareal 1996, Behar 1993)

In this chapter I have tried to show how women's power can sometimes be subtle and at other times overt, although it remains couched in a language of deference to men's preferences and 'mythical' dominance. This power stems directly from women's ability and responsibility to fulfill the two basic human desires, for sex and for food (cf. Gow 1989). Their position hinges on the centrality of the ultimate social relationship between a man and a woman, that of husband and wife. As McCallum (1989, forthcoming) argues, the continuous creation and maintenance of gender, the complementarity of male and female agencies, is what generates social organisation. 'This relation is given meaning in the organisation of consumption. The production and consumption of things is tightly linked to consumption and the production of persons, and all moments in this process are based upon dynamic male-female complementarity' (1989: 19).

I have tried to use references to cooking to refocus a discussion of women's work and power. As Vázquez García (1997) has described so thoroughly for a Nahua community in southern Veracruz, Mexico, the relationship between husband and wife is reciprocal, with material manifestations in access to land or other resources and cooking: 'the activities of men and women are complementary in the sense of women depending on men for the corn, but men depend on women for the tortilla, the final product' (171, my trans.). Vázquez García discusses the domestic economy of first and second wives in both monogamous and polygamous unions. She notes that men inherit land and women receive kitchen equipment upon marriage. She also notes that second

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interdependent...' (729-30)

wives, or unmarried women with children, are the ones who have become ambulatory vendors or women who sell home-cooked food in the streets (191). Though I do not have corresponding quantitative data from Milpa Alta, based on the qualitative data that I have presented thus far, Vázquez García's data resonates with the situation in Milpa Alta.

In the second part of this dissertation, I discuss community-wide socializing during festive occasions, organisation of which builds upon the relations within the family. What remains to be said is that although the Virgin of Guadalupe is a female model of motherhood, suffering and feminine virtue, it is as a provider of sex and food that women's power becomes evident. Both sex and food lead to the continuance (and reproduction) of individuals, as well as of society. Thus, ideal food is cooked at home, by a wife or a mother, in the way taught by generations of women who nourished their families, as wives and mothers. A woman should be able to satisfy her husband both sexually and gastronomically, or put another way, she is in control over these two fundamental desires. In fact, among other Náhuatl-speaking groups, the only men for whom women prepare food are their husbands. Furthermore, in the Náhuatl language, the word for 'to eat' has the double meaning of eating food and having sex (Vázquez García 1997: 182, Taggart 1992: 81).

Women's agency, therefore, can be culinary and reproductive. Whilst I cannot claim to have a formula or list of criteria for determining who is a culinary artist or who is an ordinary cook, I believe that it is arguable that there is such a thing as culinary agency, or potential to culinary artistry, that is accessible to anyone who cooks (see chapter two, and cf. Gell 1998). If she is a skillful cook or can mobilize her culinary agency, a woman can have actual power over her husband, the domestic sphere, and by extension, the greater social realm. Yet rather than a power struggle between genders (Gregor 1985), Milpa Alta society is characterised by gender complementarity, as has been shown to exist in other Latin American societies (e.g., Vázquez García 1997, Descola 1994, Gow 1991, McCallum 1989).

A man should find the greatest pleasures with his wife, but of course, there are deviances from the norm, and men and women are known to have extramarital affairs. Likewise, food that is not cooked at home is also considered to be delicious, almost sinful. The appeal of one is analogous to that of the other—the temptations of an extramarital affair is similar to that of the rich snacks sold on the street (again, note Vázquez García 1997: 191 above). Neither are necessarily offered for the purpose of

nourishment or the propagation of society, but they both provide temporary satisfactions of desires fulfilled for the sake of pure pleasure.



21 *Comal* set on a charcoal grill, with food for *taco placero*—spring onions, *nopales*, *longaniza* (sausage), and *gorditas pelliscadas*, with a pot of lard melting at the back.



22 Full table set for *comida*, with *pápaloquelite*, cheese, grilled meat, bread, Coke and *salsa*.



23 Street food (*antojitos*) from a *tianguis* in Mexico City—*empanada*, *quesadilla*, *tostada*, *pescadito capeado*, *salsa Valentina*.



24 A meal organised at the last minute: *caldo de pollo*, *calostros de vaca*, *taquitos dorados*, *milanesas con arroz*, *ensalada y queso*.



**Part II**  
**Food in the public sphere**

## Networks of reciprocity

In part one, I have described and discussed daily life and everyday cooking practices in Milpa Alta. I have shown how food preparation in Mexico inevitably falls within the women's domain, as it is the women who occupy themselves with the cooking for the family. Many of women's decisions for physical mobility and accessible spaces are based on food preparation and taste, as their daily movement is controlled by their need to provide meals, and also by social restrictions imposed by the tenets of morality and value. The high value placed on culinary elaboration has been shown to be interwoven with the social value placed upon women as wives and mothers within the domestic or private sphere.

Thus, a woman's life and domain appears restricted or hidden, and since food lies within the women's domain, food, that is, most of Mexican cuisine, remains hidden, as well. This does not mean that culinary elaboration is also restricted, however. On the contrary, the pursuit of flavour (the fulfillment of gastronomical desires or the ideal of culinary artistry) is a socially accepted means by which women can justify extending the borders of their permissible spaces. Within the domestic realm, they use their agency as cooks, as providers of nourishment as well as of flavourful dishes. Thus they are able to portray themselves as honourable and loving wives and mothers, respectfully deferring to their husband's 'mythical' dominance, while they wield considerable (invisible) power.

But what of the public, the extradomestic realm? Precisely because women are restricted or morally limited to specific legitimate movement outside of the domestic arena, as I have already hinted in the previous chapter, social interaction largely occurs during fiesta occasions. Although I have argued thus far that fiestas are not the only places where men and women can meet and mix, fiestas are the ideal socially sanctioned occasions for developing, as well as commemorating, social ties. The continuity of social interaction outside of the family depends on the attendance of these celebrations, from which food is inseparable. In contrast with the choices and expansiveness of Mexican cuisine which can be explored in family eating habits, only a restricted menu is permissible for festive occasions. In part II of the thesis, I describe

the main features of public socializing in Milpa Alta. This chapter provides background on the social organisations which structure daily and festive life and food.

## 6.1 *Compadrazgo*<sup>1</sup>

*Compadrazgo* is the system of co-parenthood which links non-kin to one another. When a couple has a child, it is customary in Milpa Alta to have the child baptised when the baby turns one year old. This is celebrated with a mass, usually at noon or at one o'clock, when the priest blesses the child with holy water. The ceremony is followed by a celebratory banquet held at home where the family of the child serve *mole con pollo* (*mole* with chicken), *arroz rojo* (Mexican red rice), *tamales*, beans, *tortillas*, and sometimes *carnitas*, *mixiotes* or *barbacoa*. The celebration and banquet are essentially the same as other feasts, such as for special birthdays or weddings. The difference lies in the blessing during the mass, and the godparents, *padrinos*, involved.

When a couple chooses *padrinos* for their child's baptism, the *padrinos* are subsequently called *compadre*, literally, co-father, and *comadre*, co-mother, by the parents of the child. Generally *padrinos* are chosen as a conjugal unit, usually married, or as already-established couples, although occasionally single men and women may be chosen as *padrinos*. In such cases, for example, if a single woman is asked to be godmother for the baptism of a child, her father may accompany her as the corresponding godfather. Unblessed unions cannot take the responsibility of being *padrinos* for any life cycle rituals.

Originally, *padrinos* were specifically chosen to perform the function of co-parents (*compadres*), swearing under oath of the church that they will take responsibility for the child being baptised should anything happen to the natural parents. Such a ceremony thus binds the lives of the parents and their *compadres* through the child, a commitment which they retain for the rest of their lives.

The first responsibility of godparents towards their godchild, *ahijado*, is to help the parents organise and hold a feast to celebrate the occasion. Beyond the fiesta, accepting to be *padrino* or *madrina* implies taking one's *ahijados* under one's charge in a moral as well as monetary sense. (In practice it may be another matter, however.) Furthermore, it is not uncommon for someone to begin to treat the siblings of his *ahijado* in similar fashion, although he may maintain the special relationship with his specific godchild,

and the (non-kin) link with all its advantages may be endlessly extended, as in the following example:

*One day Primy promised to cook lamb's blood so I could taste tacos de sangre, but she had forgotten to save some blood during the slaughter, since it is no longer lucrative for them to prepare the blood to sell. Without thinking she had discarded all the blood collected earlier. She only remembered this at around ten or eleven a.m. and so was worried that it may already have been too late to go ask some of her neighbours if they might have slaughtered late and had some blood and a bit of large intestine to spare. In any case I accompanied her to ask around. First we went to her mother-in-law's sister-in-law, a blood relation through marriage. There we were met with distrust and animosity, which she and Doña Margarita later referred to as 'envidia', greed. So we proceeded to another house where Primy addressed the lady who answered the door as 'comadre'. She received us well and gave us two litres of blood. Primy later told me that this lady was the sister-in-law of Primy's mother-in-law's godson, but she and Primy were thus comadres.<sup>2</sup>*

Once people become *compadres*, they begin addressing one another as '*Comadre*' or '*Compadre*' rather than by first name, as may have formerly been the case. They might also precede the first name with a title, such as to call someone '*compadre Estanislao*' instead of 'Señor' or 'Don Estanislao', or simply 'Estanislao'. The relationship may even change from a familiar to a formal one, that is, one in which they speak with the address of *Usted* rather than *tú*.<sup>3</sup> When a couple chooses their *compadres*, it is because they hold these people in high esteem and would thus be honoured if they would accept the role of godparent for their child. To speak with respect, therefore, is only natural under these circumstances. Furthermore, they treat the family of their *compadres* with similar respect, as the special relationship is extended to include other members of each family, even those who married in. Indeed, each family

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough analysis of *compadrazgo* as a principle for networking and reciprocal exchange, see Lomnitz 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Since Primy's *comadre* had run out of tripe, we had to go to another neighbour to ask for a small piece. Since this neighbour was unrelated to Primy, neither by kinship nor *compadrazgo*, she paid for the tripe without question. The piece was so small that I had not expected the neighbour to ask for payment, but as Yadira always told me, in Milpa Alta, especially in San Mateo, people always expected to pay when asking for small amounts of food, such as a few extra *tortillas* or a sprig of *epazote*. Food sharing was only free (monetarily) under ritualized contexts (in fiesta or daily hospitality).

thereafter maintains this bond between them, and one would begin to address the mother of one's *comadre*, for example, as 'comadrita'. The way Yadira explained it, she said that *compadres* and friends are 'inherited' in Milpa Alta. They are fictive kin.

Initially the *padrinos* show their support for a wedding, baptism, presentation, or other party by helping to foot the costs of certain aspects. Thus there are godparents for different occasions. Other than *padrinos de bautizo* (godparents at baptism), the most important *padrinos* in one's life are the *padrinos de velación*,<sup>4</sup> the main godparents for weddings. They are the sponsors or witnesses, but as *padrinos* they not only give their blessing to the newly marrying couple, they also usually provide the live band who plays during the reception and for the dance. These *padrinos* also accompany the bride and groom when they make rounds of their guest's tables soliciting money to help fund their honeymoon. Furthermore, when a married couple has problems either with one another or with their in-laws, they are meant to run to their *padrinos de velación* for advice.

Normally the couple's *padrinos de velación* are automatically chosen to be the *padrinos de bautizo* of their first child. When this does not happen the *padrinos de velación* are likely to feel insulted. For the second and all subsequent children, parents may choose as *padrinos* any other couple whom they hold in high esteem. For the first child, however, it is customary to honour one's *padrinos de velación* by making them *compadres*, as well, through the sacrament of baptism. Considering that it is not uncommon for a couple to marry and have their first child baptised all at once during the same mass, their *padrinos de velación* may easily be called upon to likewise become their *compadres de bautizo*.<sup>5</sup>

There are secondary *padrinos*<sup>6</sup> for whom there are less rules. Although the *padrinos de velación* must be married under church law, and are normally close friends of the groom's parents, secondary *padrinos* are more likely to be friends of the bride

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<sup>3</sup> People may begin speaking with one another with *Usted* only after becoming *compadres*, but sometimes they revert back to the familiar *tú* address on occasion. This occurs in practice, although the relationship does not change very much in sentiment. Lomnitz (1977) makes the same point.

<sup>4</sup> The word 'velación' literally means 'vigil' or 'wake' in the sense of staying up all night as for a funeral. I do not know why this word is used in the context of the wedding.

<sup>5</sup> The children of couples who have not married in church cannot be baptised.

<sup>6</sup> There is no local category called 'secondary *padrinos*' but this is my way of trying to organise these ideas.

and groom. In these less important cases it does not matter whether they are married or single. There may be a *madrina*, for example, for the shoe that the bride uses when she collects money during the wedding reception or another for her veil, or for any detail of the wedding ceremony. Another couple may be chosen to be *padrinos de pastel* (godparents for the cake), for example. This means that it is up to them to provide or pay for the celebratory cake. The *padrinos de fotografia* (godparents for photography) hire the professional photographer to document the event. Such *padrinos* become *compadres* of the bride and groom although they are not literally godparents of the cake, the adornments, or the toast (*padrinos de brindis*, or rather *padrinos* supplying the alcohol for the toast).

It is the establishment of a link of *compadrazgo* that allows a couple to expect monetary support when they hold a large feast to celebrate such occasions as a wedding or a girl's fifteenth birthday debut. Large parties can thus be more easily held because of this cooperation amongst *compadres*. Whilst this sort of *compadrazgo* is unofficiated by the church, it is still a valid kin link in practice. For the same reason *compadres* allotted such duties as these are not required to be married under church law since the Church does not need to sanction the position.

Likewise, *padrinos* are established for other types of blessings. There may be *padrinos* during the blessing of a house or a new shop, for instance. What is most clear from all the above examples is that people tend to make ties of *compadrazgo* whenever they are given the opportunity. I was even jokingly named *madrina* of the boiler in Kiko's and Yadira's house in Xochimilco because I was the first one to use the shower after a new boiler was purchased. Since I inaugurated the boiler, they told me, I automatically was designated as *madrina*, so I ought to buy biscuits to hand out to everyone. It thus appears that *compadrazgo* is a social system which links celebration (and food) to changing states of being (inaugurations, new life status as baptised Catholic, as adult rather than child at age fifteen, as married rather than single, and so on).

One evening Primy was wondering aloud about how it seems that the Catholic church has become more lax in its rules. She mentioned that it is now acceptable for a woman to marry in the church wearing a white wedding gown even if she is no longer a virgin. Having said this, however, when it regards *padrinos*, the Church does not bend its rules. To be *padrinos* for an occasion such as a wedding or baptism or other

significant religious occasion at a personal level, it is necessary for a couple to be married under church law, as a civil marriage is inadequate. Some people will explicitly state that they have a church wedding because they are due to become *padrinos* or because they will receive a religious cargo, i.e., care for an image of a virgin or saint as *mayordomos*.

Primy explained that for some, this may be the specific impetus for finally marrying in church, '*Para ser mayordomo, padrino de velación o de bautizo, hay que ser casado por la iglesia, por la civil no cuenta; entonces es una razón para casarse*'. Thus, when a couple is asked to be *padrinos* for an occasion like a *quinceaños* party, if the couple is not officially married, they might have a quick church wedding so as not to miss the opportunity to participate in the social event. In these cases the wedding may not be on grand scale, but there have been occasions when in spite of the short notice the couple marrying are able to have quite a lavish celebration nonetheless. Although it seems a social pressure to perform a marriage ceremony, it also appears to be taken as fulfilling a previously neglected responsibility, as a matter of course with little accompanying anxiety. As with other types of fiestas, families voluntarily would go into debt in order to hold a proper fiesta. As Primy put it, 'Society's expectations are more important than one's family, for the sake of keeping up appearances'.

## 6.2 The *Mayordomía*<sup>7</sup>

The *mayordomía* is a village-level socio-political institution whose responsibility is to care for the church, *cuidar la iglesia* or *hacer carga de la iglesia*. It is also referred to as '*el sistema de cargos*', the cargo system, since it is a system of taking on this religious charge for a determined amount of time before passing the charge to another member of the community. Whilst its constituents, called *mayordomos*, are expected to maintain the church, their primary function, in practical terms, is to organise the town fiesta and the *salvas* (gifts) that their *barrio* takes to others' town fiestas. Considering the nature of the systems of *compadrazgo* and the *mayordomía*, the latter is a system of social organisation at group level which uses the relationships among the patron saints of the *barrios* and *pueblos* of the area. It works with the same logic as that of *compadrazgo*, which structures social relations and social closeness and distance, amongst individuals.

Originally there was one *mayordomo* and one *mayordoma* (his wife) for each cargo. Their role as a couple was to organise and pay for the feasts and other necessities of their charge. Starting in the 1930s, however, as expenses increased, societies (*sociedades*) were organised within each *barrio* of Villa Milpa Alta, so that the financial burden could be shared and money to cooperate could be solicited from the community. The societies are still commonly referred to as *mayordomías*, although strictly speaking they are societies (Martínez R. 1987: 64-66). The role that the members play is basically the same, and the defining feature of those chosen to be *mayordomos* is their enthusiasm and active response to the duties of the post.

In San Mateo, when a couple accepts the role of *mayordomos*, they take charge of the parish for one year, whereas in Santa Martha the term is for five years. In each *barrio* there are different rules, but the duties are the same. There are fixed *mayordomos*, called *socios*, members, who hold the keys of the church. They are responsible for opening and closing its doors on Sunday, as well as for keeping it clean. There are other *mayordomos* who are appointed by the community (or the previous *mayordomos*) whose primary occupation is the organisation of the annual town fiesta celebrating the feast day of the local *santo patrono*. This consists of decorating the church, printing out the program and posting it all over Milpa Alta, buying a tower of fireworks, and hiring a band to play at the dance which will be held, unless bands are provided as part of the *salvas*.

The *mayordomos* visit all the houses of the *barrio* to solicit money to help pay for the fiesta, suggesting a minimum contribution, a *cooperación*. They also solicit this cooperation when they are planning to bring a *salva* to another *barrio*'s fiesta. The amount asked is determined by calculating the costs of the above-mentioned works, and dividing it by the number of houses whom they expect will participate. Some members of the community go to the church to pay their cooperation and generally all Catholic households contribute something. If, however, the *mayordomía* is unable to collect the required amount of money to pay for their expenses, then it is the *mayordomos*' responsibility to foot the bill themselves.

In San Mateo each year's *mayordomos* are chosen according to the street on which they live. The town is organised in a grid-like manner and there are five main streets

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<sup>7</sup> For a thorough history and description of the cargo systems in Milpa Alta, see Martínez R. 1987. For a



whose residents take the cargo in turn. *Mayordomos* are systematically appointed from only one street at a time each year. During the 1940s there was only one *mayordomo* each year, but the responsibility, specifically financially, became too much to bear, so more *mayordomos* were added to help with the costs. Becoming a *mayordomo* is voluntary in San Mateo, although in other *barrios* I was told that it is obligatory. Also, whether or not they are imbued with the desire to be *mayordomos*, most people in the community participate. I was told by one informant that non-participation is a valid impetus for public disapproval, making the inverse just as valid, that to avoid public disapproval it is preferable to participate.

According to Martínez Ruvalcaba (1987: 72-73), however, that is not a widely held sentiment, and in practice there is no particular social rejection if a couple refuses to accept the role. Spare time and extra money are necessary to properly fulfill the duties, and although people in the past have been known to fall into debt because of the fiesta requirements, it is understandable when families are unable to participate nowadays. On the other hand, many couples do aspire to become *mayordomos*. Salles and Valenzuela (1997) have observed that there is a noticeable change in the way that *mayordomos* are treated by the rest of the community. Before accepting the cargo they are regular people. After becoming *mayordomos* their relations with others are characterised by greater social distance and respect.

Since the cargo begins on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, the feast day of St Matthew, the current *mayordomos* begin speaking to the prospectives in August. Present *mayordomos* keep track of those who are most active and enthusiastic in other streets and 'invite' them to be the next *mayordomos*. During the fiesta, a mass is performed with a small 'coronation' ceremony to commemorate the succession of the duties. Those leaving the position are crowned with flowers, and those beginning their term are crowned with thorns. These thorns are the long spiny branches of a succulent shrub that grows in the area, and many later unwind their crowns of thorns and plant them in pots or in their gardens. People say that if your thorns thrive it indicates that you took on the charge of *mayordomo* with faith and a willing heart. On the contrary, if the plant shrivels and dies, your heart was twisted and unwilling.

When someone is invited to be the next *mayordomo*, Yadira explained, it is rare that he turns down the invitation 'because it is an honour, and for the sake of the Catholic

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theoretical analysis, see Greenberg (1981: ch. 1).

religion, and so that nothing bad happens (for better luck)', '*porque es un honor y por la religión católica, para que nada mal pasa*'. She continued, 'If you are *mayordomo* you will be filled with a great spiritual feeling of peace, tranquility, because you are serving God first, and afterwards the *barrio*'. Not only this, when you are asked to take the charge or even just to cooperate for the fiesta, people say, 'if you refuse, (negative) things start to happen to your business or family', '*si lo rechazas empiezan a pasar cosas a tu negocio o familia*'.

Even so, there are cases of people refusing the call. Primy told me that she and Alejandro were once *mayordomos* for two years in a row because not enough people in the next street would accept the cargo, so her street retained the responsibilities for one year more. She attributed the reluctance of her neighbours to the economic strain of being *mayordomo*, as well as the increasing Protestant conversion in that street.<sup>8</sup>

There are other sorts of *mayordomos* who organise other community events. Not unlike the system of *compadrazgo*, the system of the *mayordomía* has been extended and used to facilitate the fulfilment of other community obligations, such as the organisation of Carnival or Holy Week. Since their most important responsibility is the town fiesta, this is described in the following section.

### 6.3 The town fiesta

One of the most important public festivities is the town fiesta, *la fiesta del pueblo*. It is during this time when the entire community cooperates to hold a large-scale celebration where all are welcome. In Milpa Alta every *barrio* and *pueblo* is named after a Catholic saint, although most *pueblos* have both Catholic and Náhuatl names. Since San Mateo is a *barrio* of the *pueblo* Villa Milpa Alta, it is only called San Mateo, but there are *pueblos* nearby with names like San Pablo Oztotepec or San Salvador Cuauhtenco or San Francisco Tecoxpa. Although throughout Mexico towns may be referred to solely by their indigenous names, they almost always have a Catholic saint's name, as well. In a way, the Spaniards baptized each town with a new Catholic name, installing a church in honour of the saint in the centre of each town.

According to the Catholic calendar introduced by the Spaniards, each saint corresponds to a certain day in the year, his or her feast day. In the past people were

named after the saints on whose day they were born, and for this reason, one's birthday is also referred to as one's saint's day, *el día de su santo*.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, *barrios* and *pueblos* celebrate their saint's days with a town fiesta. Like a personal birthday party, people gather in front of the image of the saint to sing '*Las mañanitas*,' the traditional birthday song whose name comes from the word *mañanita*, meaning 'early morning'. For personal birthdays this song is sung to the celebrant at any time of day or night during the party. For a town or *barrio* fiesta in Milpa Alta the unmarried youths, particularly the single young ladies (*señoritas*) of the *barrio* or *pueblo* hire *mariachis* or other musical groups (*conjuntos*) to sing the *mañanitas* at around half past four in the morning in front of the altar of the church.<sup>10</sup> The *señoritas* are also expected to provide *tamales verdes* and *atole champurrado* for members of the public who attend the singing event.

The *mañanitas* are sung on the actual feast day, the 21<sup>st</sup> of September for San Mateo, although other groups may sing more *mañanitas* later in the morning or also on the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Usually, the fiesta officially starts the day before the feast day, on the 20<sup>th</sup>, when several other *barrios* of Milpa Alta, as well as some *pueblos* in the area and even as far as the state of Morelos, begin to arrive with their patron saints. These groups from other *barrios* organise themselves to come in procession to the fiesta, usually on foot, although those from Morelos come by bus.

One to four people carry an image of their patron saint, either on a banner or as a

**Tamales de nopales for the barrio fiesta  
Doña Margarita Salazar**

Fry chopped onions in butter.  
Add chopped *nopales*.  
Toast *chile de árbol* in lard and crush roughly.  
Mix chiles with *nopales* and *queso oaxaca*.  
Fill prepared corn husks as if they were *tamales*,  
but without *masa*, placing a stick of double cream  
cheese in the centre as if it were a piece of meat.  
Steam.

statue in a glass and wooden case. The act of coming to greet the saint being celebrated in another *barrio* fiesta is called '*llevar la salva*' or '*llevar la promesa*', 'to take the oath/promise [someplace]'. The group usually also brings floral arrangements and a musical group, a

<sup>8</sup> By the way, Primy's and Alejandro's thorny plants are thriving well and spreading throughout their garden.

<sup>9</sup> Most people are now no longer named after the calendar name, so it is not unheard of to celebrate both one's birthday and saint's day, although this is not the norm.

<sup>10</sup> In other areas, such as, for example, some parts of Xochimilco, the *mañanitas* are sung at 11 p.m. or at midnight on the eve of the feast day. This rather directly reflects the difference between Milpa Alta and Xochimilco because in Milpa Alta it is not so difficult to get up before dawn since many are accustomed to doing so on a regular day anyway (i.e., it is not as great a sacrifice as it seems).

band or *mariachis*, to accompany them as they make their offering. Any number of people from the community may join the group who take the *salva* to another *barrio*, providing that their household cooperates with their local *mayordomía* who organises the *promesa*. Cooperation consists of paying a small donation to help foot the expenses incurred for the offerings. The *mayordomos* calculate the costs of the flowers and music, as well as the number of families whom they expect will contribute and suggest a fixed quota, such as Mx\$100 or \$50, but families donate whatever amount they can. These donations are called *cooperaciones*, and paying basically gives participants the (guiltless) right to be fed upon arrival at the destination *barrio* or town. On the day itself, no one checks who has cooperated, and all are just as happy if more people join in to bring the *salva*.

Upon arrival at the church of the *barrio* celebrating its fiesta, the *salva*'s musical group plays *mañanitas* and other songs for the patron saint being celebrated and they leave their floral arrangements at the altar. Then those who came with the *salva* are led to the house of a member of the community, called a *posero* (see next section), who provides a meal to the hungry pilgrims, and in turn the musical group who came with the *salva* play popular songs as everyone eats. *Salvas* usually arrive during the mid- to late morning, thus are fed the main meal of the day, *la comida*, at the house of the *posero*. Typically nowadays, this consists of *carnitas* or *barbacoa*, accompanied by *nopales*, *arroz rojo*, beans and *salsa*, and often preceded by chicken or noodle soup.

**Table 4: The *barrios* and *pueblos* who bring *salvas* to San Mateo, Villa Milpa Alta**

<b><i>Barrios</i> of Villa Milpa Alta</b>	<b><i>Pueblos</i> of Milpa Alta</b>	<b><i>Pueblos</i> of Morelos</b>
*Santa Martha * <sup>+</sup> La Luz La Concepción <sup>11</sup> Santa Cruz Los Angeles	* <sup>+</sup> San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan San Pedro Atocpan	Yautepec San Andrés de la Cal Santa María Magdalena de Quetzalcoatl de Amatlán

\* The principal *barrios* and towns who participate

<sup>+</sup> This year (1997) they brought bands for the dances.

Not all *barrios* and towns in the area participate in bringing *salvas*, as it depends on what sorts of relations there are between *pueblos*, but everyone knows the dates of the fiestas in all the nearby areas, as well as whether or not their own *barrio* brings a *salva*. The other *barrios* of Villa Milpa Alta bring *salvas* to San Mateo except for the *barrio* of

San Agustín who has never brought a *salva* in living memory (see table 4). The principal *salvas* are brought to San Mateo from the *barrios* of Santa Martha and La Luz, as well as from the *pueblo* of San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan, who provide music for the public dances. In the late eighties, Santa Martha and La Concha also used to bring the live bands for the dances.

It is not unusual to have large dances during at least two nights of the fiesta, held from at least nine p.m. until one a.m. During each night that the fiesta is celebrated there are fairground rides, especially for the younger children, and much street food and sometimes other amusement park games set up in the streets. When there is no dance planned there may be a cultural show, but this is less common. What cannot fail, however, is the fireworks show on the feast day itself, which punctuates the main dance. Enormous *castillos de cohetes* (castles of fireworks) which burn in multicoloured lights showing images of the patron saint, the name of the *barrio*, and other figures, are set off in 30-metre high frames. The whole show may last from 30 minutes to an hour, and in between castles there are other colourful rockets exploding freely in the air.<sup>12</sup>

The festivities generally last for about four days, starting on the 20<sup>th</sup> with activities until the 23<sup>rd</sup>, on which day there is a mass at noon to coronate the new *mayordomos*. As their first duty the new *mayordomos* organise a mass called the *misa de octava*, held one week (on the eighth day) after the feast day, the 28<sup>th</sup> of September. This is generally held in the evening at around eight o'clock and is the day of *El Informe*, when the public is informed of who in the community contributed for the celebration of the fiesta. They go through the names of each family by the street in San Mateo where they live, stating if and how much each family cooperated, as well as the names of those who did not cooperate. If Don Eusebio, for example, did not give anything to help with the fiesta, in San Mateo they would announce three times, '*Don Eusebio – ¡nada!*', '*Don Eusebio – nothing!*' Thus all feel compelled to cooperate as I was told that 'if you do not cooperate, the ridicule of all who know you awaits you because everyone finds out during the Informe'. This practice of announcing each person's contribution and lack of is also in use whenever San Mateo brings a *salva* to another *barrio's* fiesta.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This *barrio* is often referred to as 'La Concha' or 'La Conchita' because Conchita is the most common nickname for women named María de la Concepción.

<sup>12</sup> These celebrations are similar to those for the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, Mexican Independence Day, except that the *fiesta del pueblo* is on a larger scale.

<sup>13</sup> According to my key informants, it is only in San Mateo where they announce the specific amounts contributed by each family. This fact is supposed to be taken as an indication of how particularly materialistic the people of San Mateo are in comparison with the rest of Milpa Alta.

Most families eagerly look forward to the *fiesta del pueblo* with much anticipation. They might begin to plan months in advance, saving money to be able to hold a large fiesta for at least 100 people. Cata, a single mother who washes clothes and does general cleaning for a living, buys a pig every year which she tends and fattens so that when it is time for the fiesta she can slaughter it and prepare *carnitas* for at least a hundred guests. As Chelita once said to me, ‘*No tenemos para el calzón, pero para la fiesta...*’, ‘We don’t have enough (money) to buy underwear, but for the fiesta... (we do)’.

### ***Poseros***

Two to three months before the *barrio* fiesta the *mayordomos* meet to organise the coming events. To aid them in looking after those who come to the fiesta they appoint two to four other members of the *mayordomía* or the community, called *poseros*, whose name is derived from the word *posada*, lodging. The families of the *poseros* are in charge of receiving the *barrios* who visit San Mateo on the day of the fiesta, bringing their *salvas*. They provide them with food and, if coming from as far away as the state of Morelos, lodging as well. The *poseros* are chosen by drawing lots or by accepting volunteers. Sometimes other families who live on the same street as the *poseros* help prepare the meal, in cash and in kind, and they also help house those visitors who need to stay the night.

In 1980 Don Felipe was a *mayordomo*, but he also volunteered to be a *posero* to receive the *salva* of the *barrio* of Santa Cruz, because he was originally from this *barrio* and wanted to celebrate the fiesta with his old friends and neighbours and family. Don Germán, Don Felipe’s next door neighbour in San Mateo, agreed to help him. Santa Cruz arrived on the Monday, and for this Don Felipe’s wife, Doña Delfina, and Don Germán’s wife, Doña Amelia, prepared *mole* with all the traditional accompaniments. In addition to this Monday feast, on the Sunday before, the actual day of the fiesta, Doña Delfina still prepared a party for their extended family, friends and other guests whom they invite every year to celebrate with them.

### **Competition and promise**

Depending on the *salvas* brought to your *barrio*, your *barrio* must correspond by bringing the same or more when it is your turn to bring the *promesa* to another *barrio* or

town fiesta. In general, though, bringing the *salva* is a voluntary act and nothing ought to be expected other than what one is capable of bringing. Even so, the *salva* is taken as an opportunity for competitive display in music (what level of musical group one's *mayordomía* can hire for the event), as well as in food (quality and quantity of food served when the *salva* arrives).

Saint Matthew, I was told, is a tax collector, and his image is always portrayed with him holding a book and a pen. One year the pen on the statue of San Mateo was stolen. This was the same year that the *barrio* contributed very little for the main fiesta of Villa Milpa Alta on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August for the Virgin of the Assumption, the central parish. People from other *barrios* were upset over this, but turned it into a joke, saying that San Mateo could not write a cheque because his pen had been stolen.

The character attributed to San Mateo seems to extend to the residents of his *barrio*. Several women from other *barrios* or other parts of Mexico City who have married into San Mateo have mentioned to me that the people of Barrio San Mateo are proud, materialistic, greedy, and presumptuous. San Mateo has a reputation for being a rich *barrio*, because most of its residents prepare *barbacoa* for a living, and this has been a successful business venture. They take every opportunity to show off what they have or pretend to have, especially in a monetary or material sense. Whenever San Mateo brings a *salva* for the fiesta of another town or *barrio*, the musical group or *mariachis* that they bring with them always play a song called 'El Rey' ('The King') and they substitute words to indicate that San Mateo is the king of Milpa Alta, singing in the chorus, '¡Ay, ay, ay, San Mateo!' San Mateo also does the same during Carnival. Although each *barrio* brings a band of their own to play the carnival music of the *chinelos*, whenever the group (*comparsa*) of San Mateo is dancing near the *barrio* of Santa Martha, they switch music to play the song of 'El Rey'.

In this way San Mateo is famous for its great competitiveness, especially with the *barrio* of Santa Martha. People tend to say, '*los de Santa Martha hablan y los de San Mateo cumplen*', 'those from Santa Martha talk and those from San Mateo fulfil'. In particular regard to Santa Martha, they keep track of what one another brings to their *salvas*, and each year try to do better than the other. Santa Martha may say, for example, that they will bring the Mariachi Vargas to the fiesta of San Mateo, but in the end they cannot do so because of economic constraints. So for the next fiesta of Santa Martha, San Mateo, who has more money, brings the Mariachi Vargas to Santa Martha. If Santa Martha brings Los João to San Mateo this year, next year San Mateo will bring

La Santanera whatever the costs. Other *barrios* bring whatever they can, but San Mateo insists on asking its residents for more and more money each year so that they can bring better or more popular musical groups. It is competition of this sort which annoys those who are not from San Mateo, and this idea may elicit an exclamation of '*¡Esa no es gente católica!*', 'These are not Catholic people!'

No other *barrios* have this special sort of *bronca* (row, fuss), but all seem to agree that it has always been like this between Santa Martha and San Mateo, although no one can explain why. Perhaps it has something to do with their physical proximity, as they are adjacent to one another, which engenders a sort of sibling rivalry effect. Funnily enough, in spite of the purported animosity, there is a rather high rate of intermarriage between these two *barrios*. This may be the true reason, therefore, behind the competition, as men and women from these two *barrios* compete amongst themselves at a personal/romantic level. People actually say that if San Mateo is the King of Milpa Alta, Santa Martha is his queen.<sup>14</sup>

I was told that there has always been a shortage of women in San Mateo, and so young men from this *barrio* naturally go to the *barrio* next door to find eligible young women. They meet them during the *barrio* fiestas or carnival when there is an opportunity to mix. Besides this, not only is there great romantic competition, there also seems to be a higher rate of acts of violence between men from these two *barrios*. Whether these are stemmed from romantic competition or not cannot be confirmed.

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<sup>14</sup> Madsen (1960) devotes a chapter of his ethnography on the personal character of the patron saints in the Milpa Alta area. He quickly describes a few of the romantic links amongst the saints, and mentions how Santa Martha, for example, has many boyfriends because she is rich, and La Concha is the godmother of Santa Martha's children, but she is a bad godmother because she hates children. On the other hand, all little boys are automatically the sweethearts of the Virgin of the Assumption (the patroness of the main parish of Milpa Alta). In my experience in Milpa Alta people only told me about the torrid romance between San Mateo and Santa Martha, but I would not be surprised if there were hundreds more bits of gossip about the patron saints which spread and change when people are in jovial moods and tease their friends from other *barrios*. They use the images of the saints and their allegiance by residence as a playful divisive system, in a similar way that people feel affinity or compete with one another by supporting the same or different football clubs.



### **Buñuelos de lujo**

**Ma. Primitiva Bermejo Martínez**

This is how Primy always makes *buñuelos*, although I began calling them her 'luxury *buñuelos*' or '*buñuelos de lujo*' because they were so different from the kind that you find being sold at fairs all over Mexico during Christmas, Easter or Carnival. The measurements are approximate because, like most home cooks, Primy just throws in whatever amounts 'feel' right to her. In Mexico *buñuelos* are broad, crispy fritters served in stacks, dribbled with a light flavoured syrup, or honey. They are served in Christmas parties or during *posadas* and are said to represent the diapers of the Baby Jesus Christ. *Makes 50 to 60 buñuelos.*

a pinch of aniseed, boiled in a little water	orange juice, freshly squeezed
2 kg plain flour	2 fistsful of lard
9-10 eggs	3 c. of sugar
¼ kg butter, melted	abundant oil for frying
zest of 2 oranges, finely grated	

Combine all the ingredients, except for the oil, in a large bowl, adding enough orange juice to make an elastic dough. Knead it well to develop the glutens, occasionally throwing the dough forcefully onto a *metate*. Do this several times and make sure that you hear a loud slapping noise with each throw. (Primy said that sometimes she would ask Alejandro or any available man to do the kneading for her because it is physically quite difficult.) When the dough is elastic, flour a work surface and pull off walnut sized balls. Flatten or roll each ball into a rough circle. Sitting down, cover your knee with a clean tea towel. Place the circle of dough on the rounded surface and very gently pull the dough from the edges in small increments, turning it constantly and sustaining it on your knee. The dough can be stretched to a very thin disk of about 25 cm in diameter. If the dough breaks easily it is not elastic enough and may lack kneading. Fry each circle in hot oil, making sure to press the centre into the oil so that it cooks evenly. Turn to brown the other side, and do not worry about it breaking, as the dough is strong. Drain on absorbent paper and allow to harden.

#### **To serve**

Drizzle with a light syrup made of crude sugar (*piloncillo*) and water (this may be flavoured with aniseed or guava).

## **6.4 Other religious festivities**

There are other religious festivities which involve community organisation as the *mayordomía* does for the town fiesta. In Milpa Alta, as well as in other areas in Mexico City and beyond (i.e., Portal 1988), religious festivals inspire greater community involvement than civil fiestas like the celebration of Mexican Independence on the fifteenth of September. Some of the major community events of each year are briefly described below and the others are listed in table 5.

**Table 5: Calendar of religious festivals in Milpa Alta**

Name	Date	Group which celebrates
New Year	January 1	Milpa Alta
La Candelaria	February 2	Milpa Alta
Ash Wednesday	February or March (moveable)	Milpa Alta
San José	March 19	Society of Mayordomos of San José
Holy Week	March or April (moveable)	Milpa Alta
San Marcos	April 25	<i>Barrio de San Mateo</i>
La Santa Cruz	May 3	<i>Barrio de Santa Cruz</i>
Nuestra Señora de la Luz	May or June (moveable)	<i>Barrio de la Luz</i>
Corpus Christi	June (moveable)	Milpa Alta
El Santo Jubileo	July 10	Milpa Alta
Santa Martha	July 29	<i>Barrio de Santa Martha</i>
Nuestra Señora de los Angeles	August 2	<i>Barrio de los Angeles</i>
El Salvador	August 6	Society of Mayordomos of el Divino Salvador
Nuestra Señora de la Asunción	August 15*	Milpa Alta and municipal towns
San Agustín	August 28	<i>Barrio de San Agustín</i>
La Exaltación de la Cruz	September 14	<i>Barrio de Santa Cruz</i>
San Mateo	September 21	<i>Barrio de San Mateo</i>
Days of the Dead	November 1 and 2	Milpa Alta
La Purísima Concepción	December 8	<i>Barrio de la Concepción</i> and Society of the Image of the Parish
Virgin of Guadalupe	December 12	Milpa Alta and especially the 3 societies for this Virgin
Christmas and posadas	December	Milpa Alta

\* This is also a civil fiesta and fair.

Source: Martínez Ruvalcaba (1987: 102)

### The annual pilgrimage to Chalma

There are specific *mayordomos* who organize the pilgrimage to visit *El Señor de Chalma* (Our Lord of Chalma). On the sixth of January, while most people go out to buy toys for their children to celebrate the day of the Three Kings (*los Reyes Magos*), thousands of people from Milpa Alta and other parts of Mexico arrive at a small mountain town in the state of Mexico to pay their respects to the saint.<sup>15</sup> Any pilgrim who decides to join can be assured of certain utilities, food and first aid, during the duration of the walk. People from all over Mexico come, but they are looked after by

<sup>15</sup> All religious images, even if they are images of Christ or the Virgin Mary, are referred to as '*santos*' or '*santitos*'. This minor confusion is interesting because in practise there seems to be little conscious differentiation or hierarchy among the saints, Jesus and Mary.

their own local councils. The *mayordomos* for Chalma arrange for trucks and buses to meet people at designated points along the path where people can pause to rest, eat, and collect their sleeping bags so they can camp for the night in the mountains. In the morning there are always *tamales* and *atole*, and in the late afternoon there is a proper *comida*.

Some people bring their own food, and pack it up along with their sleeping bags, and leave them in the truck to be driven to the rest stops when they will need them. Some take their own truck with a complete picnic prepared. The trip to Chalma can easily blossom into an elaborate camping trip, with some families bringing *mole* with chicken or turkey to eat on the way. Alejandro's father used to bring a whole sheep ready to be pit-roasted to prepare *barbacoa* in the mountains. In those days they would use native sheep, *borregos criollos*, which are smaller and cook much more quickly than what many people use nowadays, large fattened sheep from the US or Australia.

I asked Yadira and Kiko why they went to Chalma every year on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January even if just by car, because I knew that they do not consider themselves to be terribly religious. They said that rather than a sort of 'devotion', it is something that Kiko's family does by 'tradition'. They go each year to make the sign of the cross in the church and to hear mass. Then they buy *cocolos* that have been or can be blessed by the priest there who sprinkles holy water over all the devotees who come. Outside in the plaza of the churchyard there are people who gather to perform folk dances and others selling all sorts of souvenirs and snacks. Kiko and the family usually go to Chalma, hear mass, eat in the street and then return to Milpa Alta after enjoying some of the festive air about the place. For them it is a sort of blessing that they receive to start the new year, for good luck. If they fail to go to Chalma they fear they may fall into bad luck.

Many other people go to Chalma to spend time with their friends and family, although Yadira predicted that about twenty percent go because of religious fervour. Sometimes people make resolutions or oaths in the new year or other occasions, such as to stop drinking, for example. If they fall into temptation and break their oaths, they feel so guilty or their friends and family make them feel guilty, so they decide to go to Chalma as their punishment or a form of redemption.

Groups of young men or young women go to Chalma without their families, but with their parents' consent. It is not uncommon for them to go on foot, along with the majority of the devotees. To make the pilgrimage is already a sacrifice, but to go on

foot is doubly or triply so, because the road winds through the mountains and it has been known to snow in early January in the area leading to Chalma. 'But despite the cold, nothing stops them, especially the girls,' I was told. These groups of youths sometimes meet and mix at the designated campsites along the trail. It is particularly interesting to see the young women who experience great euphoria, '*una gran euforia*', when they are walking in the mountain. 'It is like an escape. In the hills they have the opportunity to liberate themselves for a little while. There they release themselves, they have their own space, they get drunk, they dance... Later they return home to the same life' (Gomezcésar, personal communication).<sup>16</sup>

Walking to Chalma the roads are so full that everyone walking must maintain a brisk pace to keep up with one another, otherwise they will be pushed ahead by the force of the crowd. 'It is quite lovely, the whole street filled with people,' Primy said with her eyes lit up. Upon arrival, the atmosphere is giddy and vibrant, as there are people in colourful costumes dancing in the plaza while others sell *cocolos*, *antojitos*, and multicoloured paraphernalia such as hats and toys to buy as souvenirs of one's visit. As long as the sixth falls on a Tuesday or Wednesday, the *barbacoieros* from San Mateo might have time to make a day trip to Chalma. This constitutes a quick visit by car, to make the sign of the cross, attend a mass or pray a little, and after a few hours in the plaza, buy *cocolos* outside before heading home. Nothing may interfere with the days they must sell or prepare *barbacoa*.

Coty said that every time she has gone walking to Chalma it has been so exhausting and physically demanding that she swears that it will be the last time. At least she would prefer to go by car if she has the opportunity to go the following year. But each year, as December nears, she always begins to feel excited and looks forward to Chalma once more. If only she was not so limited by the *barbacoa* business and her young daughters, she might go to Chalma more often. Miguel even sometimes volunteered to be *mayordomo* to carry the image of the saints, *el estandarte*, along the way. This is like taking a *promesa* or *salva* to visit Chalma, except in the special case of the pilgrimage, usually one man carries it on his back in its glass and wooden case. When he tires on the way, he may pass on or take the load in turn with another volunteer.

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<sup>16</sup> 'Es como un escape. En el cerro [tienen la oportunidad de] liberarlas un rato. Allá se revientan, tienen su espacio, se emborrachan, bailan... Luego regresan [a Milpa Alta] y vuelven a ser lo mismo'.

Kiko reminisced how he has gone to Chalma on foot a few times with his cousins. Miguel said that before he married he used to enjoy the annual pilgrimage to Chalma and he would also go with his *cuates* (buddies or mates). The reason for going, he said, was for the sake of communing with nature and with one's friends. Rarely do people attempt the pilgrimage on their own, unless they are very devout or even fanatical. Kiko reiterated this notion, and added that Chalma also used to be a holy place for the ancient Aztecs, so there has been a tradition of walking to Chalma since pre-hispanic times. But it has always been a collective venture.

### Holy Week

There are other *mayordomos* just for Holy Week. They organise the passion play,

#### Ensalada de betabel 'sangre de Cristo'

*Yadira Arenas Berrocal*

'Sangre de Cristo' means the blood of Christ, represented by the water in which the beetroot is boiled. It is important to keep the orange and banana peels on the fruit so that the bananas do not fall apart and the beet water is infused with their flavours. This is a very refreshing dish and that people only prepare during Lent and Advent.

Serves 8-10.

1 kg beetroot, leaves removed and well-scrubbed  
 500 g (1 large) *jicama*, cut into thick sticks  
 200-250 g peanuts, peeled  
 5 oranges, sliced in ½ cm rounds, with peels  
 3 ripe bananas, in ½ inch slices, with their peels  
 ¼ - ½ iceberg lettuce, shredded  
 sugar to taste

The beetroot must be very clean and boiled in abundant water with their skins. When cooked, peel then and discard the skins, cut into cubes and reserve the cooking water. Allow to cool. In a large bowl, combine the rest of the ingredients with the cubed beets and cooking water, adding the bananas half an hour before serving. Serve in bowls with abundant water.

as well as the daily activities, Jesus's prison made of oranges and chamomile, and the distribution of its parts to those in the community who paid the cooperation to construct it. There are several customs involved in celebrating Holy Week, but the major practices revolve around food: meat restriction and the specific dishes prepared to abide by it.

During the early part of Holy Week, after Palm Sunday, when women cross

one another in the street or in the market, they might greet each other saying, '¿ya tienes tus *romeritos*?', 'Do you already have your *romeritos*?' The whole of Mexico (not just Milpa Alta) completely standardizes their diet for these few days of the year. By Holy Wednesday most families in Milpa Alta have already bought their *romeritos* and poblano chiles which they will prepare for the coming days. Holy Week is actually only celebrated from Thursday to Sunday, and the market is bustling constantly as in

other days of the year, or perhaps even more so, since other shops in the centre would be closed.

When I saw the amounts of food that my friends in Milpa Alta were preparing on Wednesday and Thursday, I asked if they were having another feast or if they were expecting guests. Each family said that they were not, not even expecting their extended families to come, although they would not be caught lacking if anyone arrived by surprise. Every household had huge amounts of *revoltijo*, chiles stuffed with cheese or tuna, *pescado/bacalao a la vizcaína*, fish fried in light batter (*pescado capeado*), fried cakes (*tortitas*) of potato, broad beans or shrimps, beetroot salad called ‘*sangre de Cristo*’ (‘the blood of Christ’) and perhaps a few other dishes. They cooked enough to last them

**Pescado a la vizcaína al estilo de la abuela  
Chef Abdiel Cervantes**

¾ kg. salt cod (*bacalao*), soaked, drained, shredded  
½ - 1 L. extra virgin olive oil  
½ kg. (about 3 c.) onions, finely chopped  
2 - 2½ c. (about 4 large heads) garlic, finely chopped  
1½ c. parsley, finely chopped  
1½ - 2 kg. tomatoes, finely chopped  
300 g. almonds, blanched, peeled, finely chopped

To serve: 1 jar green olives  
1 tin chiles güeros (or any pickled yellow chiles)  
crusty bread

Sauté onions until golden. Add garlic and let brown.  
Add tomatoes and cook over high heat, stirring frequently, until oil comes out, about 20 minutes.  
Add fish and almonds. Cook 5-10 minutes.  
Add parsley, and mix well, cooking until fish completely falls apart into small bits.  
Let rest and decorate with olives and chiles.

for three days because eating meat and any kind of work are not allowed. There are many other activities, masses and prayers which occupy all their time.

Yadira told me that she loves Holy Week because of all the food – the salad, *revoltijo* and *pescaditos*. The same food is prepared for Christmas, and surprisingly enough, these dishes are rarely if ever prepared at home unless there is an occasion of this sort or a death in the family. On Easter Sunday, however, many families prepare *mole* with chicken because meat is now allowed and it is like a normal large fiesta, celebrating Christ’s resurrection (re-birth).

## Torrejas

### Ma. Primitiva Bermejo Martínez

A Lenten dessert typical of the state of Michoacan, this is the way Primi makes them, which is a bit unusual in that they are coated in the egg batter called a '*capeado*' like the *capeado* for *chiles rellenos*. Most recipes of *torrejas* are reminiscent of Spanish *torrijas*, French toast. Primi's version contains no milk and it probably would not matter if the bread used was very fresh. This is something that she rarely prepared because her mother-in-law, Doña Margarita did not like the idea of a sweet made with spices. When Doña Margarita was persuaded to try them, she liked them so much that she had her own serving the next day when there were few pieces left.

*Serves 12.*

4 slightly stale *teleras*, each cut into 3, or 1 baguette, cut into 6 cm slices  
250 g. *queso cotija* or use an aged white cow's milk cheese like Romano or Sardo  
3 eggs, separated  
vegetable oil for frying

Hollow out each piece of bread by removing some of the central crumbs, leaving an open pocket. Fill each space with cheese and proceed with the *capeado* as explained above for stuffed chiles.

### Spiced syrup

1 cone of *piloncillo* (crude sugar) or 1 cup firmly packed dark brown sugar  
8 cm of cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylandicum* variety from Sri Lanka, not the tough Cassia variety)  
5 whole cloves  
5 whole allspice berries  
around 750 ml of water

Boil all the above in enough water to make a light syrup. To serve, warm the fried bread in the syrup to impregnate them with the flavours and to heat them through. Serve in low bowls with lots of syrup.

## Carnival

A group of youths (mostly unmarried and young married men) are responsible for organising the annual carnival of Milpa Alta, the largest one held in the region. These youths form a group of *mayordomos* who all come from one *barrio* and who pass on the duty to a group from another *barrio* the following year. Participation in this organising council is basically voluntary. Sometimes a group of men get one of their friends very drunk as they dance in the streets and they make him shout at the top of his lungs, 'Put me on the list of *mayordomos* for the Carnival next year!' Although he may not recall making this joyful oath, his more sober friends remind him of his promise a few weeks before Carnival, and he is not likely to turn them down.

Carnival in Milpa Alta used to begin on Black Saturday, but over the years it was moved to begin on Easter Sunday. In Milpa Alta it has always been held after Lent, rather than before, as it is in other parts of Mexico (and the world). Doña Margarita recalled that her father used to take them to the carnival in Amecameca, Morelos held on the three days (Sunday to Tuesday) before Ash Wednesday, and then they would

spend Lent looking forward to the carnival of Milpa Alta. It also used to be held for three days, from Easter Sunday to Tuesday, as well. In 1997, Milpa Alta celebrated for six days, from Sunday to Friday, because, a few people explained to me, people like to have fun and they look forward to the dancing in the evenings, as well as the street food and games. The following year there were plans to hold it for eight days.

People begin to go down to the centre of Milpa Alta from around five or six o'clock, when the *chinelos* begin dancing. Little by little more people trickle in until by eight or nine p.m. there are so many people that there is hardly any space to move. It takes nearly an hour and a half to dance once around the block (a walk which on a normal day takes about five minutes). Such is the collective elation in anticipation of Carnival that even on the days of mourning of Good Friday and Black Saturday, many people attend the public activities in the churchyards as if they were festive occasions. The parish priest angrily announced over the microphone that people must remember that they were commemorating the death of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and that Carnival did not begin until Sunday. In the early eighties, in an attempt to control some of the religiosity of Lent, the parish priest at the time tried have the carnival postponed. His efforts failed, and he was moved to another region, because the community preferred to have their fiesta.

## **6.5 Protestantism and tradition – Jehovah's Scapegoats**

In Milpa Alta there seems to be a subtly verbalised belief that the opposite of being Catholic is being a Jehovah's Witness. The concept of a non-believer is, in effect, nonexistent, although if asked, a Milpaltense will clearly acknowledge that there is a difference between being a non-believer and a true believer. But since these positions are never explicitly expressed, non-believers are never judged or even brought to mind, unless they fail to follow certain practices related with Catholic religious expression. They are easily ignored because zealous behaviour is not a direct indication of belief and there is little chance of confrontation between true believers and non-believers, since non-believers do not profess their non-belief in the forceful way that Jehovah's Witnesses profess their differing belief. Thus, it seems far worse to be a Jehovah's Witness than it is to be a non-believer.

The prototypical Jehovah's Witness does not do things in the same way that everyone else does, does not participate in any of the traditional festivities, and therefore is an anti-social character. In Milpa Alta a fear seems to exist that it is being



infiltrated by such dissenters who have come to convert and thereby subvert the social order.

Primy once told me about the Jehovah's Witnesses across the road. Her neighbours had constructed an evangelical temple right in front of their house, she told me. They used to have a *tocinería* in the market in Obregón, and they had some other business, as well. They used to go to sell every single day and never went to mass nor even paid much attention to their children. But then they converted into Jehovah's Witnesses, they sold their businesses and now solely dedicate their lives to evangelising. So how do they earn a living to put food in their stomachs? They cannot expect to be fed when they go from house to house. People do not just feed those who show up at their gates (especially evangelizing Jehovah's Witnesses).

When someone sees two people, usually two women, approaching her house, especially if they are unfamiliar faces, she assumes that they must be Jehovah's Witnesses because they always travel in pairs. Those in the house quite commonly ask someone such as a child or the woman who is there to help with the housework (or even the resident anthropologist) to please answer the door and tell the pair that there is no one at home, so no one can attend to them, thank you very much, and sorry but we have no time to listen to the Message.

Some Catholics believe that the Jehovah's Witnesses in Mexico answer to a head church in the United States who gives members a commission for every convert they make. The system sounds like a market of souls rather than a question of religious faith. Primy said she was unsure about the truth of this claim, although she seemed prepared to believe it. The most puzzling question for her was what do the men on top gain from paying people to make converts? She asked this question over and over because she failed to see the logic of it, but continued to ponder on what could possibly be the point of taking people from the Catholic church when there is no obvious incentive. It never occurred to Primy that people of another religion may perhaps believe that they have the True Faith and may be saving souls by teaching others to convert.

She posed an example to explain her confusion about them: If she suggests to me that I go to Church with her or to a Bible study or to pray, it would be because she

thinks it would be helpful and for my own good.<sup>17</sup> But no one pays her or me to go to church. If she were to invite me to read the Bible with her it would be something that she would do out of the goodness of her heart and her interest in my spiritual well-being, and not to earn a commission. Meanwhile, she must carry on working hard to support her family. So again, how do her neighbours maintain themselves and their family if they no longer have their businesses and now dedicate themselves completely to being religious evangelists? The people in the church in the States must support them, so they can live well and have a nice car. But why did they not go to church before when they were Catholic? She implied that they would have learned to better appreciate the Catholic religion had they only given the Catholic church a chance.

Now these neighbours have convinced other people on the street and other parts of Milpa Alta to convert, as well. There are now fewer families on their street who can be called upon to be *mayordomos* for the *barrio* fiesta. This puts more pressure on the remaining Catholic families on their street, as they must then shoulder the burden of the fiesta more often than other families. Nonetheless, they are still happy to comply with the demands of the *mayordomía* and the rest of society, and they continue to avoid and ignore the Jehovah's Witnesses when they can.

Throughout Milpa Alta the Jehovah's Witnesses are taken as representative of Protestants, and there is unblanketed distrust of Protestantism prevalent amongst most who consider themselves Catholic. Yadira phrased her grievance about the many other religions which have sprung from the Catholic as a mockery of the Catholic religion, [since] they only take the aspects that are convenient for their purposes, '*Son una burla de la religión católica; toma sólo lo que les conviene*'.<sup>18</sup>

Growing up, Primy once explained to me, one is taught ideas about religion and morality, and she musingly added that many couples marry at the church not so much from fear of rejection from society<sup>19</sup> so much as from fear of God's judgment.

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<sup>17</sup> By the way, she never suggested anything of the sort to me, nor did anyone else unless it was to go to an event, with some tenuous relation to the Church or otherwise, which might be of interest to me because of its 'traditional' character.

<sup>18</sup> Funnily enough, this seems to be the same criticism that Christian converts make about Catholics.

<sup>19</sup> After all, as described in the next chapter, in practice it is socially rather unproblematic for a man and woman to live in 'free union' rather than perform a ritual of wedlock, whatever it is that people say on the surface. One can, after all, be socially stigmatised or accepted whatever one's civil/religious status. (On a tangent, there is a general distrust of outsiders, that is to say, non-Milpaltense women marrying in often have trouble being accepted by their new social circles. Also, married women are expected to acquire a certain unsexed decorum even if they behaved in a slightly more risqué manner while still single.

Although she acknowledged that the possible social stigma may provide an impetus for 'marrying well', the 'true believers' marry at church for the sake of God. Whether one was a true believer or not would of course be difficult to determine, and she could not really guess how many percent among the community would be, partly because there are so many Protestant sects now.

Primy believed that those who have left the Catholic church are indecisive because they do not have a firm foundation of what their parents should have inculcated in them all their lives. She thought that these people who 'do not know what they want' have 'weak judgment'. Conversion becomes a consequence of poor faith, rather than an act of a (reaf-)firm(-ed) belief in God.

In their sermons, priests also attacked the Jehovah's Witnesses for taking followers away from the Catholic church. Although they criticised their congregation for having poor faith, they sometimes phrased it as if the Catholics were losing support to the Jehovah's Witnesses. The clergy manipulated the image of a stereotypical submissive woman, illustrating her as either being prevented by her husband from leaving the house or blindly following his faith in the Jehovah's Witnesses. These are unacceptable excuses for not attending mass, which many women presumably used when confronted about it. Rather than assert their faith, they lazily fell into the submissive woman's trap or excuse, citing their husbands as the source of their inability to fulfil their religious responsibility. Furthermore, priests spoke with disapproval about the high participation of community members in festive occasions such as carnival, town fiestas and reception parties, whilst there is poor attendance at mass. It must be for this reason that the parish priests use the masses at weddings, funerals, Easter, Carnival and such, to specifically discuss lack of attendance at church services as well as losing faithful followers to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Fiestas are the times when the church is most full.

In one sermon the priest reprimanded those with failing faith and unsatisfactory reasons for leaving the Catholic church. He said, 'There are those among us who say, "The priest scolded me, so that is why I am a Jehovah's Witness."' We neglect our

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When Yadira married, she refused to change her manner of dressing and lifestyle when she moved to Milpa Alta, in spite of rebukes from her in-laws and others of their generation. Nevertheless, she was easily accepted in the community and is well-loved and popular on her street. She did marry well, but whether she had or not, it would have been expected that she have a harder time adjusting because of her unorthodox behaviour. She should have been shunned because she did not behave like a proper married woman. But it is one's sincerity and authenticity with oneself and others, she says, which counts, and not the superfluous designs of images and structures in society.)

faith! ... The more you feed yourself with Christ (on the Bread of Life), the more you nourish your faith’.

A friend from Xochimilco told me that one of his nephews worked in the market of Milpa Alta and so he had asked him if he could introduce me to any families he knew. His nephew said that he knew some people fairly well, but that since he was evangelical Christian rather than Catholic, the people he knew well enough were not Catholic either, so this would not help me. Christians, my friend clarified, believe that Catholicism and all customs, traditions and festivities are manifestations of religious idolatry. So Christians do not participate and have no use for traditions. He mentioned that I would find that people who considered themselves as good Catholics were completely at ease with practising *santería* or *brujería*.<sup>20</sup> If modern medicine fails to work to cure illness, Catholics do not think twice about calling on the *curandero* (healer) and using *herbolaria* (herbal or folk medicine) to remedy things. They perform *limpias* (cleansing rituals) without further thought, believing as much in these things as in their Catholic prayers.

An indication of this is the prevalence of small stands in front of many Catholic churches where vendors sell items such as *ajo macho* (garlic shallot)<sup>21</sup> or aloe vera, tied with red ribbons and sometimes with pictures of saints attached, as well as other amulets. In Milpa Alta people seem to make fun of the idea of doing a *limpia* when one is ill, yet in practise it is quite common for people to consider curing someone with a massage (*sobar*) or to use an egg (*limpiar* or *curar con un huevo*). The use of the *temascal*, a traditional dome-shaped steam bath made of stone and shaped like a Mexican bread oven (rather like an igloo), is also commonly used for curing within the belief system.<sup>22</sup>

The evil eye, or *mal de ojo*, is an example of this. *Mal de ojo* is an infirmity which affects babies and very young children, who are still unable to express themselves well in speech. Babies who cry inconsolably, especially after coming into contact with

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<sup>20</sup> *Santería* refers to an excessive devotion to a saint (*santo*) or to the saints, and *brujería* refers to witchcraft or a devotion to a witch or sorcerer (*brujo*). In practise they are rather similar.

<sup>21</sup> This is a variety of garlic which is really the first year’s growth of garlic seeds (Dahlen 1995). Its head is made of only one large round clove. It is often about three cm in diameter and is rarely used in Mexico for cooking as it is primarily used for *brujería* (Muñoz forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> It may sound like I am lumping together ideas of traditional forms of healing and spiritual/religious beliefs. In fact they are interrelated belief systems which in practice do not negate one another. Believing in the efficacy of certain herbal or mineral cures when prayer and allopathic medicine fail are simply other levels of cosmological understanding and belief.

several people, are said to have the eye, *tener ojo*. It is caused by someone staring too strongly at the child, even if in admiration. A heavy look affects sensitive children, filling them with an indefinable discomfort, and the only way to appease them is to cure or cleanse them with an egg. To do this, usually one of the parents of the child lays him or her down and uses a raw chicken egg to rub all over the child's body and forehead and in the sign of the cross. They mutter prayers at the same time, as well. The symptoms should stop after this and the baby should calm down. After this process, if the egg is still whole when it is shaken, then the child was not badly affected. But if the egg has become broken up and watery (*aguado*) then (s)he did indeed have the evil eye, but all has transferred to the egg so the child should be cured. In such a case, the egg must be discarded in a distant place or buried.<sup>23</sup>

Protestants would denounce such beliefs as they failed to fit in with the teachings of Christianity, but Catholicism in Mexico easily accommodates and validates any other belief systems. Nevertheless, this sort of radical religious free thinking is shunned by the majority who are happy to remain Catholic and not question the logic of the spiritual world. Yadira told me that she never used to believe in such things as *limpias*, but after having moved to Milpa Alta and seeing children cured in this manner, she changed her opinions. She often told me that there are traditions preserved in Milpa Alta that people from neighbouring Xochimilco know nothing about, and when they regard inexplicable situations or illnesses such as *mal de ojo*, one is left not knowing what to believe anymore and simply bases judgment on experience.

I once suggested to Primy that perhaps there may come a day when the Catholic church becomes so weak that they empty of their followers. If this occurs, what will happen with the *mayordomías* and the traditions? Primy believed that such a day when the Church and all the traditions end will never come. She elucidated that in the Bible it says that even if only one person goes to the church there will be a mass. She also mentioned that she knew of cases of people who left the Catholic church and then returned to the faith. 'So what does this mean?' she asked rhetorically. It indicated that they were weak and led astray and should have listened to their elders who tried to teach them and show them the way from the beginning, because that is the way things should

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<sup>23</sup> In a published compilation of testimonies of the people of Milpa Alta (Gomezcésar 1992), one participant adds that after using the egg, the child's body should be rubbed with red flowers, rue, and

be. She continued with assurance that the traditions and the *mayordomías* will never die because in spite of all these new ideas coming from outside, there will always be firm believers who will keep them going.

Indeed traditions in Milpa Alta appear deeply rooted as well as dearly loved. People who have married in, who work in the area or simply decided to move to Milpa Alta gave the wonderful traditions and celebrations practiced there as a primary reason for their happiness.<sup>24</sup> These traditions are inevitably linked with the Catholic calendar, even if the means of celebration may not be consistent with other Catholic communities in Spain or other parts of the world (e.g., the Days of the Dead). It is the love of tradition that makes people continue to remember Easter, Christmas, and the annual pilgrimage to Chalma, to name a few. As another friend of mine said to help me clarify these ideas, '*La religión es por tradición, y no por convicción... somos religiosos, no católicos*', 'Religion is (practised) for the sake of tradition, and not because of one's conviction... we are religious, not Catholic'.<sup>25</sup>

## 6.6 Conclusion: social organisation and reciprocity

One particular aspect about *mayordomos*, just like *padrinos*, is that they do not need to be married unless they are *mayordomos* for the *santo patrón*. Only the patron saint, the baby being baptised, or the couple marrying at church require *padrinos/mayordomos* who have married at church, as well. So although the patron saint is not quite like a baby, and the timeframe of the responsibility that one has is different (one to five years for the saint as opposed to the rest of your life for a baby being baptised) (cf. Brandes 1988), the role of *padrinos/mayordomos* can only be trusted if they are properly married from the point of view of the church. Both are moral/ethical responsibilities and require official proof of their suitability to take on each charge. From the people's point of view, however, a church marriage is only another formality or a rule to be followed along with other inexplicable demands of religion.

*Compadrazgo* is a system of forming ritual kin. Literally meaning co-parenthood, at its most basic, it is the relationship between a couple and the godparents of their

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*hierba de Santa María* (p. 127). I had never heard of this among the people I knew, so I suppose that it is not an absolutely necessary part of the cure.

<sup>24</sup> Gomezcézar (1992) and personal communication from several people.

<sup>25</sup> Ricardo Bonilla (personal communication), when we were discussing religiosity in Mexico. He is a devout and devoted lover of the Catholic religion and religious iconography.

child. This kind of link is not strictly limited to godparents at baptism, and there are different kinds of *compadres* for marriage, house blessings, and almost any kind of inaugural or life cycle event. The relationship between *compadres* is characterised by respect, *respeto*, which implies personal affection, mutual admiration, and also social distance. For this reason, friends who become *compadres* may change the form of address that they use with one another, and begin to use *Usted* when they used to call each other *tú*. The same has been observed by Lomnitz (1977), who investigated the survival tactics of a socially and economically marginal group of people living in a shantytown in Mexico City. She argues that cooperation in reciprocal exchange (observed in *compadrazgo*, *cuatismo*, and *confianza*) is a necessary social institution which marginals rely upon to survive their chronic economic insecurity. Long-term social relationship exchange is a living institution, and not 'archaic' (cf. Mauss 1990). In sum, *compadrazgo* ritualizes close social relationships which may be necessary in future, although not necessarily for economic assistance.

This social relation that is formalized during life cycle rituals, such as weddings and baptisms, tie *compadres* to one another for life. Although the actual relationship between *compadres* may be characterised by competition, greed, and initial distrust, the respectful distance that is observed extends throughout the families of the *compadres*. Lomnitz observed that both husbands and wives choose their *compadres*, sometimes jointly, sometimes singly. In Milpa Alta, this is also the case, even in choosing the *padrinos de velación* (wedding godparents) of a bride and groom. Weddings are often still normally organised by the parents of the bride and groom, unless the couple has already established a family, built their own house, and are socially and economically independent. The links of *compadrazgo*, whether *compadres* or *padrinos*, are lifelong commitments of ritual kin which are inherited just like links of natural kinship.

Links of *compadrazgo* are commemorated with a feast celebrating a change in status or position in the life cycle of the *ahijado*. Town or *barrio* fiestas, on the other hand, are a combination of feasts, performances, and religious ritual. 'Fiestas ... are literally feasts, shared events that people plan for and participate in jointly. They usually assume a traditional form—or at least are perceived by the participants to do so—and they generally are invested with sacred significance' (Brandes 1988: 9). They are organised by another social institution called the cargo system or *mayordomía*, and they work upon reciprocal exchange between groups. Specifically, the basic exchange unit is the family or household (Brandes 1988).

Accepting to be *mayordomos* is accepting a responsibility similar to that of *compadrazgo*. For both *mayordomos* and *compadres*, their main responsibility is the organisation of the fiesta, the most important aspects of which are the food and music. In theory, these roles can be contrasted. Everyday dyadic exchanges between individuals (*compadrazgo*, relatives) are long-term, indefinite bonds of reciprocity (to last a life-time and beyond); these are different from fiesta exchanges which are characterised by finite, short-term reciprocity (typically one to five years in Milpa Alta). In practice, the roles that *mayordomos* play are as human go-betweens amongst the patron saints of the surrounding villages and *barrios*.

Within the domain of fiesta exchanges, there are patron-client dyadic contracts between humans and supernaturals (men and women who promise to go on pilgrimages or carry *salvas* in return for the divine intervention of saints or God), but also collective network exchanges between groups, as families or *mayordomos* (bringing *salvas* and music in return for feasts). At a collective level there are also long-term ongoing reciprocal exchange relationships among *barrios* and *pueblos*, very similar to the contractual exchange amongst *compadres*. Just as Lomnitz argues that '*compadrazgo* strengthens social ties between equals, furthers social mobility and economic advancement, and affords a magic symbolic protection against latent personal aggression' (160), ties amongst *barrios* are strengthened, and aggression can be averted when *mayordomías* bring *promesas* to other town or *barrio* fiestas, as in the case between San Mateo and Santa Martha.

Public cyclical fiestas, therefore, appear to be ritualized versions of already-ritualized social relations. Although actions are performed at group level, they ultimately also benefit individuals. Furthermore, although men represent the basic social unit, as the head of household, women continue to be crucial to the roles they play as *mayordomos*. Men accept the role of *mayordomo* only with the consent of their wives and families. And as Brandes wrote, 'women's public roles in the fiesta cycle are muted and disguised' (1988: 32), because women take control of the all-important feast. He argues that 'women exert considerable power' (ibid.) using the same logic that I used in chapter five, to argue that it is women's domestic roles as cooks, or as culinary agents, which imbue them with both power and value in the community, so that together with their husbands and families, they construct their sociality at the levels of both the domestic and public spheres.





25 Coronation ceremony of new *mayordomos* in Barrio San Mateo.



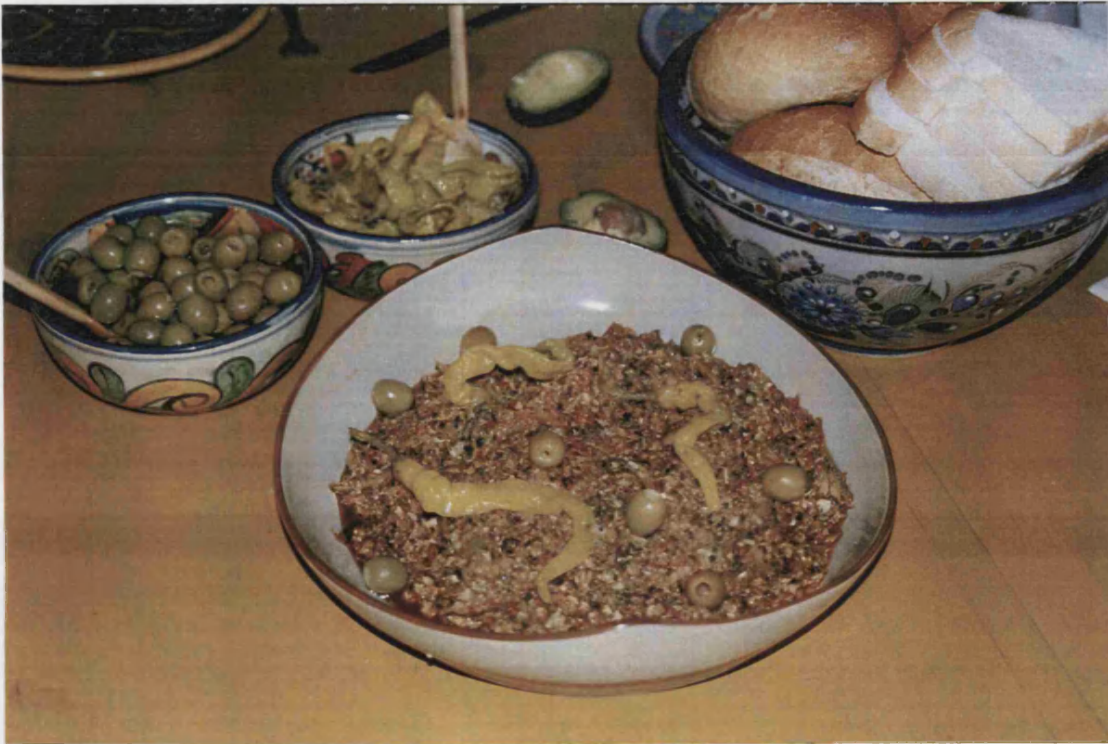
26 Bringing the *salva* to the barrio fiesta, with *mariachis* behind the pilgrims.



27 The anthropologist helping Primy and Doña Margarita make *tamales verdes*.  
(Photo: Dorothy Arts)



28 *Ensalada de betabel 'sangre de Cristo'* ('The blood of Christ' beetroot salad),  
prepared by Yadira Arenas Berrocal.



29 *Bacalao a la vizcaína* (Biscay-style salt cod), prepared by Chef Abdiel Cervantes at home.



30 Doña Delfina frying stuffed chiles in egg batter (*capeado*).

## Social and spiritual regeneration

In San Mateo grand festivities are almost always held on Wednesdays, as this is the day that most *barbacoieros* are free. From Thursday they begin the preparations for selling over the weekend, slaughtering or just marking the sheep that they will cook. They work intensively until Tuesday, cleaning day, and take Wednesday off to rest.

Life cycle events are all interrelated, and they are celebrated in similar ways, with similar feasts, so in this chapter I discuss the two most important ones, weddings and funerals.

### 7.1 Courtship (and accessible spaces)

*No saben ni cocinar y ya se quieren casar.*

They don't even know how to cook and they already want to marry.

– Mexican saying

The saying above hints at the connection between knowing how to cook and a girl's suitability for marriage, as I have already discussed in chapter five. Cooking or food provision is a skill that is so highly valued that it can influence or determine a woman's accessible spaces. Food sharing in a fiesta setting is another venue for girls to roam freely and socialise. Otherwise, a young woman rarely leaves home without a specific purpose, and never for any length of time. If she stays out for too long, she risks being accused of wasting her time or inviting some sort of indecency. For this reason, visitors to the house or invitations to attend other parties are her only (legitimate) means of meeting people outside of the family.

These moral concerns are what can sometimes hinder a single woman's physical freedom, as determined by her family members whom she holds in high respect—usually her mother, but also her father, her older siblings or her brothers, and other relatives. If her parents are very protective or strict, it is likely that they will limit her contact with young men, and may even encourage her to only socialise with the young men from families with whom they would like some sort of marriage alliance. They would do this by inviting these families to their own family gatherings such as their birthday parties. Since invitations are always open to the complete household; the children or extended family are always expected to come along.

In Milpa Alta, I was told that marriages are arranged by families whose interest is in pooling their financial resources. The family tries to influence an individual's choice of marriage partner, but the union of a man and a woman is mainly a choice for the two people directly involved. Even so, family ties are highly respected by an individual, and most choices in life, whether they are big or small decisions, are often not made without family consultation or approval. In a fiesta setting, it is not unheard of for a young lady's mother to be watching every move she makes, and to interfere if she is spending too much time with a young man who fails to meet her mother's standards. Thus some sort of arranging is surreptitiously achieved by so limiting and determining a young woman's social contacts.<sup>1</sup>

Doña Margarita also told me that in the generation of her grandparents women were not allowed to marry outside of their *barrio*, but in the generation of her parents they began to intermarry more with men from other *barrios*. They would meet during the *barrio* fiestas, delivering the *salvas*. Now people are more open and some people, like her nephew Kiko, marry non-Milpaltenses, as well. As for herself, almost all her boyfriends were from her *barrio*, San Mateo. She met them in school. But they were just children, she clarified, and during that time they would only say hello and goodbye to one another and this was enough. '*Luego viene el besito, el abracito*', 'Then comes the little kiss, the little hug', she added.

When I asked her why people were not allowed to marry outside the *barrio* in the past, she replied, 'Because people are greedy (*envidiosa*)'. In Barrio San Mateo, more than any other *barrio* of Milpa Alta, the residents are infamous for being protective and closed. Milpaltense women from other *barrios*, especially those who married into San Mateo, always pointed this out to me. People in San Mateo are unfriendly, do not greet one another on the street and are very suspicious of others. This makes them very selective about whom they socialize with, and also very aware of other people's economic situations. Greed appears to be one cause for parents of adolescents to restrict contact between their children, just as interest in potential gains in economic or social status may be a very good reason to encourage one's marriageable children to mix with another family. Despite this protectiveness, there are cases when couples marry without

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<sup>1</sup> This is why the *quinceaños* or fifteenth birthday party of a girl, her debut, is so important. Primy told me once that it was her dream to have a *quinceaños* party, and this is the dream of most typical Milpaltense adolescent girls. It is a girl's first chance to freely talk with and dance with young men.

the approval of their parents, and some of the ways that they meet one another is during public fiesta settings.

The public town or *barrio* fiestas are vitally important venues for youthful courtship. These usually last from three to seven days and each night there is a dance with different popular bands playing *banda* or *salsa* and *merengue* music. The dance usually begins at seven or eight o'clock and goes on until well after midnight. People collect in the church courtyard or the main square where the bands set up, and small groups of young men from teenagers to men in their twenties squeeze through the crowd like a pack of wolves, all the time looking out for interesting young women.

When celebrating the feast day of the patron saint of a *barrio* or town, the community gets together with *mariachis* or some other musical accompaniment to sing the traditional birthday song, *las mañanitas*, to the saint. In fiestas in Milpa Alta the *mañanitas* are sung at around four o'clock in the morning. Although this is early, many people attend, not only to sing or to listen to the *mañanitas*, but also because they know that many other people will come and it is another chance to see people and socialize. The *señoritas* of the town or *barrio* organise the *mañanitas* and provide *tamales verdes* (in this case, with pork, but without broad beans) and *atole champurrado* for all who come. Thus, Yadira pointed out to me, the incentives for going to the *mañanitas* are for the sake of the food and because single young men have another chance to get to know who are the single young women of the *barrio*.

There are a few other ways to meet a potential marriage partner outside of the fiesta setting. One clear area where young men and women freely mix is school or university. One woman told me that she entered university, but was pulled out by her father and brother after completing only the first year because her brother had discovered that she had a boyfriend there. Nevertheless, she eventually married this same man a few years later and with complete approval from her family. They even celebrated the four wedding fiestas (described below).

Another place where a woman may meet her future husband is in the workplace. Although women appear to have restricted spaces, when they are still single many of them opt to find jobs working in hospitals, as school teachers, in local government, or selling in the market, helping with the family business. In settings such as these they have the opportunity to develop friendly relationships with their colleagues which may

lead to matrimony. Once married, though, a woman's access to so many people may stop. A large percentage of Milpaltense women quit their jobs as soon as they marry because their husbands forbid or disapprove of them working.<sup>2</sup> The reasoning behind this, Primy explained to me, is that a woman ought to dedicate herself to her family, her children and her household. She told me without a trace of regret or wistfulness that Alejandro had asked her to stop working as a nurse because he wanted her to use all her energies for looking after him and their future children, and not for anyone else. A woman easily acquiesces to this demand 'out of respect for her husband', Primy explained. Although I know from previous conversations with her that she enjoyed her work as a nurse and in fact would have liked to study medicine, the shift from wage-earner to housewife seemed unproblematic in retrospect, judging from the way she told me the story, twelve years after the event.

Finally, it is also likely to meet a potential marriage partner by being introduced by common friends or relatives or in any community activity such as when the youth stage plays or small exhibits about local legends, traditions and festivities.

As already mentioned above, in spite of parental restrictions, marriage is ultimately considered to be a union of two individuals, although individuals are influenced by and tied to their extended families. At least during the courtship stage, social expectations are often forgotten when boy meets girl. It may be only later, after the two have developed a relationship, when family differences have an effect, as Luisa's (25) experience shows.

Luisa came from a family with relatively high education. Her parents were both retired schoolteachers who were proud of her academic and work achievements. Luisa said that she had never accepted her parents' attempts to impose a curfew on her movements, and so they allowed her to go out in the evenings when necessary because she was sensible and careful. She worked in the municipal government with a youth group whose aim was to document and preserve the cultural traditions of Milpa Alta. Her boyfriend came from a land-owning peasant family. She had met him in school when they were just sixteen. They would see each other during large fiestas, as well as smaller gatherings.

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<sup>2</sup> I do not have precise figures for this claim, but it appears to be considered to be true by all of the women with whom I had close contact. Yadira considered this an indication of women's subjugation (see chapter

Their relationship was very stable for the first four years, and when they were almost twenty-one, they began to discuss marriage and they introduced one another to their parents. Luisa's parents were skeptical about the match because of their different backgrounds, but she and her boyfriend got along well with their prospective in-laws. But as Luisa spent more time visiting her boyfriend's house and getting to know his family better she began to notice that if she married him she would have to give up her aspirations to study a Master's degree and to work in the government someday. Her future mother-in-law thought she was a lovely girl, but expected her to give up her dreams for the sake of looking after and feeding her family. Luisa detected certain rules of the house which were not told her explicitly, but which horrified her inside. Little by little she realised that her boyfriend could turn into her image of a Mexican *macho*, and his actions were now failing to prove otherwise. Little by little she noticed how he tried to restrict her the way his father restricted his mother. She refused to accept this role and soon after broke off the relationship.

Another woman who believed strongly in developing her professional aspirations and in not giving up her dreams for the sake of marriage told me:

Marriage is something completely different from having a boyfriend. First, [on account of] the food: if you don't like to cook, you're better off not marrying. Second, the household chores: you cannot leave everything to the servants, this would not be a home, and then, what of your intellectual development? And if you do not want to forget about yourself when you marry, you must [come to terms with your conflicting desires].<sup>3</sup>

The last phrase used was '*quebrar el alma*', which usually means 'to break your heart' in a compassionate sense. In this case, I interpret it to refer to the conflicting desires that a woman may have when she espouses ideals of motherhood and what a 'proper' home life ought to be, but also has ambitions in other fields, such as education or any other professional pursuits, which may force her to occupy much of her time outside of the home and not in raising healthy happy children. This informant did not mean to infer that marriage is a trap, only that a woman must be aware of what her limitations

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five) and estimated that about 60% of Milpaltense women are 'submissive'; these women are those who would stop working if their husbands demanded it, whether they wanted to stop or not.

<sup>3</sup> *El matrimonio es otra cosa completamente del noviazgo. Primero, la comida: si no te gusta cocinar, mejor si no te casas. Segundo, los quehaceres de la casa: no puedes dejar todo a la servidumbre, eso no es un hogar; y luego, ¿qué pasa con tu desarrollo intelectual? Y si tú no quieres olvidar de ti cuando te cases, tienes que quebrar tu alma.*



and possibilities are, both before and after marriage. She must consider the gains as well as the losses, rather than jumping to a decision.

One afternoon when I was chatting with Yadira, she described Milpa Alta as a town full of people who are starved for attention and who will never know 'true love'. She told me, '*Aquí, el amor es como la política – una cosa es el discurso, otra cosa es la realidad*', 'Here, love is like politics – one thing is what people say [in church, during courtship], another thing is the reality of what goes on [after marriage]'. Perhaps true love eludes many, but in Milpa Alta, at least, there appear to be rather specific social reasons for love's evasion.

Although I have no specific statistics, most women told me that in Milpa Alta many girls marry very young with little or no experience of love-relationships. They may convince themselves that they are in love and try to secure their man as early as possible. They think that if they get pregnant they can keep their man forever, and their boyfriends must marry them out of a sense of duty. Alternatively, they may run off together, constituting an elopement. The phrase used to say that a couple has eloped is to say '*se la robó*' which literally translates as 'he stole her'. Indeed some women who eloped say, '*na' más me robó*', 'I was just stolen (I only eloped)', indicating that there is reduced prestige involved if one fails to have a proper wedding. It seems unnecessary to hide that fact, as women appear to speak freely about this status, and little shame is involved in admitting that she failed to marry in church. Melhuus (1996: 248) describes how having children can restore a woman's honour even if her baby was born out of wedlock (in shame). Therefore, it is more appropriate to say that a woman or man speaks with excessive pride if she or he can say that they married in church, as if a church wedding were the exception and not the norm.

If a couple do decide to marry following the traditions, the first step is for the young man to ask his parents' consent for him to marry a young woman, and together they officially ask for her hand in marriage in a rite called the *Pedimento*. In describing the customs of weddings and *quinceaños* parties in the town of San Jerónimo Miacatlán, Milpa Alta, Edith Venegas Torres (1992: 101, my trans.) wrote:

The first step is when the youth asks the consent of his parents to propose to his girlfriend. If they agree, they accompany him to visit the parents of the girl to see if they too consent to the match. If they do not

agree [to the match], then they no longer propose and the girl runs off with her boyfriend without her parents finding out.

The four fiestas and other aspects of the wedding rite and feast are described in greater detail in the following section.

## 7.2 The four fiestas

A wedding ideally is made up of four fiestas, or four rites: *el Pedimento* or the Request, *la boda civil* or civil wedding, *la boda por la iglesia* or church wedding, and *la Saludada* or the Greeting. In practice nowadays, only the civil and church weddings are important for a marriage, and the *Saludada* is optional and somewhat rare. The *Pedimento*, however, is part of the process that makes for a proper wedding in Milpa Alta. Yadira pointed out to me that where she grew up, in Xochimilco, a scant twenty minutes away by car, the *Pedimento* is not normal practice for courting couples. With regard to the two wedding ceremonies, Doña Margarita told me that it used to be obligatory that marriage be performed in the church, with or without a civil wedding. In the greatgrandparents' generation and beyond (roughly estimated, this was during the 1930s) marriage was only performed in the church. By the next generation of her grandparents, both the civil and church weddings were necessary for a proper marriage. But in current generations (1990s), the civil wedding is primary, with the church wedding important although not essential. '*Mucha gente na' más están amancebadas,*' she added, 'Many people just live together [without marriage]'

As I mentioned above, the *Pedimento* is when the groom officially asks the bride's family for her hand in marriage.<sup>4</sup> It is a formal occasion and may be the first time that the bride's parents and groom's parents meet. The groom arranges the date when he and his family will visit the bride's house and the bride's family prepares a meal for the occasion. This is a family-level party, i.e., only the extended family of the bride and groom are present.

The groom arrives with his parents and other members of his family with baskets of seasonal fruit, arranged to be pleasing to the eye and wrapped in cellophane. Sometimes they bring a bottle or two of alcoholic beverages like tequila or rum, and

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<sup>4</sup> The term used is literally 'to ask for the hand,' '*pedir la mano.*' The name '*Pedimento*' comes directly from the verb *pedir*, to ask.

perhaps some cheeses.<sup>5</sup> Depending on his economic ability, the groom may offer any number of baskets of fruit (usually at least two), and may even hire a band to accompany him and may also arrive on horseback if he is feeling so inclined. Although the fruit is meant for the parents of the bride, there are instances when the groom gives so much fruit that the bride's family cannot consume it all. So on the following day, they share the *Pedimento* fruit with their closest or favourite relatives.

Upon arrival at the bride's house, the groom offers the fruit to her parents and announces that he has come to formalize his relationship with their daughter and would like to set a date for their wedding. The groom's parents suggest a date and ask permission of the bride's parents to continue the planning process. The bride's parents decide whether or not they will allow their daughter to marry this man, although the bride has already made up her mind and would not accept a refusal from her parents. The families then agree on the wedding date, the groom presents the bride with an engagement ring and then they sit down to enjoy the meal that is awaiting them.

In 1997-98 there were three cases of couples who went through the *Pedimento* in grand scale, with a band and several baskets of fruit. In one case the couple eloped in spite of the *Pedimento*. Kiko surmised that the reason could possibly be because the parents of the couple may have set the wedding for a date far too distant, like in ten months' time. The couple may have grown impatient and decided that rather than wait, they preferred to elope and be together sooner. The average time between the *Pedimento* and the church wedding is three to five months although Kiko and Yadira had two months between their *Pedimento* and their church wedding. In another case of a *Pedimento* held in grand scale in San Mateo that year, a man working in the municipal government told me that seeing the groom's party approaching the bride's house carrying all the baskets of fruit and accompanied by *mariachis* was such a lovely sight, that it provided inspiration for others to continue or even recover these traditions which are quickly being lost.

The second stage of the marriage process is the civil wedding. Again this is hosted by the bride's family who pays for a smaller scale party and meal provided for the close friends and family who attend. The bride's friends and family bring gifts to her house where the fiesta is held after the short civil ceremony. Since there are not so many

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<sup>5</sup> Yadira saw this enactment as a sort of exchange of bride for fruit. She even cynically considered it as a

people to feed, the meal served may be *barbacoa* or *mixiote*, and perhaps *mole* afterwards. However, since this is a quick legal act it hardly compares to the ceremony involved when a couple marries at the church.

The climax of the marriage process is the church wedding, but in Milpa Alta the build-up may take years before reaching this peak. Traditionally the groom's family pays for the church wedding, eliciting some financial help from the godparents or *padrinos* whom the couple chooses to sponsor particular aspects of the event. In cases when church weddings are combined with other significant dates in the couple's children's lives, however, it is the couple themselves who pay for the fiesta. The reception is normally held at the groom's house, although there are also public reception areas, large open spaces equipped with tents and tables which are specifically let for banquets. The menu of the wedding banquet is the same as for other large fiestas – *mole*, *tamales*, chicken, red rice, beans, and *tortillas*. It is also common to serve *barbacoa* or *carnitas*.

Some people dislike holding large fiestas in these banquet halls because some of the personal aspects of festivity are lost. In the first place, hosts are unable to give small containers of *mole* and *tamales* (*itacate*) to their *compadres* or close friends, because they cannot easily interfere with the waiter service. Secondly, since banquet halls take care of the physical structure and cleaning of the fiesta, it becomes impossible to return the next morning for leftovers (*el recalentado*, which literally means the food that is 'reheated'). The leftovers party, meant for the closest of family and friends, is actually an essential aspect of festivity which extends the festive atmosphere and event, and is important for the strengthening of social ties.

The final festive event to celebrate a wedding is the *Saludada*, or the greeting of the newlyweds. Again this is held at the groom's house and may only truly apply to couples who have not cohabited before the wedding. Its purpose is to help move the bride and her belongings to the groom's house the day after the church wedding. After the wedding the bride no longer belongs to her parents' house. Guests therefore go to her parents' house to pick up the presents they left there – refrigerators, blenders, furniture and whatever the newlyweds need to set up their new home. From there they

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way of buying the bride from her family.

go dancing through the streets, and dance all the way to the groom's house, the bride's new home. They carry a broom and a mop, adorned as bride and groom, and they pause at each street corner to dance. They are accompanied by *mariachis* or a musical band.

When they arrive at the groom's house the cooks who prepared the wedding banquet the day before will be waiting for them with little *cazuelas* of *mole*. The cooks are also dancing with the pots of *mole* and they tear up pieces of *tortilla* and scoop up some *mole* to place it in the guest's/dancer's mouth as each passes. Then the guests may enter the house and deposit their gifts. If a guest does not open his or her mouth to accept the *mole*, because s/he is '*chocoso*', ill-humoured, as punishment the cooks will use their fingers to wipe his or her pursed lips and faces with *mole*. People are aware of these consequences, so hardly anyone ever refuses the *mole* offering.

The cooks who prepare the wedding feast get together and decide on the day of the wedding whether or not to have a *Saludada*. If the father of the groom agrees, he agrees to hosting another feast the following day for all the same guests. If he does not have enough money, he says that they cannot have a *Saludada*. But if he agrees, the cooks go around collecting donations so that they can make more *mole*. News spreads among the guests that they are all invited to the *Saludada* the next morning and the parents of the groom arrange for another feast. The party can last all day and night again, and even extend further when close friends and relatives return to help clean up and eat more leftovers (*recalentado*).

### 7.3 The importance of weddings

Although many young couples enter marriage with little preparation, it is not uncommon for couples to marry several years after establishing a household together and having children. Thus, the ritual of marriage is not as important for social regeneration (and reproduction) as the relationship between spouses. Yadira said to me, '*En el matrimonio es importante entenderse bien en la mesa y en la cama; lo demás es secundario*', 'In marriage it is important to understand one another well at the table and in bed; the rest is secondary'. Successful relationships are those which are satisfying both sexually and gastronomically. This is why stable married relationships are celebrated with a wedding, to celebrate their endurance. They legitimately occasion the same grandeur as weddings of a young couple who have not yet cohabited nor had children together.

Weddings, Primy confirmed, are the most important rites or fiestas in this community. The wedding is a source of pride both for the bride and for her parents. When a woman elopes, it is considered as not only shameful, but also as a lack of respect on the part of the woman towards her parents and family. As Yadira mentioned to me before, the wedding of one's daughter is the most important event for Milpaltenses, '*la boda de la hija es el máximo para los Milpaltenses*' .

Primy remembered that when she was around fifteen, in the 1970s, one of her aunts eloped, and both she and her husband were judged very harshly for this. It was seen very badly by the community. But lately much has changed and so many other influences have come in, so it is no longer problematic for a woman to simply move in with her boyfriend and live together without marrying.<sup>6</sup> Primy also remembered that before, a woman who was not a virgin or 'pure' on her wedding day was not permitted by the church to wear white. She could wear a beige or ivory-coloured dress, but not white.<sup>7</sup>

Now, however, brides who already have several children with their live-in lovers wear white wedding gowns and the church imposes no hindrance. This does not fool anyone, because everyone knows her true status, yet it is no longer considered scandalous. People believe that social pressure to conform to established moral ideals has dissipated over the years and one's individual choices are respected more. No one, Primy emphasised several times, not even your parents, can oblige you to do anything, even to marry. Thus now, if a couple lives in together with or without the marriage rite, '*¡qué bueno!*' Primy congratulates them. Unlike twenty years ago, the treatment one gets if one lives with his or her lover without wedlock is virtually the same as with. Very little actually changes in the end.

Having said this, there is still a slightly greater silent honour bestowed upon those who marry properly before any sexual contact or cohabitation. Primy explained that to go out into the street in your white wedding gown, knowing you are marrying well, and being followed by *mariachis*, fills you with happiness and pride in fulfilling your duties to your parents, family, self, church and society. She spoke from experience. It is a very satisfying feeling.

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<sup>6</sup> I have a suspicion that things have not changed so drastically, but that perhaps when Primy was a child her elders told her that to elope was bad. It is part of one's moral education to be taught the social ideals, whether or not these ideals actually have to be met in order to have an unproblematic social life.

Nevertheless, in contradiction to the idea that marrying well in church with a proper banquet leads to a happy social (married) life, the example of Don Felipe and Doña Delfina indicate that there may not be a connection between social ideals and actual behaviour. A proper wedding is not a guarantee for social acceptance and a smooth transition between single and married status.

Don Felipe came from a well-off and highly educated family in *Barrio Santa Cruz* (a family 'of ancestry', *de abolengo*, in Milpa Alta). Doña Delfina came from a family of pork butchers (*chiteros*) for whom education was not a priority. When Doña Delfina used to sell pork in the market of La Lagunilla, Don Felipe used to teach in a primary school in the nearby colonia of Tepito. He would often visit her in her market stall and their romance blossomed. But Don Felipe's family were against the match, and his parents refused to support their union. Still, they continued to see one another for ten years as sweethearts before they finally married in church.

Doña Delfina cut off her long plaits and had her hair curled for the occasion.<sup>8</sup> She wore a lacy white wedding gown and her bridesmaids were dressed in similar finery. Don Felipe wore a new black suit and dressed proudly for the event. This occurred in 1950 and a photograph of the wedding shows that all the lady guests sat on the pews to the right of the altar, and all the men sat on the left side, separated from the women by the central aisle of the church. Don Felipe and Doña Delfina looked blissful and full of anticipation, belying the fact that Don Felipe's father refused to sanction the union and did not attend the wedding. Not only this, for the remainder of his life Don Felipe's father refused to recognise his daughter-in-law and never set foot in their house. Don Felipe was disowned and never forgiven for marrying 'beneath' him, in spite of his adherence to all the rules of propriety regarding courtship and marriage.

Since his family no longer accepted him, he moved to San Mateo where Doña Delfina had been bequeathed a plot of land and a house. This uxorilocal act gave rise to much teasing from his peers, who called him *ciguamoncle*, which injured his pride. Later his brothers and sisters opened a bakery without him. He was left on his own to

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<sup>7</sup> This situation, on the other hand, is a different matter from the previous point about elopement versus 'a proper marriage'. The regulations of the church demand certain things in practice which social sentiment may or may not consider as relevant for the continuation or regeneration of social life.

<sup>8</sup> This was the only time in her life that her hair was short. After the wedding she let her hair grow long again and then continued to wear it in two long plaits which she tied together with a ribbon. This is how most Mexican women of indigenous descent wear their hair. Milpa Alta, it must be recalled, has only recently defined itself as *mestizo* and its Náhuatl heritage is still evident in many aspects of social (and gastronomic) life.

start his life anew in San Mateo where he reestablished himself, and made a living by continuing to teach and till the land that his grandmother had left to him at her death. It seemed not to be of any relevance whatsoever that he had married well and performed all the required acts dutifully. Since he had married a woman whom they considered to be of lower social status, there was another system of value (class) which determined how they treated him. His union was still not accepted by his family in spite of the proper social rites.

In Milpa Alta, church weddings are the grandest occasions for the family and are the most important celebration in an individual's life. It is the climax of the four wedding fiestas, as well as the climax of the life cycle. Since a proper wedding always involves a proper banquet following the service, it is not unusual for a couple to postpone their church wedding until they have saved enough money to be able to afford to feed and entertain at least 200 guests with good music, good *mole*, and good booze. All fiestas are major expenses and most people are loathe to cut corners because of dwindling finances or the falling value of the Mexican peso. Rather than offer simpler or cheaper culinary fare, a couple often opts to have double festivities, celebrating, for example, their church wedding on the same day that their first child is baptised, or on his or her presentation to the church on the third birthday, or on the child's first communion. Many couples marry on the day of their *barrio* fiesta. The reasoning behind this is that a proper fiesta for each occasion is essential, so why not hold them on the same day and save on the expense of hosting two separate feasts? Sometimes there are so many couples with this same idea that joint or multiple weddings are performed because the church cannot accommodate so many masses in one day.

Fiestas are occasions when families spend much money on food and music, but they are also occasions when they attend mass. The churches are rarely full on the weekly Sunday services, but most people take time out for church when celebrating special days. The one other occasion when people usually attend mass is during funerals. These are briefly described in the sections that follow.



## 7.4 Feast of mourning

*El muerto a la sepultura, y el vivo a la travesura.*

The dead to his burial ground, and the living to his fooling around.

– Mexican saying

A consideration of Mexican ideas about death calls to mind the colourful festivity and special foods associated with All Souls's Day and All Saints' Day (1-2 November), the Days of the Dead (*Días de Muertos* or *Días de los Fieles Difuntos*).<sup>9</sup> What dominates are seductive images of dancing skeletons dressed in the deep shade of pink known as *rosa mexicano*, and multi-coloured skulls crafted of sugar, smiling whimsically on family 'altars' decked with food offerings. The Days of the Dead are celebrated with such flamboyance that it is easy to observe that there are prehispanic elements that have contributed to religious mixing in this uniquely Mexican experience. The imagery is so powerful that it has eclipsed detailed analysis of actual death. Funeral practice seems less fascinating, as it appears to follow typical Catholic practice as brought to Mexico with the Spaniards.

The existing, though sparse, literature which describes the practices surrounding death<sup>10</sup> in the area of Milpa Alta, demonstrate that there have been few significant changes over the past 70 years.<sup>11</sup> Today, the ritual practices are characterised by a series of nine wakes (*novenario*) and a Catholic mass before burial. It is customary to visit the family of the deceased to offer condolences with gifts of candles and flowers. This sort of practice has nothing in common with the practices of the Days of the Dead.<sup>12</sup>

An important element which has barely been touched upon by other ethnographers is the fact that the bereaved, in turn, give food to those friends and family who attend at each stage of the funeral process. One exception is Lok's (1991) (very food-focused) study of exchange and the concept of sacrifice in both funerals and the Days of the Dead

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<sup>9</sup> There are special regional foods prepared all over Mexico to celebrate the Days of the Dead. *Calabaza en tacha* (candied pumpkin), particular *tamales*, *atole*, *mole*, *camote en dulce* (candied sweet potato), are just a few of the examples of dishes which are traditionally prepared for the holiday, not to mention the famous *pan de muertos* (bread of the dead), baked in forms which represent corpses or skeletons. This bread is baked to honour one's dead relatives, and is exchanged and eaten during the season of '*los difuntos*' (the dead), but in fact these edible corpses, along with the other associated practices, have less to do with death, and more to do with festivity.

<sup>10</sup> There does not seem to be work discussing or analysing bereavement.

<sup>11</sup> Redfield has observed that 'few pre-Columbian elements survive in the death customs' (1930:142) for the town of Tepoztlán, in the adjacent state of Morelos. He does not explain why he makes such a claim, nor does he describe which elements did or did not survive. Nevertheless, in general his ethnographic account and Oscar Lewis' restudy of Tepoztlán (1951) agree largely with my own observations in Milpa Alta, more so than Madsen's (1960) ethnography of Milpa Alta.

in the Sierra de Puebla. Both in the literature of Mexico, as well as that of food and death in anthropology in general, there has been more emphasis on food offerings to the dead. While it is adeptly argued elsewhere that (symbolically) feeding dead ancestors results in the regeneration of life, my ethnography shows that death is also a matter of how the living feed the living, rather than only on how they feed the dead.

Catholicism and its accompanying traditions displaced much of prehispanic practice although there is little mention in the literature of funeral rites before widespread conversion. Soustelle (1972:118-120, 204-6) describes ancient Aztec beliefs in predestination and the cycles of death and rebirth, particularly rebirth as a result of death or sacrifice. He also states that there is little description of funeral practices, although it is known from codices and other sources of the period that there were two kinds of funerals: burial and cremation. These Aztec sources described how the type of ceremony chosen depended on the cause of death (drowning, childbirth, illness, etc.), and cremation was the most common. Furthermore, a black dog (probably an *escuintli*) was cremated with the corpse to accompany the dead during his journey to the underworld. This journey would take four years, thus offerings (of food) needed to be made 80 days after death, as well as at the end of the first up to the fourth year, to help the dead along their way.

Madsen's (1960) description of the funeral rite in San Francisco Tecoxpa, Milpa Alta, also mentions the food offerings, but cremation had fallen out of practice. The Catholic mass followed by burial in the cemetery had been the norm when he was writing. He relates how death causes a spiritual change in the individual who must detach himself from the land of the living to enter the land of the dead. It is for this reason that the bereaved hold a wake for nine days and offer food (and music) to help the dead on his way, as his spirit-soul needs help to understand that he must leave this world and enter another.

Although Madsen does mention music played by a band during the funeral, he does not mention that it is always *mariachi* music. In Milpa Alta, *mariachis* constitute an important element in most celebrations or life cycle rituals. They are present during birthdays, weddings, fifteenth birthdays for girls, baptisms and burials. One of my informants told me that Mexicans from outside of Milpa Alta sometimes are surprised at

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the cult of the dead and the Days of the Dead, see Nutini (1988).

the omnipresence of the *mariachis*, particularly during funerals. When a man, especially a very cheerful, popular and friendly man, dies, all his friends cooperate financially to hire *mariachis* for the funeral to play both happy and sad songs, including the favourites of the deceased. Women who die may also be celebrated with *mariachis*, although this is less common. Children, however, are never buried to *mariachi* music because, it was explained to me, their deaths are felt much more deeply than are the deaths of adults who have already lived their full lives.

This last observation, like some others that I made, contradicts the established literature which describes a child's funeral as a time of rejoicing in Tecoxpa and nearby Tepoztlán (Madsen 1960, Redfield 1930, Lewis 1951). People do say that children die innocent of sin, so when they die their souls go directly to heaven. It would follow that a child's death should not be an unhappy occasion, but from my experience in Milpa Alta, a child's death is much cause for sorrow. Redfield describes how a child is dressed in a white shroud and the coffin and candles are all white. An adult, he claims, is dressed in black and the coffin and candles used are black. In Milpa Alta these colour schemes are not followed, although the rites are similar to those recorded in the literature.

The funerals I witnessed were somewhat different from those described by others. In Milpa Alta, when I asked about death practices, I was told of the food that is eaten by the living during funerals, with no mention of food offerings for the soul of the dead. Other writers do not describe the funeral feast, although Lewis (1951:416) mentions *mole verde* (green *mole* which is served with beef in Tepoztlán, but may be more commonly served with chicken or pork in Milpa Alta) as typical fare for the ninth day of the *novenario*.

When someone dies, the church bells toll in a particular rhythm which depends on the marital status of the person who has passed away – slowly for a married person or quickly for a single person or child.<sup>13</sup> Those who hear the bells ask around or spread the news about who has died so that those who knew the deceased may later pay their respects and visit the house. When they go, they must bring with them a large white candle (180 cm long and three cm wide) commonly known as *una cera* or *cerita*, and they may also bring flowers if they wish. Other people bring maize, beans, rice or other

foodstuffs which are used for the funeral meal the next day (Flores 1992:29).<sup>14</sup> On the day of death there is a wake held at the residence of the deceased. The body is normally resting in its coffin in the sitting room, and at each corner of the coffin are four *ceras*. On the table on which the coffin rests, a cross made of lime (CaOH) is sprinkled, and placing the cross requires a *padrino* who may be anyone called upon at the last moment around the time of death. Upon entering, the visitors light their candle and remove one of those already there, setting it aside in a pile, and replace it with their own. These candles are collected by the family of the deceased to be lit in the cemetery after the body has been buried. Then visitors sit or stand away to pray silently, or others might go to speak with the family of the deceased to offer condolences.

According to Flores (1992), when a person dies, he is received by his dead townspeople in heaven, who ask him if he brings any petitions from earth. If a relative of his had brought a *cerita* to his wake, he may say yes and can be happy. But if no one brought *ceritas* he must say no and be sad, believing that he has already been forgotten. This is why people bring *ceras* when they hear of a death. Madsen (1960:211-213) notes that it is possible for the living to send messages to their dead relatives by paying and asking the priest to recite a small prayer at the funeral so that the soul of the dead may carry it with him to the afterworld. Also, he writes that St Peter meets the dead at heaven and St Matthew may alter the records about the dead's sins to help in his entrance to heaven if in life the dead attended his fiesta (in Barrio San Mateo). In spite of the myriad versions of what precisely occurs upon death, there seems to be a general common belief that the lands of the living and the dead are not separate and that there are opportunities for influence and communication between the two worlds, if one follows a certain set of practices.

There are particular prayers for use during wakes. They are said periodically until sunrise, and in the meantime the women of the family prepare the funeral feast for the following day. If death occurs at night, the burial (*sepelio*) is held on the second day, so that there is one full day for vigil and visiting. Those in Milpa Alta joke that in San Mateo a person must not die on the weekend, otherwise his body will be put in the freezer until Tuesday when the *barbacoieros* are free to go to the cemetery and can

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<sup>13</sup> The rhythm of the bell toll is specific to Milpa Alta. In other areas there are different rhythms or means of alerting the public of a death.

<sup>14</sup> In his brief article on the customs and traditions in another town of Milpa Alta, the first thing that Antonio Flores mentions are funerals, and that people bring candles and food to the house of the deceased.

perform the necessary rites as well as hold a proper meal. In fact, when Alejandro's father was terminally ill and in the hospital, he prayed that he would die on a Monday so that his funeral would not interfere with his son's sales, and his prayers were answered.

The burial is usually held after a midday mass, although sometimes the funeral procession just passes the church and pauses in front on its way from the house of the deceased to the cemetery. Many women, especially of the older generations, carry the traditional shawls called *rebozos* and cover their heads with them as they walk. *Mariachis* are hired for the procession to and from the church and the cemetery, and sometimes for the meal following the interment. There are prayers and short speeches at the graveside; some who knew the deceased beg his pardon for issues left unresolved, others ask for help during their own journeys to heaven (Flores 1992:30).<sup>15</sup> Then flowers and a metal cross are left on the fresh grave.

Afterwards the family and friends proceed to the house of the deceased where some women of the family and their *comadres* have been preparing the feast to offer to their guests. It was explained to me that the idea behind the celebration meal was so that one may come to spend time and share a meal with the family of the deceased: '*que pase uno a comer a convivir con los familiares de un difunto*'. I had also attended a funeral where it was the dying wish of the deceased lady that her mourners be fed a good feast at her funeral, and that her family continue to celebrate the *barrio* fiesta in spite of her death.

The funeral meal consists of *revoltijo* (*mole* with *romeritos*), red rice (*arroz rojo*), *tortillas*, beans, and *tamalates*, as well as soft drinks or *aguas frescas*. *Tortitas* of shrimp or potatoes, or even fillets of fish dipped in whipped eggs and fried (*capeado*) are served if the family can afford it, to make the meal more special. The origin of the recipe for *revoltijo* predates the arrival of the Spanish. *Mole* with *romeritos* used to be prepared with

**Batter for coating fish (*pescado capeado*)**

***Yadira Arenas Berrocal***

1 egg  
1 clove garlic  
salt and pepper

Blend all ingredients together or crush garlic and scramble with eggs, salt and pepper. Dredge fish fillets in flour. Dip in egg

<sup>15</sup> Flores is a native of Milpa Alta relating his understanding of these practices. He uses this terminology.

*aguacle*, the eggs of a water bug called *axayacatl* (*Ephydra californica*). The *aguacle* were collected and formed into little cakes called *ahuauhtle*. These were similar to the *tortitas* served in *revoltijo* today (Muñoz, forthcoming).

There is no meat eaten, as eating meat would be like eating the corpse. This is why *revoltijo*, a meatless *mole*, is always served. Madsen (1960: 209) also mentions this correlation between eating meat and human flesh, although many of my informants talked of meat abstinence, especially during Lent and Advent (times of *vigilia*) as a matter of tradition. Notwithstanding, belief in this correlation still exists and is propagated. The guests who attend a funeral may joke and laugh during the reception meal, but those closest to the deceased, as would be expected, feel sad.

For nine days after death friends and family gather at the house of the deceased at eight o'clock in the evenings to pray for the dead so that his soul may rest. This is called the *novenario*. The first day is the day of death, when the body is present in the house. A rosary for the dead is prayed, which is slightly different from a regular rosary, and not everyone knows how to pray it. The *novenario* prayers are printed in a small book which not everybody owns, so the members of the community who know them are asked to lead the prayers when there is a death in the family or among the neighbours. As far as I understood, prayer leaders get no compensation for their help, as they offer their service out of sympathy, as well as in respect of the community's needs. Primy's foster mother taught her and her four sisters how to pray the rosary and the *novenario*, teaching them that if one does something, one must do it well. If one fails to pray the *novenario* well, the soul of the deceased will not rest and will continue to suffer. The ghost remains in the land of the living, and the living will hear noises of the soul's unrest. Since Primy is known to pray very well she is often asked to help during wakes. She almost always complies, although sometimes it can be far too tiring or the timing is inconvenient, so if the family of the deceased demand in a brusque or rude manner that she pray for them, she might refuse.

During these gatherings the bereaved family offers coffee (*café de olla*) or a cinnamon infusion (*té de canela*) with bread or *cocolos*. If there is *mole* (*revoltijo*) leftover from the funeral feast, they may serve *hojaldras* or *teleras* filled with the *mole*. They also distribute *esquelas*, small cards inviting those who accompanied them during the wake and prayers to attend the final mass on the ninth day. The last day of the *novenario* is also the day for the 'raising of the cross' or 'raising of the table', *levantar*

*la cruz* or *levantar la mesa*, when the cross of lime is swept up and taken to the cemetery to be sprinkled onto the grave. The *padrino* of the cross is given a basket of food, and according to Flores (1992) a glass of water and a piece of bread is taken to the cemetery to offer to the dead as a final meal on the journey to the afterworld.<sup>16</sup>

After the mass, all who attended return to the house of the bereaved for a meal. Now the restriction on eating meat is lifted and a feast of *mole* is served to officially end the heavy or immediate mourning. It appears that the period of mourning may coincide with the amount of time it takes for the dead to complete their journey from the land of the living to the land of the dead, as time is required for the dead's spirit-soul to fully detach itself from the earth and enter the realm of the afterlife or heaven. This is why meat may now be eaten on the final day of the *novenario*, and it is not uncommon to be served *mole* with chicken or sometimes turkey. Sometimes chicken cooked in a tomato-based sauce is served instead, and often red rice is the accompaniment, with beans and *tortillas*.

Some families might have a candle constantly lit in front of a photo of the recently deceased, at least during the first month or year after death. At frequent intervals they might also visit the grave, for example, once a week during the first year, or only on the anniversaries of birth and death. There they leave flowers and light the *ceras* collected during the wake. On the fortieth day after the death another mass is held in honour of the deceased. Another meal follows, but this time it may be a snack of *tamales* and *atole*, rather than a full meal; this depends on the time of the mass. If the mass is in the morning or evening, then *tamales* and *atole* will do. If the mass is at midday, *mole* or another substantial meal is served. The following year, on the first anniversary of death, another mass followed by a feast of *mole* is offered and the same people who attended the funeral are invited once more. This is reminiscent of the Aztec practice mentioned by Soustelle (1972), of the dead being remembered once a year after death for the first four years. The difference is that in Milpa Alta today, the food prepared on the first anniversary of death is not an offering to the souls of the dead and it is not customary to remember them with a feast on subsequent anniversaries. The food is prepared for the living who are invited to a feast in honour of the dead.

Close friends and family of the mourners need not be formally invited for the first anniversary meal and mass in honour of the dead. Like other important life cycle

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<sup>16</sup> I was not told of this, nor had I the opportunity to witness this practice.

events, closeness, or *confianza*, implies that friends would remember significant dates without being reminded of them. For this anniversary feast, in theory, anything may be served, but usually it will be a dish prepared with chicken, such as *mole rojo* or *pepita (mole) verde con pollo*. On our way to one funeral, Doña Margarita said that they had passed the house of her *comadre* whose husband had died a year before. They could not attend her feast because they had another funeral to attend. On their way from the church Doña Margarita said that her *comadre*'s house smelled of *mole*, and the aroma whetted her appetite. Still they had decided to skip the feast, but she anticipated that her craving would be appeased after this next funeral as she exclaimed, 'But now, *revoltijo!*'

Later, Doña Margarita's *comadre* sent her some food from the death anniversary meal. This food that is packed by a host for a guest to take away from a (celebratory) meal is called the '*itacate*' or '*taquito*' and is a generous serving of the food prepared. For this occasion the *itacate* contained *pollo enchilado* (chicken marinated in a chile sauce<sup>17</sup>), refried beans with cheese, pickled vegetables, spaghetti, green *salsa* and *tortillas*.<sup>18</sup> If Doña Margarita had been able to stay for the meal, there is a good chance that she would have been given an *itacate* to take away with her anyway. Her *comadre*, therefore, made it a point to send the *itacate* so that Doña Margarita would not have missed the meal. This indicates the close relation between food and celebration in the case of funerals. In order to have fully participated in the celebration, it is necessary that one join the feast and eat, regardless of whether one shared the food when others ate or afterwards.

It is also customary to take candles (*ceras*) and flowers to the house of the family of the deceased on the first Days of the Dead after that person has died. Several people told me, 'it is believed that the souls of the recently dead are still among us during the

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<sup>17</sup> Meat or fish which is '*enchilado*' is also called '*adobado*' because it is marinated or spread with an *adobo* paste before frying, roasting or grilling. An *adobo* is like a simpler version of a red *mole*, using at least one, usually two or three, type of dried red chiles, ground to a paste with spices, seeds, vinegar and other ingredients. It can be prepared as a stew like *mole* or used to coat meat or fish as mentioned. In special occasions which are not so determining as celebrations like weddings or baptisms, an *adobo* may be served instead of *mole*, such as for one's 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday or, as here, the anniversary of a death. Recalling that with or without *mole*, festive food may be *barbacoa*, *carnitas* or *mixiote*, a *mixiote*, by the way, is made up of pork, rabbit, and/or chicken, smothered with an *adobo* paste and wrapped in the skin of the maguey leaf, also called a *mixiote*. The packet is then roasted or steamed like *barbacoa*, as if it was a cross between *adobo/mole* and *barbacoa*.

<sup>18</sup> This is typical fiesta fare.



first year'.<sup>19</sup> This is why friends and relatives pay their respects to the bereaved on these days when all the dead are remembered.

As for the differences between a Catholic and a non-Catholic funeral, it appears that other than the lack of a mass and the *novenario*, which are to be expected, the major change in funeral practice is the lifting of the meat taboo. Tradition still demands hospitality, but the Catholic connection between animal meat and human flesh is ignored as superstitious belief. The bereaved family must invite the community for a meal after burial, and if they serve meat, it does not inhibit the Catholic mourners from joining the funeral feast, although it may elicit some initial eyebrow raising before they start to eat. It would probably have been considered more strange if there was no food offered at all. Nevertheless, in one case that I witnessed the family of the deceased seemed to have chosen to serve a beef dish on purpose, in direct contradiction to the traditional *revoltijo* or poultry dishes which are served during the different stages of a Catholic funeral.<sup>20</sup>

I have focused attention on the funeral feast because of my interest in food, but also because I believe it to be more pertinent than a discussion of religious syncretism, as Madsen (1960: 209-219) attempted in writing of 'the other life' in Tecoxpa. His description conflates funerary practices and beliefs with those of the Days of the Dead. He writes that 'Aztec fascination with death permeates the religion of Tecospa [sic], where death is an intimate commonplace from childhood on' (219). He provides no substantive evidence for this, little connection between the beliefs he recorded and daily practice. Judging from my own observations, his account may give a misleading idea of the practices surrounding death in Milpa Alta. He describes the travails of the 'spirit souls' of the dead and notes that food is buried with a corpse and that breakfast and 'a large chicken dinner' are offered when the dead visit the earth during the Days of the Dead to help them in their journey back to the afterlife (218-9).

Whilst my own observations of their food traditions hint at strong survivals of Náhuatl traditions even in the funeral feast, nowadays there is little self-reflexive discussion of the food prepared as an offering for the dead in Milpa Alta. It is the choice of meal at each stage of the funeral process which takes precedence, and follows

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<sup>19</sup> No one ever said to me, 'I/We believe that...' rather they kept their distance from such statements by saying, 'the belief exists that...' or 'it is said/believed that...'

<sup>20</sup> As explained in chapter six, protestantism is considered as a refutation of traditions in Milpa Alta.

specific rules which determine the menu. That is, the practices surrounding death in Milpa Alta cannot be so simply described as the dead being served just any 'large chicken dinner'. If he had paid more attention to details about food, he may have noticed that the celebrations of death and of the Days of the Dead are complex social processes involving different and quite specific traditions and beliefs. They bring together ideas about gastronomy as much as hospitality, sacrifice, exchange and religion.

On the other hand, Lok (1991) provides a sensitive analysis of the practices surrounding death and the Days of the Dead in Puebla, which is also a Náhuatl-speaking region. Lok goes into some detail about the necessity of *mole* as the food served to *compadres* during funerals. Not only must the dish be *mole*, but it must be *mole de guajolote* (turkey), made with dark *ancho* chiles, and served with *tamales de frijol*, prepared in a way similar to the *tamales de frijol* or *alberjón* in Milpa Alta. Her study details how *mole de guajolote* is actually used in three types of exchange and sacrifice, in return for human life. She argues that the terms 'offering' and 'sacrifice' can be conflated as two types of 'exchange' which is created to bond two people or two groups.

Although death ultimately unites social members in different ways, it also causes a temporary disruption of the social harmony of the living. This usually is revealed when there is a dispute over inheritance.

## 7.5 Inheritance and greed

*Del árbol caído todos hacen leña.*

From the fallen tree everyone makes firewood.

– Mexican saying

*When we found out that the mother of Yadira's compadre Manuel had passed away, we changed our plans for the day. We first went to the market to buy two large white candles (ceras) of the sort that are used for funerals, as well as red and white gladioli to give to the family of the deceased. We arrived at the house of compadre Manuel's sister, where his mother had been living before she died. As we entered, there were half a dozen women sitting at small tables preparing tamales, nopales and other food for the guests expected during the wake.*

*The corpse was already lain in its coffin in the living room and four candles were lit at each corner. As is customary, the first thing we did when we entered was unwrap the*

*candles and flowers we had brought. Yadira removed a candle from one corner of the coffin, and replaced it with her new one. She lay the candle she had removed on the pile of others on the side. There was a vase with flowers and water into which Kiko put the gladioli that we had brought. Then we all sat silently to pray. Kiko went to speak with Manuel and Yadira sat with his wife. Since we could not stay long, we expressed our condolences and Yadira promised that they would come back the next day for the burial.*

After we left Yadira asked me if I had noticed that one of the candles had been dripping and two had been crackling and spluttering. She told me that this was a sign that the soul of the deceased was not at rest, that the dead woman was crying because there were family disputes. Indeed, there were conflicts in the family over inheritance. She elaborated that Manuel had two sisters and two brothers. His mother had been living with one of his sisters which is why the wake was held in her house, and the two sisters were preparing the food to be served to 'those who accompanied them in their sorrow'. Since Manuel was the most financially successful of the siblings, he offered to pay for the greater part of the funeral proceedings, the coffin, mass and burial, but his sisters took care of the food. Their remaining two brothers contributed nothing, since they did not have the means. What was upsetting was that the two brothers claimed that the land their mother left them ought to be split just between the two of them, as Manuel was rich enough not to need more land, and the two sisters were supported by their husbands.

This is the trouble with inheritance and greed, Yadira explained to me. Death introduces a period of mourning, but there are some ugly cases when interest in inheritance appears to dominate and sibling rivalry erupts as a result. Other people had told me of siblings arguing over land or other forms of wealth even before a parent's death, while the dying parent was on his or her sickbed, or even within earshot. Situations such as this complicate the funeral proceedings by disrupting family unity during mourning. From other informants' accounts I gathered that muted expressions of greed among members of the bereaved are not uncommon, although it is not always manifest in such disputes over inheritance of land. It is also something that the deceased must deal with before death.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This is also common in other cultures, as the reader will doubtless be aware.

Primy told me the story of her father-in-law. He died before signing the papers that put his *barbacoa* market stall in Alejandro's name. This leaves the property intestate and so it does not go automatically to the son or wife of the deceased. It is left open to any claims, which became a problem for Primy and Alejandro when Alejandro's father died. They consulted with people in the requisite offices and someone recommended they forge Alejandro's father's signature and sign the necessary papers themselves, but neither of them could copy the signature. However, since Primy had struck up a friendship with a woman who worked in the office, they eventually were able to get the papers signed in Alejandro's name.

I asked why Alejandro's father had not signed the market stall over to Alejandro before, especially since he had been ill for some time. Primy replied that in Milpa Alta people believe that if you do such a thing as sign over your market stall to your son, your son will take control over everything little by little and will abandon you, leaving you with nothing. Primy's explanation rather surprised me, as I had expected her to say that perhaps Alejandro's father thought that he would not continue with the business. Instead, Primy nonchalantly referred to general assumptions of human nature as greedy and selfish. This indicates that in Milpa Alta, social relations are fragile ties which require nurturance and regulation by means of regular exchanges (of food) during both ritual and daily occasions.

## 7.6 Funerals in relation to other life cycle events

*Sólo él que carga el cajón sabe lo que pesa el muerto.*

Only he who carries the coffin knows the weight of the dead.

– Mexican saying

Like all masses held for important stages of life such as baptisms and weddings, funeral masses are usually held at noon or one o'clock, after which the *comida* is served to the guests who attend. These masses are opportunities which the clergy take to propagate basic tenets of Catholic belief and ideals of practice.

Kiko related to me how one priest officiated at the funeral mass of his father. He asked how many children the deceased had, and then requested them, Juan and Kiko, to step forward one after the other. He called for Don Felipe's widow and then asked if Don Felipe had married under church law. They answered that he had. He then asked for Juan's wife to step forward. Had they married under church law? Yes. So the priest then called for Kiko's wife to step forward. They explained that she had had to

remain at home to look after her newborn child. He said that this was alright, and had they been married under church law? When the affirmative reply came, the priest congratulated Don Felipe and proclaimed him a 'great man' for marrying in church and raising children who did so as well.

Kiko and Yadira said that this priest always used his sermons or any other opportunity to encourage people to marry in church. Using the funeral mass to remind the community of the desirability of a church wedding is not as random as it sounds. I heard another story from a woman whose mother had been in hospital with a coma, on the brink of death for a month. It was strenuous and traumatic for all the children and siblings of the dying lady, and they sat at her bedside, wishing both for an end to her suffering as well as to avoid the inevitability of her death. After several days of frustrated waiting, one of the dying lady's sisters scolded one niece and one nephew for not having married in church. This, she said, was the reason that their mother could not die and finally rest in peace. Although two of their sisters were separated from their husbands, at least they had had proper church weddings before the marriages failed. So the other two (who had been living in free union) promised at their mother's deathbed that they would have church weddings as soon as they were able. Their mother died soon after, and one month later, after waiting for a short while for the sake of decency, they had a small, very subdued joint wedding in church so that their mother could rest in peace.

These examples show that the interrelations between family members can affect different stages of the life cycle of their closest relatives. The above suggests that life is not conceived as a linear progression of birth to death with a few punctuating status changes along the way. Rather, human life is a myriad of fragile interrelations, a constant complex of happiness and sorrow, of festivity and mourning.

### **On death and birth**

Any discussion of death in Milpa Alta must include some mention of the practices surrounding birth. Catholic doctrine portrays death as a rebirth into eternal life and ancient Aztec belief emphasizes that death, especially by sacrifice, was necessary for rebirth and the continuation of time. Death is celebrated with music and food, and the helpful addition of prayers to assure the path of the dead to eternal rest. The birth of a child, on the other hand, does not occasion large scale festivity. On the contrary, the post-partum mother should be confined at home with her newborn for at least one

month.<sup>22</sup> During this period of immobility, the mother and her child are relieved of regular household duties which may then be taken on by a woman's in-laws and husband, or by a servant hired to help with chores. She is recommended to take sweatbaths with her baby in the *temascal*.<sup>23</sup>

Other than these baths, mother and child ought not to be moved until they are safely recuperated, although visitors are always welcome. News of recent births spreads quickly and all who know or are related to the mother come to the house to see the new baby. This is one of few occasions which cause or allow members of the community to visit one another.<sup>24</sup> By remaining at home the mother may rest as much as she needs, and receive her guests, although visitors are welcomed with mixed feelings. They come to inquire about the health of the child and of the mother, often with presents such as baby clothing and paraphernalia, but their attention, even if in admiration, risks infecting the child with the evil eye (*mal de ojo*).

The birth is not celebrated in large scale until the baby reaches one year of age, which is usually the date of baptism in Milpa Alta.<sup>25</sup> In effect this is the true social birth of the child and the festive meal prepared is the same<sup>26</sup> as that for other birthdays or anniversary type celebrations of birth, weddings, and Easter Sunday (that is, the re-birth of Christ).

Returning to the practices surrounding death, much more than the church rite, it appears that the funeral feast is of major local importance and focus. A proper funeral requires a coffin, a set of new clothes for the corpse, a mass, and food for those who come to offer their condolences. The food hospitality lasts the nine days of the *novenario*. During this time of rosary and vigil the family of the deceased must serve coffee and sweet rolls, or *tamales* and *atole*. Then, on the ninth day, a feast of *mole con pollo* or *guajolote* is served with the usual accompaniments (*arroz rojo*, *frijoles*,

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<sup>22</sup> Other sources (Redfield 1930, Lewis 1951) specify a 30 to 40-day confinement for women who have just given birth.

<sup>23</sup> Although some people continue to take sweat baths in the *temascal* after parturition, as described by Redfield (1930) and Lewis (1951), in recent years there has been greater neglect of the *temascal* and now there are only a handful of people who have *temascales* in working condition and one must make an appointment and pay a small fee in order to take the bath. For more description of the *temascal* and its uses, see Gomezcézar (1992) and Madsen (1960).

<sup>24</sup> Recall that the other opportunities to visit other people's houses other than births are deaths and large festive occasions.

<sup>25</sup> In other areas of Mexico baptism is held as soon as possible after birth, when the baby is at least two or three months old.

<sup>26</sup> *Mole con pollo*, served with *arroz rojo*, *frijoles* and *tamales de alberjón* or *frijol*.

*tamalates*). On the fortieth day after the death another meal is served, sometimes *mole* again or just *tamales* and *atole*. Furthermore, the family needs to pay the gravediggers and the *mariachis* who play music during the funeral and the feast.

This is unlike what has been reported in other areas where particular foodstuffs are used in funerals to feed ancestors so that through them social life can be regenerated.<sup>27</sup> In Milpa Alta, the rules of hospitality make it seem that gathering people together for the funeral feast takes precedence over any other practices which might help the dead move away from this life and into the next. This may be why the funeral feast is the same as the Christmas feast. Both are meals which collect loved ones together in a specific way.

### 7.7 Concluding remarks: Death, marriage and hospitality

The funeral rituals are practices which allow society to come to terms with and accept the death of one of its members. Although burial occurs on the day following death, the *novenario* is a public acknowledgement of death, and also is an opportunity for members of the community to fully realise a death. The aspect of hospitality in funerary rites also keeps the bereaved preoccupied so that they are not left alone with their grief, and the *mariachis* celebrate the life the deceased had led.

Such funeral practices in Milpa Alta may be surprising, even for Mexicans from neighbouring areas. Maestra Carmen came from Tulyehualco, in Xochimilco, and although it is not very far, when she moved to Milpa Alta upon marriage, she had no idea that the customs would be so different. She was particularly surprised at the customs surrounding weddings and funerals. 'Here,' she said, 'a funeral is like a fiesta'.

She told me that she has always been unwilling to prepare party fare when one of her loved ones has died. She continued:

With my sorrow I do not want to attend to people, and my husband told me that I will be accused of being *a heretic because I am not following the customs*, but I don't care. Here one must serve *mole*, *cocolos*, coffee, and even the luxury dish of *barbacoa*, so that people feel well looked after. But I disagree with all this. (emphasis added)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See for example Thompson (1988) and Bloch and Parry (1982).

<sup>28</sup> 'Con mi dolor no quiero atender a la gente, y mi esposo me dijo que me van a tachar como hereje por no seguir con la costumbre, pero no me importa. Aquí hay que dar mole, cocolos, café, hasta el lujo de barbacoa, para ver que le atendieron bien. Pero no estoy de acuerdo.'

As her statement indicates, community members may easily confuse the practice of a custom with the dogma of religious belief.

Angélica Castruita Aguilar (1992:82), residing in Villa Milpa Alta, but originating from Coahuila in the north, wrote of another source of confusion, as follows:

Burials in Milpa Alta are also something special because, in spite of their being sad moments for the family and friends, here it is customary to carry the coffin with music and fireworks.

In the beginning I used to get confused because, upon hearing the music and fireworks, I used to think: 'Now here comes a wedding'; but no, it was a burial.

Most people say that they do not wish to be remembered with sorrow. Rather they would like their survivors to remember them as they were when they were alive, full of vivacity and joy. It is for this reason that death is celebrated as well as soberly respected. A meal must be served to all who offer condolences, otherwise the bereaved are criticised or not understood. Thus, funeral practice can be examined from the point of view of the funeral feast. The funeral feast is a generous act that the bereaved hold in memory of someone, but it is for themselves, to continue living. The dishes served are complex, as dishes for special occasions usually are, and they are made from recipes with strong (prehispanic) historical roots. Failure to provide adequate food may be easily construed as a failure to fulfil religious duty. Hospitality is not only oppressive for the host, who must put in money and labour to produce the feast, but it is also coercive to the guest, who must eat everything that is served.

Ultimately, although death appears to negate life, with the enactment of funerary practices, specifically in hosting a funeral feast, it in fact encourages social life by facilitating interaction. It also reminds people of the beauties and fragilities of life, and necessitates the gathering together of kin, fictive kin (links of *compadrazgo*), and non-kin (friends, neighbours). Thus, the funeral confirms society in Milpa Alta because it is one of the few occasions when social contact is possible, and so it must be enacted in a festive manner by preparing special food (*mole*). My experience suggests that it is food and festivity which helps unite individuals into a social whole, thereby allowing for the propagation of society (cf. Bloch and Parry 1982). Likewise, weddings perform the function of the regeneration of the family, at another level.



A wedding or any fiesta is a venue where the whole family may go out and mix with their neighbours and friends. Otherwise, there are hardly any other opportunities or time set aside to meet people. As I mentioned in chapter one, at one wedding reception I bumped into a woman whom I had met a few weeks before when she had seen me taking photographs during the *barrio* fiesta. She had asked me to take some photos of her family, and I never managed to reach her until I saw her by chance at this wedding. I gave her the photos and she asked if she could have another copy of one or two more. I had hoped that she would later develop into a key informant for me, but she seemed reluctant to have more contact. She thanked me politely for the photos, however, and said that she was sure we would meet again at another large wedding or other fiesta, and perhaps I could pass her the other photos then. I agreed and was left thinking that much or even most social contacts were perhaps made under the context of the fiesta. There seemed little other legitimate or possible way to meet and get to know people better unless one attended fiestas, whether at family, *barrio* or town level.

The wedding is a social rite where a couple makes a public commitment to one another, pledging fidelity and love. Not only this, it is an opportunity for grandiose celebration, putting oneself in competition with all others in the aspects of music and food. In Milpa Alta, all social life exists *because* of parties, and the party goal is the wedding party because it celebrates the romantic ideal whilst putting on display culinary ideals. Ultimately, public display of any sort is a demand for social approval or judgment and attention. The conjugal union is a social triumph over anti-social behaviour and solitude. Solitary actions are usually viewed with negative sentiments.

Marriage unites families, and it constitutes a celebration of the ideal relationship between a man and a woman. A married couple is the starting point of the social nucleus, and it represents the potential for the regeneration of the family, and eventually, of society at large. This is why weddings are celebrated in large scale, commemorated with a mass, and with the special celebratory dish, *mole*. The important aspect to emphasize is the celebration, and the necessity of a special meal to commemorate the event.

Celebration is equally important for funerals, and the meal served is the same as that served at Christmas and during Holy Week, but not on Easter Sunday (during Christ's death, but not his rebirth). In contrast, on the final day of mourning, typical festive food (*mole* with chicken or turkey) is offered to guests. This is the same meal

that is prepared for birthdays, weddings and Easter (Christ's rebirth). In this way, the funeral (death) reconfirms the social order (opportunities for interaction), and is cause for celebration, which is the driving force of social life.



31 *Torreas*, prepared by Primy Bermejo Martínez.



32 To make *buñuelos* Primy kneads the dough on a *metate*.



33 Primy stretches dough for making *buñuelos*.



34 Frying *buñuelos*.

## 8

### The festive life

The previous chapter provided some personal and specific details of how festive celebration occurs at the family level. This chapter is a general discussion of celebration food in Mexico, in Milpa Alta in particular. There are fiestas of varying scales requiring greater or lesser individual involvement, depending on family and community demands, and whether these are personal celebrations of life cycle events or local or national holidays. One striking feature of fiestas in Mexico is the predictability of the menu for the feast; in Mexican cuisine, feast food is *mole*. Certain occasions are celebrated with special foods, just as specific dishes call to mind particular occasions. This is significant, but not just as an indication of the symbolic power or value of foods. Special occasions require elaborate dishes so that they can be marked as special,<sup>1</sup> but there is actually greater value in the domestic quotidian realm, as indicated by the general culinary elaboration of family meals. Before analysing festive life, it is important to understand the fundamental rules of hospitality in Milpa Alta, since food hospitality is crucial to social interaction. This is described in the section that follows.

#### 8.1 Hospitality and exchange in the festive spirit

When guests arrive at the house, the first thing that a host says is, '*¡Adelante! ¡adelante! ¿Qué les ofrezco?*', 'Come in! come in! What can I offer you?' The perfect host offers every person who enters her home whatever meal is at hand, preferably in double the amount she serves herself. What is served depends on the time of arrival. Before noon it is breakfasttime, from around noon to about six it is lunchtime, and after six is suppertime. Since someone might arrive for whatever reason at any time, however infrequent, there must always be something to eat or drink available, even if it is only a piece of fruit or *agua fresca*. People take it seriously and remember hosts who do not offer a softdrink or a glass of water, '*¡ni siquiera te ofrecen un refresco o un vaso con agua!*', a complaint expressed with derision towards the subject of conversation. Hospitable and well-mannered people offer their guests a full meal if it is

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<sup>1</sup> Dissanayake (1995) argues that human artistic behaviour is a necessary, naturally selected, practice which aided the survival of the species. The power of human artistry hinges upon the crucial aspect of making something artistic, decorated, 'special' and 'extra-ordinary' (cf. Gell 1996).

available or if they themselves are in the middle of a meal, examples of which follow below.

The main meal of the day, *la comida*, is usually served between two and five in the afternoon. It starts with a soup or *sopa aguada*, often chicken broth with pasta, and/or *sopa seca* (dry soup), which is either pasta or rice flavoured with onions and garlic and sometimes tomatoes, to which carrots, potatoes and/or peas may be added. The main course may be as simple as breaded chicken breasts accompanied by cooked vegetables, or *chicharrón en chile verde* (pork crackling in green sauce) or it may be something rather more complex such as *mole verde con pollo* (green mole with chicken). This would be followed by beans and all accompanied by *tortillas*, as well as *agua de frutas*.

In the evenings a guest may be served leftovers from the main meal or perhaps some sweet rolls accompanied by *café de olla* or hot milk into which one is invited to stir instant coffee or chocolate and sugar. In the mornings a guest may also be served leftovers from the day before, be it a bowl of *pancita* accompanied by *tacos* of broad beans or *nopales compuestos*, or perhaps *enchiladas* or thinly sliced beef steaks with a *salsa* and potatoes sautéed with onions. Whatever is for breakfast is served along with beans, sometimes refried, *teleras* and hot milk. If they have run out of milk the hosts apologize lightly and ask if coffee would be alright, because this is all that they have left. The responsibility of a host is to share whatever food is at hand, and the responsibility of a guest is to accept the food offered, as the following anecdote illustrates:

*It was the feast day of Saint Francis, and I was staying in Primy's house. We were breakfasting on chilaquiles served with two fried eggs each and teleras. To prepare the chilaquiles Doña Margarita had used the green sauce from the carne de res con nopalitas en chile verde (beef with nopales in green sauce) that we had eaten for lunch the day before. She would normally prepare a new sauce to make chilaquiles, but, she said, one uses whatever one has at hand. Since Doña Margarita had served the meal and served herself last, she had only one egg. Just as we started to eat, at around 9.30, Yadira and Kiko came to pick me up for the day. They were taking me to visit the town fiesta of nearby San Francisco Tecoxpa. Since their nopalera was in that area of Milpa Alta, she and Kiko needed to pay their contribution to the local mayordomía.*

*Doña Margarita immediately passed her plate to Yadira and said that she was not very hungry, so Yadira should have her share. Yadira protested that she had already*

*had breakfast and that Doña Margarita should eat, but Doña Margarita insisted. She then asked Kiko if he would like some barbacoa en chile verde because they had run out of tortillas and could not make more chilaquiles. He accepted the offer and she heated some barbacoa in the same sauce and served it to him with some beans. Since Primy had not yet touched her eggs, she passed one of them to Yadira's plate, saying that she really did not feel like having two eggs that day.*

*After eating, we went to visit Yadira's compadres, whose son was ill. There we were offered tacos dorados de pollo. This was what they had eaten for lunch the day before, and they had several left. We told them that we had just that moment come from Primy's house where we just had breakfast, but our hosts insisted, 'Un taquito, ¡nada más uno!', 'One little taco, just one!' So we each had one, and then were pushed to have more. After this, we were served some sweet rolls and coffee, then we were offered apples and bananas, which by this time were simply impossible to force in, so they gave us the fruit to take away with us.*

*After visiting San Francisco and walking around the fair, we returned to the compadres' house and helped them cook nopales which they sell in the market already prepared with onions, tomatoes and herbs. We were invited to have a few tacos of nopales with cheese, cebollas desflemadas con rajas de chile jalapeño (sliced onions tamed with lime juice and salt and mixed with strips of jalapeño chiles), fresh sprigs of coriander and slices of avocado. This was a very informal and impromptu meal and Chelita, their compadre's sister, heated tortillas one by one and gave them to each of us straight from the comal, rather than wrapping a stack in a napkin inserted into a chiquihuite.*

*Yadira and Kiko then took me back to Primy's house. It was four o'clock and they had just served their comida. Since we arrived just in time, we were each given a plate full of milanesas with a simple cucumber and avocado salad and fried plantains with cream, accompanied by a tomato and pasta soup, beans and tortillas. We explained that we had just come from eating and that we were very full, but Primy, Alejandro and Doña Margarita would not accept this, and again insisted we eat. So with difficulty we cleaned our plates and then Yadira and Kiko left.*

What the above description shows is that hospitality is a coercive system, both for the hosts and for the guests. Food is used in the spirit of the gift (Mauss 1990) to generate social ties, with the assumption that the hosts (donors) would receive similar

treatment at some unspecified time in the future if they arrive as guests (receivers) in the home of their present guests. The perfect guest accepts everything offered to him gratefully, eats everything with relish, and possibly asks for more, in appreciation of the superior flavours of the food. If he is a slow eater, as soon as his plate is near empty, the host offers the guest a refill. A guest should not be surprised if his refusal is answered with, '*Es que no te gustó*', 'It's because you didn't like it', uttered with an offended tone of voice. If a guest leaves food on the plate a host may say disapprovingly, '*No desprecias a la comida*', 'Don't undervalue food', or '*No desperdicias la comida*', 'Don't waste food'. Food offered in hospitality is treated as an extension of the host and/or cook (if they are the same person). In this way food embodies the agency (of welcome, gift) of the host in a material form. For this reason the social pressure to eat everything placed in front of a guest is high. Rejecting food is tantamount to rejecting the host. This same basic system of food giving and receiving is also in action when families are invited to large-scale fiestas.

Contrary to popular belief, therefore, party-going is not all fun and games, especially in the case of Barrio San Mateo in Villa Milpa Alta. Ever since Yadira married into a Milpaltense family, her attitude towards parties and local level festivities has changed. Amongst the seven *barrios* and eleven *pueblos* of Milpa Alta, she told me, Barrio San Mateo was the most *fiestero*,<sup>2</sup> but this did not mean that the people of this *barrio* were idle and *simply* fun-loving. They may be considered the merriest, but they were still as hardworking as any other Milpaltenses and continued to get up before six o'clock every morning to tend to their cactus fields or other occupations. All the parties could be thought of as a sort of diversion from the monotony of daily labours at a social or community level, or also as a source of social cohesion (Perez-Castro and Ochoa 1991).

Yadira told me that she had gained quite a lot of weight since her wedding day, mainly because she moved to Milpa Alta where parties are taken very seriously and where hospitality requires a guest to eat everything she is offered. If a guest cannot eat it, he or she can surreptitiously take it away to eat at home later. Some people attend parties with a plastic bag or tupperware in their handbag, so that they can unobtrusively take home the food they are unable to eat. Some also use the plastic cups on the table which are there for serving drinks, or they wrap food in *tortillas* and tie it into a napkin

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<sup>2</sup> The dictionary definition of this word, *fiestero*, is pleasure-seeking, fond of parties.



to take home. The most important thing is never to leave anything on the plate. Leaving food is a great insult; it is a breach of the spirit of the gift (of food, a culinary work of art) which allows for ongoing social relations.

By the same reasoning, attendance to a party is a social commitment. An invitation to a fiesta must be honoured with its acceptance, and also requires reciprocity in the form of future invitations to family fiestas. Refusal to accept an invitation without good reason may be taken as an insult or a break in the ties of trust, *confianza*, which keep families together. Lomnitz (1977) defines the Latin American concept of *confianza* as more than just 'trust' or 'confidence'. It is a trusting relation between two individuals in social, physical, and economical proximity, what she calls 'psychosocial distance'. This implies a willingness to engage in reciprocal exchange because of perceived parity in an 'equality of wants'. At the heart of this system of reciprocity is Foster's notion of the 'dyadic contract' (1961, 1963), involving a tie of responsibility between pairs of individuals of equal social status, and also those in a hierarchical relation to one another. Also inherent is Mauss' notion of 'the gift', which allows for the continuance of social relations. '[A]s part of this behavioral model, gifts require counter-gifts; invitations to meals beget counter-invitations; and lending a hand at work obligates the recipient of the favor to reciprocate in kind at some later date' (Brandes 1988: 85).

Thus, when there is *confianza* between two families, it is like being part of the same family, although if family members live physically far apart, Lomnitz shows that psychosocial distance plays a more important factor in reciprocal exchange networks than blood ties. The concept still applies in Milpa Alta. When one family is particularly close to another family, they must expect not to receive an invitation. They know that they are always invited to any family celebrations, and if they fail to show up on a special day, such as the town fiesta or a birthday, it can be interpreted as a breach of trust. If, however, they have spoken to the hosts to let them know they cannot make it, this is fine, and a food parcel (*itacate*) will be sent to their home after the fiesta is over.

Parties and festivals in San Mateo become more than simple seasonal markers partly because of their frequency, and also because of their obligatory force. Even personal fiestas are taken seriously. It is quite common for some Milpaltenses to take a day off of work on their birthdays to properly attend to their celebration. Fiestas are social commitments which Yadira says can also be tiring and annoying. '*Son*

*tradiciones pero imposiciones muy fuertes por parte de la comunidad*, ‘They are traditions but at the same time very strong impositions from the community’. In Milpa Alta there are so many fiestas that Doña Margarita also said that sometimes she has a craving for *mole*, but she need not go through the effort of making it because she knows there will always be another party soon and her craving will be satisfied. Every month there is at least one fiesta at *barrio* level (see table 5, p. 192). There are private parties every week. One’s energies are easily depleted, especially when one tries to juggle family, profession, education, and traditional industry. To go from one party to the next, Yadira says, at least for her, can become tiresome, *llega a aburrir*.

Nevertheless, she respects the importance of the festivities, and explained:

The people of Milpa Alta are very very hardworking because nature gave them few resources. So it is a luxury to be able to stay home to eat, because there is no time. It is necessary to work from dawn until late at night in order to progress [financially]. And it is because of this that the community is so festive – to show others that yes, they do have money to celebrate, and to do it well.<sup>3</sup>

Her statement is telling in that she mentions eating well at home as a ‘luxury’. Holding large parties, serving *mole*, *barbacoa*, or *carnitas*, is socially enjoyable and beneficial, but the deepest pleasure, of highest value, is eating a meal at home, surrounded by loved ones (close family members).

Fiestas appear to have two purposes – to celebrate a religious occasion or life cycle event, and to eat and drink together. Brandes (1988) has argued that fiestas are ‘informal agencies of instruction’ (6) that appear to be chaotic and formless while they actually promote order and social control. In contrast to daily exchange, the principle upon which the fiesta cycle is based is an exchange based on openness and the public, binding groups, rather than individuals. The basic unit in fiesta exchange is the household, unlike in daily exchange where the basic unit is the individual.

For every celebration, local families are expected to help, either financially or with their labour. In preparation for the main *barrio* fiesta, the *mayordomía* goes to everyone’s house collecting donations, as large sums of money are needed to hold a

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<sup>3</sup> ‘*La gente de Milpa Alta es muy trabajadora porque la naturaleza no les dió tanto, entonces es un lujo quedarte a comer en la casa, porque no hay tiempo. Hay que trabajar desde la madrugada hasta la noche para salir adelante. Y es por eso que es un pueblo tan fiestero – para mostrar a los demás que si tiene dinero para festejar y hacerlos bien*’.

proper town fiesta (cf. Brandes 1988). On the whole, most families in Milpa Alta regularly give whatever economic, material or physical aid that is asked of them, even if it is not always easy. Sometimes people in the *barrio* give up more than it appears that they should if they were to be more practical and think of their personal benefits. 'But you have to contribute to continue with the traditions', Yadira says. In fact, it is to one's personal benefit to give to the community, especially in the role of *mayordomos*, not only for the sake of tradition, but also for the sake of comfortable relations and status within the social network (Brandes 1988, Salles and Valenzuela 1997, Lomnitz 1977). It is the festive life which ultimately sustains community life. And crucial to these fiestas is a proper feast. *Mole* is the dish that usually defines a feast, so I now turn to a discussion of *mole*.

## 8.2 *Mole* and *mole poblano*

*Eres ajonjolí de todos los moles.*

You are the sesame seed of all *moles*.

– Mexican saying

The most famous dish in Mexico is the *mole poblano*, the Pueblan *mole*, formerly called *mole de olor*, *mole* of fragrance (Bayless and Bayless 1987: 196). Considered to be the ultimate Mexican dish, it is primarily eaten for celebrations. There are several different kinds of regional recipes for *mole*, but generally speaking, it is a richly flavoured thick sauce which incorporates up to thirty ingredients, both native and non-native to Mexico. The name for this dish is a hispanization of the Náhuatl word for sauce, *molli*. The word now connotes a combination of dried chiles, spices, nuts, herbs, fruits, seeds and starches (like bread and *tortillas*). It is often misrepresented as a combination of chiles and chocolate, but it is more complex, and chocolate is not an essential ingredient, although it is commonly included. Each ingredient requires individual preparation before they are all ground together into a paste, diluted with broth, and cooked.

There is some disagreement about what makes a *mole poblano* distinct from other *moles*. Some cooks say that the *mole poblano* is distinguishable by the chiles used – mulato, ancho and pasilla. Others believe it is particular in its incorporation of chocolate, although many other *moles* may contain chocolate. The majority say that its most characteristic difference is that Pueblan *mole* includes a lot of sesame seeds, and typically is strewn with more as a garnish. Even in artistic images, such as paintings,

photographs, or the sculptural sweets made for the Days of the Dead, called *alfeñiques*, the *mole poblano* is recognised as the thick dark brown sauce with sesame seeds sprinkled on top just before serving. The popular Mexican saying above, *Eres ajonjolí de todos los moles*, draws upon this common knowledge about festive food in Mexico. Since parties are considered incomplete without *mole*, and *mole (poblano)* is incomplete without its sprinkling of sesame seeds, to say that someone is like the sesame seeds of all *moles* implies that that someone is highly social and attends all parties.

The *mole poblano* is considered the national dish, although it is only popular and well-known throughout the central area. There has been much speculation about the origin of the dish. It is often portrayed as a *mestizo* dish, with strong indigenous Mexican roots. The most popular story is that *mole poblano* was invented at the end of the seventeenth century by Spanish nuns, although it is improbable that a Spanish nun would kneel on the ground in front of a heavy stone *metate* to grind out a thick sauce, as narrated there. Given the difficulty of obtaining Spanish ingredients in New Spain, what the Spanish could not make the native Mexicans grow, they had to import. The scarcity of these ingredients led to the Spanish creoles adopting and adapting to the local foods available. Thus they would necessarily have to hire native girls to help them and to teach them how to use these ingredients which were so different from anything with which they were familiar. The only ones who could have taught the nuns or any non-natives to make a sauce, or a *molli*, using the *metate*, would have had to be the local women.

These local women also had the easiest access to the newly-introduced foodstuffs that the Spanish brought with them to the New World. Thus, the culinary learning was a mutually enriching education for the Spanish and the Indians. Since it is known that there were native Mexicans helping in the convent kitchens, it is more likely that they did the most strenuous manual labour, especially if they were already experienced and indeed expert at the exercise of grinding a sauce on a *metate*. So, while it may be more poetic to think of *mole poblano* as an invention of inspired religiosity, surely the development of the recipe was a slower process of culinary incorporation and experimentation rather than a Catholic miracle.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As Richard Condon (1973, 40) humourously put it, '*Mole* is the Mexican ceremonial dish which the Aztecs were eating before Saint Paul invented nuns.'

Laudan and Pilcher (1999) argue that the *mole poblano* is actually the New World version of Creole interpretations of eighteenth century European cooking. Whatever the case may be, in Milpa Alta the debate on the recipe's origin or authenticity is not considered relevant. For them, *mole* is a celebratory dish of family tradition. The quintessential festive dish is *mole*, whether it is in Pueblan-style or a family recipe.

### 8.3 *Mole* and celebration

*Mole* is quite a difficult dish to prepare, and its presence at a meal usually means that there is some sort of celebration, such as someone's birthday or saint's day. All over Mexico, *mole* is served every Christmas, Easter, Day of the Dead, and at birthdays, baptisms, weddings and funerals. The classic accompaniments for *mole* are turkey (*mole de guajolote*, deliberately referred to using the Náhuatl-derived word, *guajolote*, and not the Spanish word, *pavo*), rice (usually red, especially for dark *moles*), beans, and *tortillas*. For most families, usually chicken is now used, instead of turkey, because chicken is cheaper and more readily available. Sometimes as a first course, *consomé*, or the broth of the chicken or turkey, is served with rice, chopped onions, chopped coriander, fresh green chile, and limes. In Milpa Alta, they also serve *tamalates* (plain *tamales*) or *tamales de frijol* or *alberjón*, *tamales* with beans or yellow peas.

To drink there might be *pulque*, but though Milpa Alta is in a *zona pulquera*, *pulque* is no longer widely available. Since not everyone develop a taste for this sour viscous drink, it is also common to have a glass of tequila with *mole*, or beer. Outside of Milpa Alta, friends told me that it is important to accompany *mole* with tequila or a fizzy soft drink, otherwise it causes an upset stomach. But in Milpa Alta and in professional kitchens, I was told that this only happens if it is a badly prepared *mole*. Properly prepared, as at home, *mole* would not have any ill effects. The commercial *moles*, which are prepared in bulk with less attention to detail, are those which may be dangerous. This was because the chiles used in commercial *moles* were not cleaned well, and the bad chiles and stems were not discarded, as would be normal practice at home.

Apart from Puebla, where *mole poblano* is from, famous regions for *mole* are the southern province of Oaxaca and the municipality of Milpa Alta in Mexico City, specifically the town of San Pedro Atocpan. Every year they hold a week-long *mole* fair, *La Feria del Mole*, and I have been told that San Pedro *moles* are exported as far as Israel. *Mole* is everyone's family business in San Pedro and not only do they sell

prepared pastes or powders to later be diluted with chicken broth or water, they also sell the necessary spices and dried fruits and chiles so that women can make their own *moles* at home. In the roving markets (*tianguis*) that are set up in the streets every day in all reaches of Mexico City, there is always a stand supplying *mole* and dried groceries set up by a resident of San Pedro.

While Mexicans from all over go to San Pedro to shop for ingredients, there is hardly a clientele of people from Milpa Alta for *moles* prepared in San Pedro. All over Milpa Alta, as well as Xochimilco, it is more common for *mole* to be homemade, although in other parts of Mexico City it is almost unthinkable to attempt it. Relatively few urban dwellers have the time or the skill to make their own *moles* for birthdays or other celebrations, and so it is easier to buy a good quality paste from the market than spend several days toasting, frying, drying, grinding, stirring, cooking and re-cooking the sauce. It is precisely this elaborate effort and the number of ingredients required that make *mole* an expensive dish reserved for special occasions.

Not only this, leftover *mole* is sometimes made into *enchiladas*<sup>5</sup> or mixed with shredded chicken to fill bread rolls (*tortas* or *hojaldras de mole*), or even used to make *tamales* at home. Some people prefer the varied preparations made with leftover fiesta food than the feast itself, and these variations are easily available in inexpensive eateries throughout Mexico City, like cafes and *fondas*. So, although it is possible to eat *mole* everyday, without spending too much money, it is not always easy to find a well-made *mole*, and it remains a dish highly imbued with celebratory meanings. It is not a *symbol* of celebration in a semiotic sense, though its presence at a meal indicates that there is a significant event which has caused the host (cook/wife/mother/artist) to prepare (or even buy) and serve it as an action of respect for the occasion. *Mole* never appears on the table by accident, because it happened to be in season and available in the market. It appears because its presence carries the collective intentions of the community to commemorate a life cycle or fiesta cycle event with kin and non-kin. Some people deliberately stain their shirts with *mole* so that their neighbours or colleagues see the mark and think to themselves, 'Hmm, he must be rich or lucky because he obviously ate *mole* today....' (Luis Arturo Jiménez, personal communication).

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<sup>5</sup> In Milpa Alta, and elsewhere in Mexico, this is commonly done at home for breakfast the day after a fiesta as part of the *recalentado*.

*Mole*, therefore, is a complex and socially powerful dish. This is also why, following Gell (1998, 1999), I consider it appropriate to think of it as an object of art within the art corpus of cuisine. Since *mole* is never made in small amounts, cooks need skill and practice to prepare it well. Chiles and seeds are easily burnt, fruits may be underripe, spices may be old and flavourless, and nuts may go rancid if the weather is warm. The value attributed to *mole* is related to an awareness that it requires a certain technical mastery to prepare it well. When it is so delicious that it impresses the eaters as a gastronomical climax, the eaters are succumbing to an enchantment grounded on their knowledge of what it takes to make a *mole*. So what Gell (1996: 44) succinctly writes about art in general is true for *mole* in particular: ‘The power of art objects stems from the technical processes they objectively embody: the *technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*’.

The first time I went to Milpa Alta and met Yadira and her family, Doña Delfina prepared *mole* for us as a special welcome. The first thing Doña Delfina told us was that this *mole* was better than all the *moles* in San Pedro Atocpan. She made sure that I was aware that their proximity to the industrial *mole* makers had nothing to do with the *mole* she was serving me then. In spite of it being the time of the *Feria del Mole*, she made the *mole* herself, and since it was not commercial, it was better.<sup>6</sup> She also told me that she had some of the chiles especially sent over to her from Puebla, and explained how these extra little attentions made quite a difference to the outcome of the dish.

On another occasion, Yadira’s sister, Guille, explained to me that to make a good *mole* she would toast her chiles in the sun for a week, rather than use a flame and *comal*. This way the chiles would toast gently, and were in no danger of burning, therefore becoming bitter. She also showed me another detail which indicated her special care in producing a good *mole*. When serving, after pouring a generous amount of *mole* over the piece of chicken, she said it was important to take a little of the oil rendered on top of the *mole*, and a sprinkling of this added a sheen and extra flavour to properly garnish the dish.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This idea of homemade products being better than their commercial counterparts is prevalent and put into practice more by suburban, rural or lower-middle class people than central urban or upper-middle to upper class people. In urban centres this is starting to change, as ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ Mexican cuisine is growing in popularity.

Almost everyone I met had a commentary or opinion about *mole*. Several women gave me culinary tips, and one man described *mole* as a ‘gastronomical orgasm’. No doubt *mole* deserved its status as quintessential fiesta food. Yet my observations in Milpa Alta showed that it was more common for fiesta food to be *barbacoa*, *carnitas* or *mixiotes*. This change in the traditional menu for feasts has only begun to occur in the last ten or fifteen years. The changing or loss of such tradition may seem to indicate a decreasing significance of *mole*. But as I will explain below, rather than detract from its meaningfulness, its replacement as fiesta food emphasises and even reinforces its social meanings.

Like *mole*, *barbacoa*, *carnitas* and *mixiotes* are usually made at home, or by relatives or *compadres* who know how to make it. There are also some women who are well known in the community for their cooking, and they can be hired to prepare certain dishes for the fiesta, such as *tamales*, pickled chiles, *salsa* and vegetables. Sometimes, however, many families still prepare a small amount of *mole* to serve as a second main course after guests have filled themselves with *barbacoa*. They offer it for their guests to eat with *tamales* and beans. At other times, *mole* is not served, but a small portion is given to special guests (family and *compadres*) as an *itacate*. *Mole* and its accompaniments, therefore, are still almost always present during any sort of celebration in Milpa Alta. There may or may not be *mole*, but the meal remains sufficiently festive. To explain why this is so, it is necessary to understand something about the role of social memory in how a cuisine or any other traditional art develops.

#### 8.4 The development of a tradition

We may think of the development of a cuisine as a linear progression from simple to complex. As an example, let us consider *salsas* in Mexican cuisine. A prototypical *salsa* (*chilmolli*, in Náhuatl) is one made of chiles, ground into a sauce. In Milpa Alta, the words ‘*salsa*’ and ‘*chile*’ are often used interchangeably. ‘*Carne en chile verde*’ refers to meat in green *salsa* (which usually includes green husk tomatoes, onions, and spices, and perhaps other chiles, as well). It is not meat in green chile only. At its most basic, *salsa* is conceptualised as a whole green chile (in Milpa Alta, usually *de árbol* or sometimes *serrano*) which accompanies a meal, to be bitten into whenever desired. At its most complex, a *salsa* can be a *mole*.

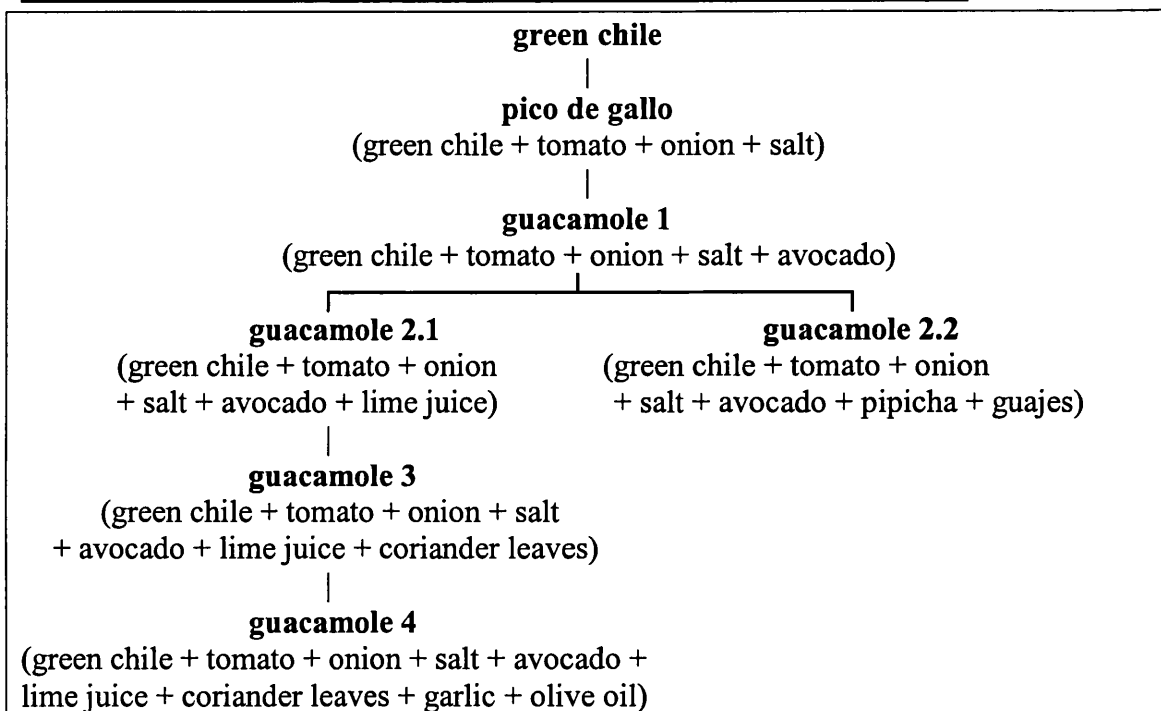
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<sup>7</sup> If she were making *mole poblano* she would also sprinkle sesame seeds on top. She was one other



A green chile can be elaborated on to develop it into a simple *salsa*, such as *pico de gallo*, which is a mixture of roughly chopped green chiles, red tomatoes, onions, and salt. Adding avocado to this mixture makes the *salsa* into *guacamole*, and adding more ingredients makes varieties of *guacamole*, of increasing complexity (see figure 2). Although chile is no longer the main ingredient of the *salsa* called *guacamole*, it can still be seen as a precursor to the development of the recipe.

**Figure 2: Linear progression from green chile to complex guacamole**

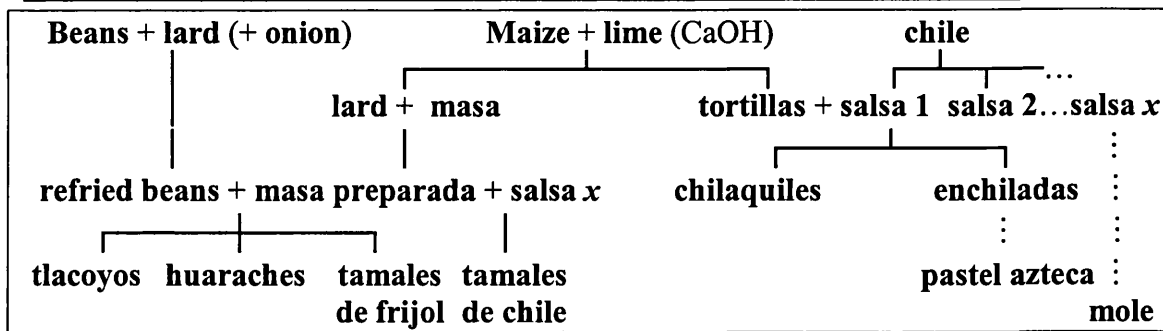


In the diagram above, the arrangement of recipes may look very much like a family tree, or a lineage of *guacamoles*. This is not accidental. Following Gell's theory of art, an artwork (or recipe, in this case) should be thought of to be just like a person. It has relations with other persons (recipes), it can 'marry' and 'have offspring', thus forms a lineage. Conceived of in this way, there are extensive families of recipes (different types of *guacamoles*, for example, or different types of *barbacoas*). Some of these are related to each other, others seem to have nothing to do with one another as they are completely different and do not mix. A simplified plan of this is illustrated in figure 3 below.

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person who confided in me that her culinary secret was that she 'cooks with love'.

**Figure 3: An example of some interrelations among recipes, shown as families**



Reasoning that one recipe develops into another makes sense, but what of other dishes? It is not surprising, of course, that a linear progression or family tree is an inadequate means of mapping out all the recipes in a cuisine. This would be too simplistic and does not illuminate how quite different recipes develop at the same time or how similar recipes may develop in different regions, or even in different households in the same community. Traditional cuisines appear to develop as spatio-temporal wholes that change and move forward historically, from the perspective of the present looking back towards all past developments.

A cuisine is actually an ideal example of a ‘distributed object’ as defined by Gell. As a single unit, it is a set made up of many parts, one body of cuisine made up of many recipes. Each part can be very different from the others, but put together the parts make sense as a whole. Each part has some quality which defines it as belonging to the whole, although this quality may not be easily defineable. This quality is what Gell calls ‘style’ (1998: 166).

[A]rtworks are never just singular entities; they are members of categories of artworks, and their significance is crucially affected by the relations which exist between them, as individuals, and other members of the same category of artworks, and the relationships that exist between this category and other categories of artworks within a stylistic whole—a culturally or historically specific art-production system. (153)

Pinpointing exactly what it is that makes *barbacoa* like *mole*, for example, is not as obvious as the similarity between a basic *salsa* and a *mole* (that is, both are *salsas*, made with chiles and other ingredients). But my purpose here is not to examine the defining style of what makes one dish Mexican and another not Mexican. What is necessary is to accept the logic that there is something called ‘style’ which allows certain recipes to be grouped within the corpus of Mexican cuisine, and from this, we can observe the

interrelations of this level of meaning (culinary) with other levels of meaning in social life (much like Munn's value transformations, and somewhat like Levi-Strauss' culinary triangle/tetrahedron).

As far as Mexican cuisine is part of Mexican tradition, its history (or 'biography') can be understood as having come into being by the work of many persons (women) simultaneously in separate households. It continues to be modified and improved as each cook prepares each meal everyday. Cooking is activity in two ways, as a physical activity and as a creative activity of continuous innovation. What is considered to be 'traditional' cooking has and continues to emerge out of the domestic sphere and as a part of local social life.

As a distributed object, the varied recipes which make up a cuisine may each develop in its own way, spread out over space and time (see Gell 1998: 235, figure 9.4/1: 'The artist's *œuvre* as a distributed object'). The recipes are separately refined by a collection of individuals who interact with and influence one another, leading to further innovation and growth. This, in essence, is how all traditional arts develop. Thus, a cuisine is a collective work, constructed by the efforts of individuals who prepare dishes based on recipes. The recipes are drawn from their memories, or they learn them from other individuals in the community, who have greater skill in using the 'traditional' knowledge of the culinary arts, and who are in turn drawing from their own memories or influences. In Gell's terms, a recipe is the index of a dish that is prepared. It is the result of the agency of a cook who prepares it with specific intentions for a particular reason and for particular other persons, or herself.

## 8.5 Fiesta food

To return to the question of how *barbacoa*, *carnitas* and *mixiote* came to be accepted as fiesta food, it is first interesting to note some of the similarities amongst these dishes. *Barbacoa* is made by roasting a whole lamb in a pit lined with maguey leaves and left to cook overnight over hot coals and aromatics. It is always served with particular *salsas* accompanying it. *Mixiote* is made of meat (rabbit, pork and/or chicken) which is rubbed with an *adobo* (a *mole*-like) paste, then is wrapped in a *mixiote*, the skin of the leaves of the maguey (the same plant used to line the pit for making *barbacoa*). *Carnitas* is made by stewing a whole pig in its own fat. It is flavoured with oranges and garlic, and, like *barbacoa*, it is always served with *salsas* and *tortillas*.

The relative costs of preparing these dishes are also relevant. The high quality ingredients for *mole* (chiles, nuts and spices) are expensive. One kilo of *mole* costs more than one kilo of *barbacoa*, *carnitas* or *mixiote*. Also, *mole* is prepared at home even though it is available commercially, and it is always made as a special effort for a special occasion. But *barbacoa* or *carnitas* can be bought already made, or it may be the family business to prepare these dishes anyway. So in money and in labour *mole* is more expensive, technically difficult, and valuable.

It appears that the substitution of *mole* with these three other dishes only occurred since the 1980s, which is the time of great economic crisis in Mexico, when the value of the peso dropped phenomenally in relation to the US dollar (see graph on the exchange rate in Meyer and Sherman 1991: 687). Before then, as far as I know, the menu of a feast had been more or less consistent over time and space, i.e. within the region. The adoption of these other dishes as suitable festive foods must have been gradual.

But if the prices of all the accompaniments are added up and put in relation to cost of food per head, the fact that *mole* is made as a paste and then diluted, one kilo of *mole* is enough for more people than one kilo of the meat dishes. In effect, to prepare *mole* for 500 people costs less than it would to prepare *barbacoa*, *carnitas* or *mixiote* for 500 people.<sup>8</sup> Since the costs of hosting a fiesta are high, many people delay holding their weddings until they have enough money to hold a proper feast. Since *mole* is feast food *par excellence*, it would then make more sense to serve *mole* rather than *barbacoa* at a wedding banquet. Not only because of the costs, but also because of the social values, it would seem more logical to serve *mole* during a fiesta.

Recalling that honour and value are sometimes related to Simmel's notion of resistance as a source of value, the more an object resists our possession (because it is very expensive), the greater its social value. For this reason, a dish like *barbacoa* becomes more desirable as festive food, in order to bestow value on the occasion being celebrated, and on one's guests.

In addition, the acceptance of *barbacoa* as feast food can partly be explained by Bourdieu's concept of the 'aesthetic disposition'. The aesthetic disposition is associated with economic capital (Bourdieu 1984: 54), so if *barbacoieros* in Milpa Alta have the greatest economic capital locally, and constitute the dominant class, if they decide to serve *barbacoa* during their fiestas, it can be considered of good taste. It is therefore

defined as appropriate, and can replace *mole* in value as a tasteful alternative, ‘only because choices always owe part of their value to the value of the chooser, and because to a large extent, this value makes itself known and recognized through the manner of choosing’ (91). The aesthetic point of view or aesthetic intention is ‘what makes the work of art’ (29). He continues that ‘in fact, this “intention” is itself the product of the social norms and conventions which combine to define the always uncertain and historically changing frontier between simple technical objects and objets d’art...’ (29). In short, serving *barbacoa* became prestigious for fiestas because of the prestige (or ‘distinction’) associated with being a *barbacoiero* in Milpa Alta.

*Barbacoa* is a luxury food, although it has a different ‘taste of luxury’ from how Bourdieu defines it. In spite of its status as an appreciated artwork in the cuisine, this is not enough to explain why *mole* is still served during fiestas, especially to the hosts’ *compadres*, whether or not there is *mole* for the rest of the guests. Then, in the cases when *mole* is not served, there is an apparent contradiction in *mole* being necessary for fiestas and yet not being present. There must be another reason why *barbacoa* has become acceptable feast food in Milpa Alta. If, as is the case in Milpa Alta, *mole* continues to be described as having the ultimate flavour, as being the ‘*mole de fiesta*’, how can *barbacoa* be served at a feast in its stead? In fact, there is perfect sense in *barbacoa* (or *carnitas* or *mixiote*) acting as a replacement for *mole* at feasts. To understand this, cuisine must be thought of as a distributed object, as described above.

## 8.6 Conclusion: the presence or absence of *mole* in fiestas

To reiterate, as a conceptual whole, cuisine is an ‘object’ which can be divided into its constituent parts, which are different dishes of varying kinds and complexity. Some recipes can be shown to have developed directly from others, as modifications of previously successful (flavourful and pleasureable) dishes. Others can be offshoots of preparatory recipes, which, when combined with other recipes or other techniques, produce another dish or innovation. Still others may have been born of improvisation, using a cook’s knowledge of recipes she has followed in the past or learnt from others, while applying her skill to the limited ingredients or situation that she has at her disposal.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2000, it cost around Mx\$10,000 (approximately £700) to make *mole* for 500 people, Mx\$15,000 (£1050) for *carnitas*, and Mx\$20,000 (£1400) for *barbacoa*.

Although not all the parts of the whole cuisine are similar (a *salsa* has nothing in common with a *tortilla*, neither in preparation nor ingredients), there is no denying that they are equally valid parts belonging to the same whole; that is, they are of the same style (Mexican). So while a simple synecdoche does not exist, there is still a relation between two dishes which allows them to represent or replace one another if they both maintain ‘the relative capacity ... to create potentialities for constructing a present that is experienced as pointing forward to later desired acts or material returns’ (Munn 1986: 11).<sup>9</sup>

Provided that a dish is conceived of as needing a certain amount of technical mastery in order to prepare it, what occurs is Gell’s ‘halo effect of technical difficulty’ (1996 [1992]) so that the dish can be designated as special, or special enough to commemorate a special occasion. *Barbacoa* is special enough to be a Sunday treat for the family, it requires labour and skill to prepare, the meat used is expensive, and it is somewhere in the range of special dishes, although it may not rank as high as *mole*. In fact, *barbacoa* is a luxury to be indulged in with the family. Thus it makes sense that *barbacoa* could be served at a fiesta, provided that there is a little bit of ‘*mole de fiesta*’ offered as a second main course, to complete the social transaction of value.

Eventually, the meal structure could be modified by preparing a smaller amount of *mole* and accompaniments for a fiesta, only to give as an *itacate* to the hosts’ *compadres*, close friends and family. The menu gradually shifts from a festive meal being defined as ‘*mole*’ to ‘*mole* after *barbacoa*’ to ‘*mole* as *itacate* for *compadres* only, after *barbacoa*’ to only ‘*barbacoa*’. With time, therefore, *barbacoa* is made able to effectively carry similar meanings to *mole*, when served as the meal of a fiesta. In effect, *mole* is still omnipresent in fiestas. Its actual presence or absence does not indicate its conceptual absence. The menu transformation reveals a transfer of value from *mole* to these three specified dishes, each of which requires a relatively high level of technical difficulty for its preparation. This makes them legitimately pertain to the style of a Mexican fiesta because of their recent relation to *mole* and the omnipresence of *salsa/chile*. In effect, because of its deep social significance, *mole* is present in people’s memories, whether or not it is actually served to them on their plates.

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<sup>9</sup> This is what Munn calls the ‘relative extension of spacetime’, and is similar to what Fürst calls the ‘rationality of the gift’ (1997).



35 Yadira, Kiko and their daughter, Valeria, on the feast day of San Francisco Tecoxpa.



36 A hired *señora* making *tamales de alberjón* for a fiesta.



37 Coating pieces of chicken and pork in *adobo* to prepare *mixiotes* for a fiesta.



38 Typical fiesta food—*carnitas*, *arroz rojo*, vegetables and beans (*frijoles de olla*).





39 Token serving of *mole*, as a second main course at a fiesta, served alongside *tamales de frijol*, with red and green *salsas* on the table. Notice the *nopales compuestos* in the plastic cups, ready to be taken home by the guests.

## **Conclusion**

## The centrality of gastronomy in social life

In this thesis I have approached the study of Mexican cuisine by thinking of cooking as an artistic practice, situating this in the context of Milpa Alta to argue the following points: flavour is functional in an active sense; flavour is achieved via love (the *sazón de amor* necessary for good cooking); observance of cooking shows how actors are acted upon by their actions (following Munn 1986); gender is not intrinsically hierarchical (cf. McCallum forthcoming), and women are able to use cooking to exert power and enact their social value (cf. Melhuus and Stølen 1996) as social action complementary to men's; and social organisation can be understood as a social-relational matrix with recipes as indexes, and food as the active art nexus (following Gell 1998). This means there are different social levels (*family-compadrazgo-mayordomía*) and these levels can be understood by analysing food in terms of cooking, from everyday hospitality to fiesta hospitality. In the following sections I will explain these conclusions.

### 9.1 The function of flavour

As I explained in chapter two, flavour is an active element of food, not the superficial, physical characteristic of an object (foodstuff) which carries semiotic meaning. If food, or a dish, is thought of as an artwork, the flavour is not simply the decorative aspect. Rather than an aid to help humans ingest nutrients, the presence of flavour, and the mobilization of different flavours in a cuisine, via cooking, effectively creates social relations. In other words, form and function, surface and depth, are interlinked. Given that any kind of cooking and eating are food transactions, flavour constitutes the index of the surrounding social relations of the actors (cooks and eaters).

From my observations in Milpa Alta, food meant for banquets follows a set menu with few variables, whereas food meant for the private sphere, both for special occasions or not, makes fuller use and appreciation of the extent of Mexican cuisine. As I have explained at length (chapters three and eight), sauce, *salsa*, is the basic unit of Mexican cuisine. Many Mexican dishes are defined by their sauces (also equivalent to and referred to as *chile*), rather than the accompanying meat or vegetable that is eaten with the sauce.

Examples of this are *chicharrón en chile verde*, *entomatados*, *adobos* or *adobados*, *pipiánes*, *moles*, and by extension, *chilaquiles*, *enchiladas*, and *chiles rellenos*. The varieties of *pozoles* (hominy soups made with pork, especially a whole hog's head) are differentiated by colour (red, white and green) and the variations are prepared by the addition or omission of a red or green *salsa* in the cooking process. The same can be applied to most *tamales* which are differentiated by the *salsa* used in the filling, as *tamales verdes*, *rojos*, *de rajas* or *de mole*, or by the *salsa*'s absence (*tamalates*, sweet *tamales*). Otherwise, there are also many Mexican dishes that are inconceivable to eat without an accompanying sauce, pickled chile or a fresh green chile to chew on at the side. This includes all sorts of *tacos*, *barbacoa*, and also soups, rice dishes, pasta dishes; also street food like *sopes*, *tlacoyos*, *huaraches*, *gorditas*, and *sincronizadas*. Even fresh fruit, like mangos, bananas, *jicamas*, and pineapples, are sold with a sprinkling of powdered *chile piquín* and lime juice.

At its most basic, a Mexican sauce is a chile, and at its most complex, it is a *mole*. A foodstuff can be eaten as it is, but when combined with chile or some sort of sauce, it becomes a part of cuisine, i.e., flavour is added, and hence, value is added. When *mole* is served to guests, it actually *represents* Mexican cuisine, as the ultimate recipe, because it is the most laborious and technically difficult recipe to prepare, and it also brings together more ingredients than other recipes. Although *mole* 'stands for' Mexican cuisine as epitomizing some of its best qualities, or as an example of excellence amongst other *salsas*, it also carries other meanings when it is served or eaten. It is considered to be 'very Mexican' and 'very traditional', so much so that sometimes foreigners are warned that they may not like it when they try it for the first time, or they may not like it at all. Otherwise they are expected to like it right away, and to fully appreciate the honour bestowed upon them if they are served *mole* in someone's home.

In Milpa Alta, the deeper social meanings inherent in the serving and eating of *mole* are related to traditionalist ideas of this dish being historical, and passed down from generation to generation via women (cooks) in the family. The cooks are specifically women, who are highly valued in Milpaltense society as wives and mothers, as producers and reproducers. As I have described in greater detail in chapter five, women's morality is circumscribed by their knowledge of cookery, their domestic and extradomestic labour, as well as by their sexual behaviour. When women prepare *mole* from scratch, using family recipes, and for family fiestas, *mole* acts as the quintessence

of women's hard work, as well as the most flavourful dish in a woman's culinary repertoire.

Yet in spite of this, the technical knowledge necessary to produce quotidian dishes or daily family food seems more complex than what is necessary for large fiestas. Of course there is no denying that *mole* is a complex and sophisticated dish, but in an area like Milpa Alta its preparation is common knowledge. Everyone knows how to make *mole*, but not everyone is considered a good cook nor has the same range of culinary knowledge which is only fully explored in the familiar/private sphere. What this discussion indicates is that there is greater creativity involved in domestic cooking, therefore more culinary agency and freedom. Particular flavours are not just the guiding principles of social events and their organisation. By preparing particular dishes for personal or commercial reasons, cooks deliberately produce certain flavours for their own social ends. They might prepare *mole* for a fiesta, *barbacoa* to sell in the market, or family favourites for loved ones. So flavour is in fact the most active and functional aspect of food.

Depending on who cooks what, when, and why, the production of particular flavours are the primary concern in food preparation. Rather than an incidental characteristic of food, flavour is central and active, cooked in for specific reasons and for specific others/eaters. In terms of Gell's anthropological theory of art (1998: 12-27), flavour constitutes the index of the recipes (artworks) of a cuisine (an art world). To summarize and illustrate the way in which I have approached this study of food, the basic dishes that make up Mexican cuisine are listed in table 6 below. It represents the redistributed art corpus of the cuisine, as lived experience in Milpa Alta. I use the terms public eating and private eating to refer to extra-familial and intra-familial eating, respectively. Public eating means food is shared with the larger community, outside of the family (private) sphere. Within the family sphere I include close friends, and instances when people who are not very close to the family may show up at the house unexpectedly. I classify snacking in the market under private eating because these snacks are eaten within the domestic unit, whether at home or in the streets. Public eating is basically uniform, whereas private eating encompasses the myriad possibilities that cooks have in preparing daily meals. As I have already explained in chapter two, the openness and variety of Mexican cookery makes it an apt example of a 'high' or elaborate cuisine, as defined by Goody, worthy of artistic analysis.

**Table 6: Mexican cuisine organised by occasion within the public and private realms**

<b>Occasion</b>	<b>Public eating</b>	<b>Private eating</b>
<b>Birthdays, weddings, town fiestas, Christmas day</b> ( <i>anniversary or life cycle</i> celebrations with Catholic mass)	Mole con pollo o guajolote Tamales de alberjón or de frijol or tamalates Arroz rojo Barbacoa, mixiote or carnitas	
<b>Easter Sunday, ninth day after a funeral</b> ( <i>re-birth</i> of dead soul, like life cycle celebrations, above)	Mole con pollo o guajolote Tamales de alberjón or de frijol or tamalates Arroz rojo Barbacoa, mixiote or carnitas	
<b>Days of the Dead</b> (clear <i>prehispanic</i> origins in customs)	Mole con pollo o guajolote Tamales verdes, de rajas; atole Arroz rojo Dulce de calabaza, regional sweets, candied fruits	Mole con pollo o guajolote Tamales verdes, de rajas; atole Arroz rojo Dulce de calabaza, regional sweets, candied fruits
<b>Holy Week, Christmas eve, funerals</b> (very <i>Catholic</i> practices)	Revoltijo – meatless mole with shrimp fritters Tamales – tamalates or con queso Tortitas de papa Pescado capeado	Revoltijo – meatless mole with shrimp fritters Tamales – tamalates or con queso Tortitas de papa Pescado capeado
<b>Lent and Advent seasons</b> (family food or private eating during special occasions)		Ensalada de betabel ‘sangre de Cristo’ Capirotada or torrejas Pescado a la vizcaína Chiles rellenos de queso o atún Buñuelos, calabaza en tacha
<b>Street food (illicit eating)</b>		Tacos, tamales, tortas, sopas, barbacoa, quesadillas, etc.
<b>Eating within the family</b> (everyday home cooking)		Sauces, stews, herbs, vegetables, pancita, pozole, birria, quelites, mushrooms, insects and eggs or larvae, cheeses, chiles en nogada, other stuffed chiles, pickles, preserves, other moles and moles de olla, adobos, chilaquiles, enchiladas, pasteles aztecas, flans, rice puddings, ates, candied fruits, and the rest of Mexican cuisine...

## 9.2 Flavour, love and desire

In the context of daily life, cooking is almost never done for the sake of the cook alone, nor would this be normal behaviour in Milpa Alta. Cooking is a social activity by nature, and as I have explained in part one and parts of part two, food preparation entails an emotional commitment from cooks and eaters. In this section I briefly go over my findings in Milpa Alta, regarding the element of love in Mexican cooking.

Usually, when a person eats alone, rather than prepare a meal for himself or herself, he or she more likely goes to the market or to a street corner and has a meal of *tacos* or some other *antojitos*. Partly this is because much of Mexican cooking is laborious requiring time and effort to prepare. Another eater makes a cook more willing to go through the trouble of preparing the several parts that make up a meal. Given that a person would rather eat at home, if he or she has a family to eat with, another reason why someone would eat in the streets is because street food is particularly delicious. Food in the street provides all the flavour of Mexican cuisine without the effort. Indeed, if one is alone there are no social relations involved to complicate one's enjoyment of the flavour.

Gow (1989) describes that for an Amazonian community, 'the desires felt and expressed for certain kinds of foods is [sic] systematically related to certain types of social relations' (568). Taggart (1992: 80-81) also describes how hunger for food and desire for sex are linked for the Sierra Nahuatl of Central Mexico.<sup>1</sup> In Milpa Alta, married women prepare food for their husbands and the rest of the household as part of their domestic role. More specifically, if she does not cook at home for her family, she can be criticised as 'bad', and if she chooses to eat in the streets, she is *chinaqueando*, naughtily enjoying someone else's cooking as she shirks her own duties to cook. Likewise, being seen in the streets invites digression, and not being at home allows criticism of potential extra-marital love affairs.

In these two ways, home cooking is thought of as good cooking, both in a moral and a gastronomic sense. In chapter eight I explained that eating at home is considered a 'luxury' in Milpa Alta, yet street food is not undervalued in itself, nor is it necessarily less tasty than a woman's home cooking. This is because first of all, it is also prepared by a *señora*, a married woman, a wife and mother. That she is cooking for unknown eaters is less relevant than the fact that she still cooks with the same technical mastery

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<sup>1</sup> Nahuatl is a dialect of Náhuatl, and the Sierra Nahuatl are of Aztec ancestry, like Milpaltenses.

as if she were preparing the food for her family. (Her agency, on the other hand, is directed towards making monetary profit, so the flavour is still important.) Though any married woman knows how to make the same *antojitos*, somehow, the food may seem to taste better in the streets. In chapter five I also referred to Vázquez García's (1997) study of Nahuas in Veracruz, where she observes that many women who sell home cooked food in the streets are unwed mothers or second wives of men whose first wives exert domestic (marital and gastronomical) rights. Street food is commoditized cooking, but its appeal lies in the link between eating and sex.<sup>2</sup> It is as delicious and clandestine as an illicit love affair. It is akin to the pleasures of sex without the entanglements of love (amongst social relations).

Recalling that the basic unit of Mexican cuisine is the *salsa* or chile, it is not accidental that the ideal celebration dish is *mole*. *Salsa* equals flavour in Mexican cuisine. *Mole* is the ultimate *salsa*; it has the ultimate flavour, it is the ultimate woman or ultimate orgasm, as my banker friend said (in chapter three). *Mole* is a work of art, a product of Mexican women, who are wives and mothers who have passed their culinary secrets down the lineage through their daughters. The value allotted to *mole* is understood as effectively equivalent to the value of women in Milpaltense society, as explained in chapter five.

*Mole* as a special dish indicates celebration, but it is special not only because it is difficult to make. There are other dishes in Mexican cuisine that are difficult to make. *Mole* differs from other dishes within the cuisine because its preparation epitomizes the wide variety of culinary techniques and ingredients that women have adopted and adapted into 'traditional' Mexican cuisine. Its complex history involves the invasion of foreigners who brought ingredients and technical knowledge to Mexico, and who influenced the religious and domestic realms, altering social interaction while simultaneously altering women's relationship with food and cooking. In one recipe the interrelating value systems and complex of intentionalities that exist in Milpa Alta are

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<sup>2</sup> Taggart (1992) also describes a link between eating and sex in his analysis of the Sierra Nahuat. His study is a comparative analysis of gender segregation in Mexico and Spain, which he bases on early childhood relationships with parents. His data on Mexico emphasize cooking as part of women's role, and links cooking and eating with the relationship between husband and wife, because of the links between Nahuat conceptions of eating and sex. 'The public separation of women from men on family ceremonial occasions is understandable if one considers that *all rituals involve eating* and that *the Sierra Nahuat connect eating with sex*. A woman and a man eating together in public would make a Sierra Nahuat uncomfortable because it would suggest the unleashing of powerful and potentially destructive human emotions' (81, emphasis added).



found: 'tradition', land, *compadrazgo*, sexual and maternal love, women, and especially, flavour.

If these are the ingredients necessary to successfully prepare *mole* (or any other recipe), the question that remains is how do professional chefs achieve culinary mastery in Mexican cuisine? In chapter three I described some of the ways that chefs thought of proper Mexican cooking.<sup>3</sup> The teaching of cultural events and Mexican history were included in the curricula of some cookery schools. Urban students were encouraged to go back to the *pueblos*, to search for unwritten recipes and culinary tips from anonymous *mayoras* and *señoras*, who were unrecognised culinary artists. According to them, the achievement of superior flavour is reached by technical culinary skill, top quality ingredients, an understanding of traditions and Mexican culture, and, if possible, a *sazón de amor* (a sprinkling of love).

### 9.3 The importance of cooking

I have argued thus far that flavour is the most important and functional (active) aspect of food. When a professional chef said to me, 'Flavour is everything!' this meant more than to say that flavour in food helps nutrients slip down our throats. There are many physiological, cultural and social reasons why people eat and drink certain foods, but flavour, its artistic nature, is of primary concern, or so it appears on a superficial level. What I have also been arguing is that the manipulation or mobilization of flavours in cooking is as much a social activity as human agents interacting (cf. Gell 1998). There is a necessary interconnection between the physical characteristics of food (their artistic nature) and what occurs in other levels of social interaction.

To explain this from another angle, recall that in Mexican cuisine, flavour is equivalent to chile. To gain access to the meanings of chiles beneath the surface, it is necessary to understand their role in Mexican cuisine as a whole, and this in relation to the social actors who produce, consume and transact food (in the family, in hospitality, commercially), and thereby construct their social world. Within the culinary and gastronomical domains, chiles are central to Mexican cuisine, but the meanings that they carry are not metaphorical; rather, they may be symbolic in the way that Nancy Munn uses the term (1986: 7):

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<sup>3</sup> I also include here cookbook writers, who are involved in a wider discourse of good taste than local Milpaltenses.

A symbolic study is not substantively restricted (for example, to the examination of myth or ritual or some special, predefined class of objects). Rather, the practices by means of which actors construct their social world, are thought to be symbolically constituted and themselves symbolic processes.

To understand the culinary system of Milpa Alta, it makes sense only in relation to how Milpaltenses use their cuisine, or the moral notions surrounding cooking, in their social interaction. So if chiles appear to be symbolic ingredients in Mexican cuisine, it is because there is a sophisticated culinary technology that actors learn and can utilise via their cooking.

A more concrete example of this has been described in chapter four. Discussing *barbacoa* in Milpa Alta, I showed that the production of a culinary work of art is an all-encompassing social activity. The traditional methods to prepare *barbacoa* involve a commitment to a way of life that is ordered by the demands of the market economy and the elaborate recipe. It also requires cooperation within the ideal social unit, the nuclear family, or, more specifically, the ideal relationship between a man and a woman, that of husband and wife. The production of *barbacoa* provides a good example of what Munn refers to as 'intersubjectivity'. '[A]gents,' she writes, 'not only engage in action but are also "acted upon" by the action'. Practices form types of social relations and also form the actors who engage in them (1986: 14-15).

A final observation is that only married men prepare *barbacoa*, but (previously married) women without husbands are also able to prepare *barbacoa*. If a woman's husband dies or abandons her, she can continue to rely on *barbacoa* as her means of livelihood, by hiring men to perform the slaughter and disembowelling for her (the '*matador*' mentioned in chapter four). What is less common is for a man to continue to prepare *barbacoa* without his wife. Most men would continue with their businesses anyway, and some hire women (*señoras*) to help them with some of the cleaning, chopping, *salsas*, and *panzas*, and anything else that their wives would have normally done. But generally their businesses do not flourish the way they did when their wives were alive. This occurs unless they remarry. When a *barbacoiero* man's wife dies, it is more common for him to remarry than it would be for a *barbacoiero* widow to do so. Only when he remarries is he able to continue with the business with similar success as with his late wife.

Taking *barbacoa* as a representative of Mexican cuisine (as in Gell's distributed object of art/culinary corpus [1998: 165-8]), it must be reiterated that the wife's basic

role in preparing *barbacoa* is to prepare the *salsas* and the *panza*. These are the most culinary activities of the whole process. Since women's role in the family is to be a cook, it is not accidental that women are expected to perform these tasks. In a sense, women are related as much to men as wives and mothers, as they are related to the preparation of food, which is represented by the preparation of *salsas*.

In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on cooking as a technical skill to describe the creation of flavour. Though for a different goal and using a different means, society could be approached in the way Lévi-Strauss suggested:

The conjunction of a member of the social group with nature must be mediated through the intervention of cooking fire, whose normal function is to mediatize the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer, and whose operation thus has the effect of making sure that a natural creature is at one and the same time *cooked and socialized*. (1964: 336, orig. ital.)

Since the texture of cooking and social life in Milpa Alta is characterised by women doing most of the cooking, the following section provides a final discussion on gender.

#### 9.4 Gender and cooking

Cooking is not part of housework as invisible labour, but it is a creative task based on the value placed upon the home, and on women as wives and mothers, as providers (as described in chapter five). The cuisine is a material embodiment of a woman's role in the family, as a sexual partner for her husband, and as a mother and nurturer for the next generation.<sup>4</sup> But although cooking is embodied, and gender is embodied (cf. McCallum forthcoming), cooking is not an activity of performative gender roles *per se*. They are not necessarily linked, although food is used as the nexus of social meaning by which cooks (again, not necessarily women) construct their social world. As my material on Milpa Alta shows, as a loving dimension of women's housework, good cooking can lead to the development of a 'traditional' cuisine as much as the production of social relations.

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<sup>4</sup> Although not discussing a specific group, Fürst (1997) analyzes cooking in relation to femininity, and she argues that 'the real homemade dinner, cooked by the woman for her man and children, is something like the quintessential gift' (446). Her concept of the 'rationality of the gift' is based on 'ways of reasoning and relating to the world' to mediate between micro- (culinary) and macro- (greater social) levels of society. '[K]nowledge is based on practice or activity...[and]...rationality is...relative to certain social contexts' (444). Cooking, she argues, is oriented 'toward the structuring of emotional relations, typically between mother and child' (445).

Taking the case of Milpa Alta, culinary creativity can be seen as the outcome of the private sphere and the social dynamics of men and women, families amongst other families (in *compadrazgo*), and the *mayordomías* of neighbouring districts. As I have described in chapters four and five, women and men have roles and expectations which seems to dictate the limits of their behaviour, but which also allow them to achieve social and material ends through complementary action. For men this behaviour includes working in the fields or in a professional job and going out to drink with friends. For women it includes going to the market, cooking, cleaning and caring for the children, as well as extradomestic labour. Together, they establish successful businesses, links of *compadrazgo*, and fulfil their roles as *mayordomos* for the community.<sup>5</sup>

Related to this gendered division of labour, there is some sociological research that premises that cooking causes women's subordination (see Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 77-86). Studies in France and England show that given the importance of a well-cooked proper meal, 'construed as fundamental to the identity of the family and to its well-being' (78), women are subject to the demands and taste preferences of their husbands who have economic dominance. These women have 'responsibility without authority' (79). Their oppression results from their apparent autonomy in the domestic sphere, which actually masks the subjugation under which they place themselves by accomodating and prioritizing the desires of others (DeVault 1991, McIntosh and Zey 1999 [1989]). Whether or not the subordination is explicit, it has also been argued in studies on Sweden (Ekström 1991) and South Wales (Murcott 1982). Women are required to provide a cooked dinner, which means that they must organize their time and work surrounding this demand. The elaborate rules attached to the meal is a form of control which daughters accept as appropriate to their gender as domestic roles and tasks are taught to them by their mothers. Thus, the basic argument of these feminist perspectives is that culinary responsibilities tie women to the home and cause their subordination.

My material, on the other hand, suggests that there is another possibility, which is given further credence by other related studies in Latin America and elsewhere that demonstrate that gender roles are not necessarily constitutive of power relationships and

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<sup>5</sup> This is similar to what has been argued by others before me, particularly in Indian communities in Latin America, where women's culinary labour is shown to be active and productive, as well as complementary to men's labour within the conjugal unit (see footnote 6, following).

identity, but that *gender is in flux* and *power is not intrinsic to its constitution* (Melhuus and Stølen 1996, McCallum forthcoming, González Montes and Tuñón 1997; see also Moore 1994, Ortner 1996, Sanders 2000). Furthermore, by focusing on food, the existing ideal of gastronomy makes culinary artistry a possible goal that women may strive to achieve, whether or not they consider it to be the main source of their public esteem in general. In fact, as I described in chapter five, women in Milpa Alta are proud to be known as hardworking, and this does not necessarily involve cooking for their families. Nevertheless, some may choose to emphasise cooking as part of their gender identity, depending on the social or local political situation in which they find themselves. That is, women may choose to define themselves as loving individuals who cook for their husbands or other family members (*'me dedico al hogar'*), whether or not they actually do so regularly because they are food vendors or *barbacoieras*, or have other income-generating activities on the side (cf. Villareal 1996).

By virtue of its artistic nature, cooking is a creative activity which requires a basic freedom to perform. In chapter five I presented data that many women in Milpa Alta are wage-earners, like their husbands, and they are able to hire domestic help. Yet they continue to do most of the cooking themselves, or at least few would admit that they do not cook, on occasion. This is not to say that their extra-domestic work is easy or that there are no other domestic labours to be accounted for. What it emphasises is the importance of cooking in family life (also cf. Harris 1978).

Looking more closely at cuisine and the social relations surrounding its production can be illuminating, therefore. While it is arguable that women's subordination was exacerbated by the demands of the kitchen, in the case of Mexico, this was specifically the demands of making fresh *tortillas* (see Pilcher 1998: 99-121). Before wide industrialization and the spread of mechanical *tortillerías*, Mexican women used to spend up to a third of their waking hours making *tortillas* (ibid: 100-106). At the same time, there was resistance to machine-made *tortillas*, because machines produced inferior flavours in comparison to hand-made *tortillas*. Gradually, with technological advances, and political changes as women entered the extradomestic labour force, machine-made *tortillas* gained acceptance (ibid: 106-110). Having the *tortillas* sorted out, women were left with more time and energy to devote to other culinary activities. The elaborate cuisine was not the restrictive factor *per se*. A final anecdote from my fieldwork illustrates what I mean:

*One middle-aged woman told me that she had never learned to cook as she grew up, although she used to be in charge of making tortillas for the family twice a day. Her mother and sisters all cooked very well, and it was only several years after marriage that she had the chance to learn to cook. She had a successful professional career, but she wanted to learn to cook for the sake of her family. She was able to combine both cooking and her profession for two reasons other than her desire to achieve technical culinary mastery: one was a direct result of her no longer needing to pat out tortillas by hand since they were now available from the industrial tortillerías; the other was because she had two to three hours for her daily lunchbreak, and this gives a woman time to prepare a proper meal, if she wishes.*

Women use cooking and food sharing as more than a means of expression of love and trust, competition and pride. In Milpa Alta I found that the opposite of trust was felt to be greed and stinginess, rather than distrust. Trust, *confianza*, was enacted in the form of generosity, particularly with food hospitality. Trust partly sprung from a shared connection to land and historical consciousness, and partly it is passed on from one person to another, via kin or *compadrazgo*. In this way successful fulfillment of kin roles can also be articulated by food and food sharing. But is women and men doing complementary work within the conjugal unit –and for women, food provision and other culinary activities are primary—that produces and reproduces the social order.<sup>6</sup>

In chapter five, I described how women’s social spaces can be limited when they are at home, but work for women is more than domestic labours, and in fact cooking is no longer necessarily demanded of women nowadays. Whether a woman cooks for her family or hires someone else to do the cooking, she may take the credit for providing a meal (abducting the culinary agency of the food/cook). Not only this, elaborate cuisines may in fact be a means of escaping these varied existing restrictions that are already embedded in social life, the origins of which are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Sidney Mintz (1996: ch.3) argues something similar in his book, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*. He describes how freedom from slavery may have been partly achieved by the development of a local cuisine. Since Mintz approaches the analysis of food in anthropology from the cooking, his ‘taste of freedom’ is in direct contrast with Bourdieu’s. Bourdieu defines the ‘taste of luxury’ as the ‘taste of liberty’ or a distance

from necessity (1984: 177); it is associated with economic success (economic capital). In contrast, although Mintz does not specifically engage himself with Bourdieu, what Mintz describes is how something judged to be of good taste can emanate from the necessity and poverty of the slaves of the American south, who were low in class hierarchy. Rather than good taste (at least in food) being defined according to the habitus of the dominant class, it was the pursuit of flavour and culinary mastery which allowed some slaves to be elevated from being treated like beasts in the fields to being treated like creative human individuals, culinary artists, able to construct a cuisine and ultimately their own freedom.

In these differing tasks (and in eating), they were able to exercise the human potentiality to taste, to compare, to elaborate their preferences. To be sure, they did so under terrible constraints; often, just staying alive was the sole challenge. Yet the ability to render judgments of food, to develop comparisons, to calibrate differences in taste—and to be prevented from doing so—help to suggest that something of the taste of freedom was around before freedom itself was. The tasting of freedom was linked to the tasting of food. (Mintz 1996: 37)

As I describe for Milpa Alta, the dependence on flavour, or the addiction to culinary works of art, gives women the legitimacy to expand their social and physical boundaries, as well as other forms of autonomy, of thought and domestic power, because of the actions necessary for achieving technical mastery in cooking. Although women's socially acceptable spaces may have appeared limited, cooking was one significant way around it, which eventually led to the development of an elaborate cuisine, an idea also formulated by Mintz:

working in the emergence of cuisine legitimized status distinctions within slavery, both because the master class became dependent on its cooks, and because the cooks actually invented a cuisine that the masters could vaunt, but could not themselves duplicate. (47-8)

In effect, by recognizing that cooking is active and creative, its outcome (food, dishes, recipes) should be thought of as having social agency, or as being social actors in their own right, as works of art (Gell 1998). Then, an elaborate cuisine is not simply a creative escape valve for otherwise restricted women. It is work allocated according to the sexual division of labour in the conjugal unit that complements men's work to both

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<sup>6</sup> See Harris (1978), Hugh-Jones (1978, 1979), McCallum 19 for comparative analyses of gender complementarity in Latin America.

produce and reproduce sociality. It is a license for social action in the pursuit of technical or culinary artistry, and, if subordination was a presupposed issue, it can even be thought of as a form of women's liberation.

## 9.5 The culinary matrix and the art nexus

It is appropriate now to recall the theoretical basis of food as art as I have been using it.<sup>7</sup> Gell's theory of art uses a conception of a body of artworks as if it were a body of a person. The entire art corpus of a single artist or a collective style of art can therefore be looked at as if it were pieces of one body, distributed over time and space, a 'distributed person'. Anything that comes from a person, including visual appearance and things he or she produced, is detachable from that person, and can be physically touched, as well as seen. In effect, they are objects, *exuviae* (Gell 1998), which are detachable and also exchangeable, and can link social beings in the same way that Mauss's *hau* or Munn's *kula* valuables transform value from one person to the next. With respect to Mexican cuisine, this means that special occasion dishes are significant, but only in relation to how they compare with other dishes in the cuisine, and with the social relationships of the cooks and eaters.

### Agency and intention

Taking the above into consideration, cooking is an activity performed for the sake of social interaction, and the technical mastery required to cook is also socially learnt and socially salient. Women who are wives and mothers cook for their husbands and children, and the other (usually unmarried) members of the household. They also cook particular things during fiestas for *compadres* and their extended families. In other words, women cook with particular eaters in mind. Although the way that they prepare some dishes may be nuanced by their own taste and pleasure, they still are cooking with the intention of feeding (or offering food to) someone else (a recipient). What they prepare is dependent upon their relationship with the eaters. Hence, they use their culinary agency according to the network of intentionalities in which they are entangled as social beings.

Gell's conception of intentionality is based on defining the nature of causation. '[I]ntentions cause events to happen in the vicinity of agents' (1998: 101). Rather than



searching for a chemical or physical explication of why something caused another thing to occur, 'the explanation of any given event (especially if socially salient) is that it is caused intentionally' (ibid.). So this is why food has flavour, i.e., why flavour is a social (and also cultural) aspect of food. It is not because of inherent biochemical properties in the foodstuffs themselves, rather it is in the *deliberately induced reaction* of foodstuffs when cooked or combined in a particular way. Food served to be eaten has flavour because a cook *intends* to bring out or produce these flavours in the meals that she prepares for other people with whom she has specific social relations.

The idea of a cook/artist's intentions can be better understood when applied to feast food, in the example of the Days of the Dead. Food set out in the family altar, the *ofrenda*, is offered to the dead relatives of the family. *Mole* with chicken is always present, as well as yellow fruits, *tamales*, sweets and some favourite foods of the dead. The dead are believed to eat the essence of the food when they come, and afterwards, when the living eat the food that had been set out, it no longer has any flavour. Although not everyone says that they believe it, it is conceived to occur in this way, and this is how it has been reported to me by people in Milpa Alta, as well as in Lok's study of practices concerning death (1991). In this case, although the food may have been prepared with the same culinary principles as always, it loses its flavour because of the presence of the dead who come to eat its essence. The explanation for this is no more mystical than the relationship between the cook (culinary agent) and the expected recipient of the food, the dead. Although other living people, related to the cook, eventually eat the food, the food was cooked with the intention of feeding the dead relatives, and not to feed the living. Therefore the flavour was cooked in for the dead to take away, and the relationship of gift exchange within this network of intentionalities is completed when the food is eaten by the living the next day and they can verify that the food has lost its flavour.

Regarding feast food in general, food for a public fiesta follows a limited menu and is an object of exchange that mediates between two actors, in their respective levels of social organisation. In chapter six, I described the systems of reciprocity which run Milpaltense society, *compadrazgo* and the *mayordomía*. Fiesta food is salient in these two spheres, ritualized and given to others who are in a relationship of reciprocal

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<sup>7</sup> 'to write about art...is...to write about either religion, or the substitute for religion which those who

exchange with the hosts, as a material demonstration of respect. This happens at the family level amongst *compadres*, and also at *barrio* level, amongst *mayordomías* who act in representation of their patron saints. Stanley Brandes analyzed the fiesta cycle in Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán (neighbouring the State of Mexico), and he argued that:

It is impossible to calculate whether fiesta exchange is itself modeled on daily exchange or the reverse. What they have in common is a recognition that reciprocal favors are critical to survival, and that in the long or short term these favors should somehow be balanced. These messages, whether in the public fiesta domain or the private daily domain, strengthen one another. They pervade all of social life and, through frequent repetition, persuade villagers to live according to prevailing contractual norms. (1988: 87)

I would argue that the fiesta exchange is indeed modeled on daily exchange (cf. Hugh-Jones 1979). Basic exchange in social interaction occurs in hospitality, specifically food hospitality. As I have described in chapter eight, daily food hospitality is as rule-bound as ritualized fiesta hospitality. The food offered is prepared at both levels with similar technical mastery and culinary agency, although the agency is directed at different specified recipients. Since *mole* is prepared at home, and this is the ideal dish to give to *compadres* and fiesta guests, the pattern and rationality of giving with unspecified expected reciprocity is the same at both levels. In *compadrazgo*, reciprocity is monetary or moral and it sustains a special social relation (*en confianza*); in the cargo system, reciprocity is socially extended to the local community and the communities of *mayordomías* who regularly bring *salvas* and keep the traditions (and social interaction) alive. Hence, fiesta exchange is daily exchange writ large.

What the systems of *compadrazgo* and the *mayordomía* highlight in Milpaltense society is that competitive relationships and social differentiation exist. The *barbacoieros* of San Mateo enjoy a social position and value related to their economic capital in comparison to the other *barrios* or towns of Milpa Alta. To some extent the taste judgements or values placed on certain flavours within the cuisine (or certain dishes) are determined by the social values of the dominant actors (Bourdieu 1984). Likewise, the affluence, literacy, social stratification and prevalence of domestic helpers position Milpa Alta society among the kind of group that Goody demonstrates that has the conditions for the emergence of a differentiated cuisine (1982). Yet at the same

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have abandoned the outward forms of received religions content themselves with' (Gell 1998: 97).

time, I also have tried to explain how the emergence of an elaborate cuisine may not only be the result of hierarchical relationships in society, as such.<sup>8</sup>

I have tried to approach food by focusing on the cuisine itself as a whole, as well as on cooking as a practical activity from which social value and meanings can be understood. Thinking of cooking as artistic has allowed me to re-interpret the way that people think about flavour, especially since it is often difficult for a person to articulate why he or she prefers a particular dish over another. When people in Milpa Alta talk of '*el mole de fiesta*', the *mole* of the feast, or '*el lujo de barbacoa*', the luxury of *barbacoa*, the dish that they speak of becomes a nexus of interacting social relations within the cuisine, as well as among the human social actors who perform value transactions via food hospitality. A particular recipe is placed in a hierarchical relation to the indexes of other dishes in the corpus of its cuisine (cf. Gell 1998, Goody 1982). The dish can be judged as delicious or flavourful because it is accepted with gastronomic awe from the perspective of the eater, who can imagine the complexity of the production of the dish from his or her informed culinary knowledge. This effect is encapsulated in Gell's notion of the 'technology of enchantment'(1996). Finally, the hosts' decision to serve these dishes to others in formal hospitality bestows value on their guests, while at the same time allows the hosts to mobilize the value of the dish (or vice versa), because of the social prestige connected with the preparation of the dish (Bourdieu 1984, Munn 1986).

As an example, then, *mole*, in fact, becomes representative of the whole distributed object of Mexican cuisine. It is the whole cuisine, produced through daily cooking, that mediates the domestic realm with the public sphere. It is the relational node of a culinary matrix of interrelating social spheres, where the power and value of women (or cooks) are transformed into ongoing social relations. In the wider social context, family honour can only be distributed and properly enacted with fiesta commensality, serving *mole*, or its substitutes, which all effectively represent the whole cuisine. This means that social interaction is effective when food is offered, cooked with culinary artistry (or technical mastery), in the spirit of the gift. *Mole* represents *salsa*, which represents flavour, which represents women, who are ultimately governed by an honour code of

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware that the development of cuisine cannot be fully explained by focusing solely on recipes. Meal structure is another area which requires analysis and incorporation. In this dissertation, however, I

giving and respect to their children and husbands. In effect, women are representing the family, although men may be the public or official representatives. Therefore social interaction circulates around women and women's culinary labours, via women's culinary agency. In this way, the fulfillment of gastronomical ideals or desires is central to social life in Milpa Alta.

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have focused on recipes as indexes of the cuisine (culinary art world). See Sutton (forthcoming) for a sensitive and thorough treatment of the structure of meals.

## **Glossary**

**agua de sabor, agua fresca** water flavoured with fruit  
**aguamiel** sap of the maguey plant, literally, 'honey water'  
**ahijado** godchild  
**alberjón** dried yellow peas  
**almuerzo** late breakfast, usually eaten between 9 and 11 a.m.  
**amancebados** living together in free union, without marriage  
**antojitos** snacks, street food, literally 'little cravings'  
**armada** nopales that have not grown straight  
**arroz rojo** red rice, also called *arroz a la mexicana*; long-grain rice is soaked, drained, fried until golden, then liquefied tomatoes, onions and garlic are added, to make it red, and often peas, carrots and maize kernels are boiled in with the rice  
**atole** hot maize gruel, often drunk as an accompaniment to *tamales*, or on its own in the mornings or evenings  
**atole champurrado** *atole* sweetened and flavoured with chocolate and cinnamon  
**barbacoa** pit-roast meat  
**barbacoiero** person who prepares barbacoa for a living  
**barrio** village district  
**borrego** yearling lamb, usually one or two years old  
**café de olla** typical Mexican way to prepare coffee boiled with abundant water, cinnamon and *piloncillo* or brown sugar  
**calostro** colostrum  
**cantina** local place for drinking, like a pub  
**capeado** coated in light egg batter and fried, used mainly for stuffed chiles; the eggs are separated, the whites are whipped until stiff, and the yolks are incorporated, like in making a soufflé; stuffed chiles are coated in flour before the eggs, then fried  
**carnitas** pork cooked in its own fat, served during fiestas or for *taco placero*  
**cazuela** earthenware cooking pot  
**cebollas desflemadas** onions marinated in lime juice and salt until limp, sometimes with fresh green chile or red or yellow chile manzano, also called *cebollas curadas*  
**cecina** air-dried spiced beef  
**cerita** candle, especially for funerals, white  
**chalupitas** street snack made of corn *masa* shaped into little boats  
**chicharrón** light, crisp, deep-fried pork rind (or crackling)  
**chilaquiles** typical food for the *almuerzo*; stale *tortillas* are fried until crisp, coated in a thin *salsa*, and served with sliced onion, crumbled white cheese and thick cream  
**chinampa** land extensions built by the Aztecs on lakes by covering giant reed mats with mud and planting them as *milpas*; the mats were secured to the bottom of the lake by the roots of the plants which had a constant supply of water from the lake  
**chinaquear** to eat in the market or on the streets, instead of at home  
**chinel** costume and dance for carnival  
**chiquihuite** basket for holding tortillas, to keep them warm  
**chitero** pork butcher  
**chongos zamoranos** typical sweet made of milk solids  
**ciguamoncli** man who lives in his wife's house, henpecked husband  
**cocol** sweet bun, eye-shaped  
**colonia** city district  
**comadre** co-mother, godmother of one's child  
**comal** round griddle, made of metal or clay  
**comida** lunch, largest and main meal of the day, usually served between two and five in the afternoon

**compadrazgo** system of co-parenthood (god-parenthood)

**compadre** co-father, godfather of one's child

**confianza** trust, security

**crema espesa, crema de rancho** literally, 'thick cream' or 'ranch cream', it is crème fraîche, *slightly* acid, and the most commonly used cream in Mexico; it is *not*, as often believed, sour cream

**criollo** born and raised in Mexico

**despanzar** disembowelment

**enchiladas** corn *tortillas* passed through hot oil and warm *salsa* or *mole*, then folded over a filling such as shredded chicken or crumbled white cheese and chopped onions; each person is served two to four *enchiladas*, garnished with cheese, onions, and sometimes *crema espesa*

**epazote** (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*) a herb widely used in Mexican cooking, especially in the central states

**flautas** long rolled fried *tacos*, usually filled with shredded *barbacoa* or shredded chicken, served with shredded lettuce, cream, grated cheese and green *salsa*

**frijol, pl. frijoles** bean(s)

**gorditas** many different street snacks have this name, which is essentially a fat filled *tortilla* (*gordita* literally means 'fat') or *masa* moulded around a filling like *chicharrón prensado* (concentrated bits of pork and rind left behind when making lard) and baked on a *comal*, served with onions, chopped coriander and *salsa*

**gorditas pellizcadas** fat *tortillas* that have been pinched to hold toppings, also called *sopes*

**guacamole** sauce made of avocados, usually with onion, tomato and green chile

**guajolote** turkey, word derived from Náhuatl

**güey** insult for a man, indicating that his wife is unfaithful

**hijo de puta** 'son of a whore', insult for men

**hojaldra** soft, round eggy roll

**horno** oven, also pit-oven or earth oven

**huevera** unlain eggs (of chicken)

**huitlacoche** black corn fungus

**itacate** food wrapped for carrying, either for picnic or fiesta food given to *compadres* and special friends to take home after a fiesta

**jícama** (*Pachyrhizus erosus*) a refreshing, juicy, crisp tuber, indigenous to Mexico and Central America, always eaten raw, often with lime juice and red chile powder; can be substituted with Jerusalem artichokes

**licuado** any fruit, like bananas, papaya, pineapple or guava, blended with milk and sugar or fruit juice, sometimes also with nuts

**longaniza** a type of sausage

**madrina** godmother

**maguey** century plant, agave

**mañanitas** birthday song

**mandilón** man 'tied to the apron strings', henpecked husband

**mariachi** musical group of guitarists, trumpeters and *ranchero* singers, who wear the flashy cowboy (*charro*) costumes with wide-brimmed hats

**masa** *nixtamal* dough for making *tortillas*, *tamales*, and snacks

**matanza** slaughter

**mayordomía** cargo system to care for the church and town or barrio fiesta

**menudencias** offal, innards

**mestizaje** miscegenation, hybridization, mixture

**mestizo** (person) of mixed blood, i.e., part Spanish, part Indian (native/indigenous)  
**metate** three-legged basalt grinding stone  
**mezcal** licour distilled from maguey sap  
**milanesa** breaded and fried thinly-sliced meat, usually beef, but sometimes chicken  
**milpa** traditional maize plantation, intercropped with beans, chiles, tomatoes, squash  
**mixiote** skin of the maguey *penca*, used to wrap meat rubbed in *adobo* paste, to make the dish of the same name  
**molcajete** basalt mortar  
**mole** complex sauce made by grinding together many ingredients, including dried chiles, spices, nuts, herbs, fruits, seeds, starches; this is quintessential feast food, but there are also simpler *moles* for daily meals  
**molino** mill  
**muchacha** girl, often referred to one hired as domestic help  
**Náhuatl** the language of the Aztecs, descendants of the Aztecs (also called *mexicas*)  
**nixtamal** maize boiled with lime (CaOH)  
**nopal** (*Opuntia sp.*) prickly pear cactus  
**nopalera** nopal farm  
**nopales compuestos** boiled nopales prepared with onions, tomatoes, lime juice and coriander  
**novenario** funeral prayers that last nine nights  
**olla** gourd-shaped pot, made of clay, used for boiling beans or coffee, or for steaming *tamales*  
**padrinos** godparents  
**pancita** stew made of beef or mutton tripe, flavoured with chile guajillo  
**panza** stomach, of animals; also stuffed stomach, like haggis  
**pápaloquelite** (*Porophyllum ruderale (Jacq.) Cass. Ssp. Macrocephalum*) a wild herb of the central region with a distinctive flavour, eaten raw  
**pascle** beef pancreas, boiled with onion, tomato, chile and coriander leaves, then sliced and fried  
**pedimento** one of the four fiestas when a man asks permission to marry a woman  
**penca** fleshy, pointy leaves of the maguey  
**pendejo/a** stupid  
**perol** large metal bin, used for steaming *barbacoa*  
**pescado a la vizcaína** Biscay-style salt cod or other salted dried fish  
**piloncillo** crude sugar, sold in cones  
**promesa** see *salva*  
**pueblo** village  
**pulque** fermented *aguamiel*  
**puta** whore  
**quesadilla** fried snack made of corn *masa*, with varied fillings  
**quinceaños** girl's fifteenth birthday party or debut  
**quinceañera** fifteen-year-old girl birthday celebrant  
**rajas** strips of chiles  
**rastro** official slaughter house  
**recalentado** leftovers  
**redaño** caul  
**revoltijo** *mole* made with *romeritos*  
**romeritos** (*Quenopodiáceas Suaeda torreyana Wats.*) a wild green vegetable that looks like the herb rosemary; it is usually boiled and stirred into *mole*, although it is sometimes cooked into a green sauce, as well



**salpicón** boiled shredded beef, with onion, tomato, chile, vinegar, oregano  
**salsa** sauce, based on chiles, usually containing tomatoes  
**salsa borracha** drunken *salsa*, usually made with chile pasilla and *pulque*  
**saludada** one of the four fiestas when the bride is welcomed into the groom's house, held on the day following the wedding  
**salva** oath or offering of flowers and music brought by *mayordomías* to other town or barrio fiestas  
**sazón** flavour, special touch  
**señorita** unmarried young woman  
**sopa aguada** brothy soup, served as a first course  
**sopa seca** 'dry' soup of pasta or rice, served after the *sopa aguada*  
**sope** see *gorditas pellizcadas*  
**suciedad** dirt  
**taco** tortilla folded or rolled around any filling  
**tacos dorados** fried rolled tacos, usually of chicken or *barbacoa (flautas)*, served with thick cream, crumbled white cheese, shredded lettuce and green *salsa*  
**tamal, tamales** steamed stuffed maize cake, wrapped in cornhusks or banana leaves  
**tamalate** white *tamales* made with lard but without filling  
**tamalera** container for steaming *tamales*  
**tamales verdes** *tamales* made with a green sauce, usually made with pork  
**tejolote** basalt pestle  
**telera** crusty white bun with two ridges on top, often used for making *tortas*  
**temascal** a traditional stone sauna shaped like an igloo or Mexican bread oven  
**tequila** distilled maguey sap, a form of mezcal  
**tianguis** roving market  
**tocinería** pork butchery  
**tomates verdes** green husk tomatoes  
**tortas** large sandwich made with *teleras* or *bolillos*, filled with refried beans, sliced onions, tomatoes, avocados, pickled chile (or *salsa*) and a combination of cheeses and cured or cooked meats  
**tortilla** flat, round maize 'bread', staple of Mexican meal  
**tortillería** tortilla factory  
**tortitas** fritters  
**totopos** fried triangles of *tortillas*, *tortilla* chips  
**vigilia** times of meat abstinence

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