

Review of:

## **Truly Texas Mexican: A Native Culinary Heritage in Recipes**

By Adán Medrano

Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2014, Pp. 186, bibliography, index.

Review By: MM Pack

Austin, TX

---

The region of North America now known as Texas has always been a crossroads of food cultures. The earliest inhabitants were primarily nomadic groups with trading connections ranging from Arizona to Georgia, into Central Mexico and up the Mississippi River Valley. In the 16th-century, Spaniards and mestizos migrated into this northernmost province of colonial Mexican territory; they were joined in the 19th century by Northern Europeans and Africans arriving via the American South, Anglo settlers from the Midwest and Upper South, German and Czech farmers brought by enterprising impresarios. All these cultures, seeking land and opportunity, contributed to the state's culinary traditions and the foods that Texans eat today.

Adán Medrano's *Truly Texas Mexican* is a book of history, context, and recipes that focuses on the segment of Texas food traditions rooted in the cuisines of original Native American inhabitants—both north and south of the Rio Grande—who intermingled with and were ultimately absorbed by early immigrants from colonial Mexico. His thesis is that the foods of pre-Hispanic peoples coupled with ingredients, influences, and flavors introduced early from points south constitute a regional Mexican cuisine equivalent to other regional Mexican cuisines like those of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Michoacán.

Medrano names this cuisine Texas Mexican and stands firm that it is not the same as Tex-Mex, the popular and widespread concept of Mexican-influenced Texas food. He contends that Tex-Mex represents only a limited and anglicized facet of the larger, far older regional cuisine. He posits that Texas Mexican is the home cooking for descendants of early Native American/Hispanic residents (also known as Tejanos, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos), while Tex-Mex refers specifically to the dishes developed in early 20th-century Texas restaurants that catered primarily to Anglos and steadily became popular in other parts of the US. (In the 1980s, Diana Kennedy described such as “an overly large platter of mixed messes” (1989:xiii) and was appalled by the liberal applications of molten processed cheese.)

Medrano's terminology differentiation is useful and should probably be more widely adopted. The term Tex-Mex wasn't even applied to things culinary until the 1970s; before that, it was all simply called “Mexican food.” Today, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines Tex-Mex as “a Texan style of cooking using Mexican ingredients.” Joe S. Graham, in the Texas History Association's *Handbook of Texas*, characterizes Tex-Mex foods as “a combination of Indian and Spanish cuisines, which came together to

make a distinct new cuisine.” Both definitions use Tex-Mex to describe what Medrano says ought to be called Texas Mexican.

So what, exactly, constitutes Texas Mexican cuisine? In the varied terrains and climates of Texas and Northern Mexico, Native Americans ate fresh- and saltwater fishes and shellfish, hunted deer, bison, turkey, quail, and rabbit, and foraged for native pecans, sweet mesquite beans, prickly pear cactus fruits and paddles, wild berries and plums, and *quelites* (wild greens such as purslane and lambs’ quarters).

Ingredients that arrived from far-flung trading connections and then along with early Mexican settlers were beans, corn, chiles, squashes, potatoes, avocados, and tomatoes. From the Old World via Mexico, Spaniards brought beef, pigs, goats, and sheep; they introduced wheat, sugar, rice, onions, and garlic, as well as citrus, melons, and many other fruits and vegetables. Cooking styles included roasting and baking in earth ovens, grilling, steaming, stewing and boiling over open fires, grinding, fermenting, drying, salting, and smoking.

These elements all contribute to the blended cuisine that Medrano, a San Antonio native with family connections in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila, grew up eating at home, along with his neighbors and most of the Tejano population. Many of the book’s recipes include extensive headnotes, almost mini-essays that are short histories of specific ingredients and cooking processes; two good examples are avocados and the preparation of corn. In addition to two introductory chapters that cover big-picture context and history, Chapter 3 is a short list of kitchen tools and ingredients; newcomers to this cooking might have benefitted from some more of this. *Piloncillo* is included but *canela* is not; dried chiles are described but fresh ones aren’t. And, perplexingly, the nixtamalized corn *masa* in the index and history chapters is listed as “corn flour” (term not in the index) within recipes.

The book’s 100 recipes are grounded in traditional ingredients and preparations, which the author characterizes as lighter, subtler, more healthful, and far more varied than their sometimes similarly named Tex-Mex counterparts. The recipes also reflect CIA-trained chef Medrano’s own tastes, preferences, and family traditions. Not all the ingredients used in the cuisine are included in recipes—no mesquite beans, prickly pear fruits, or *quelites*, for example. He excludes game and offal dishes as well as open-fire cooking, because “the subjects merit books unto themselves.” He does, however, pull in a few recipes from other regions of Mexico and include some newly developed dishes (like Grilled Clams in Tequila Broth) that are “created in the spirit of the Texas Mexican flavor profile to indicate how our cuisine is evolving and creating new combinations of European and Meso-American New World ingredients” (Medrano, 2014:4).

*Truly Texas Mexican* aims to define and shine a light on a largely ignored cuisine, reclaim culinary territory for its practitioners and their ancestors, and interpret that cuisine within the multi-cultural context that is modern Texas. Both Texans and curious cooks from elsewhere can enjoy these recipes while appreciating how indigenous ingredients and migration patterns contribute to the region’s foodways.

## References Cited

Graham, Joe S. Tex-Mex Foods. *Handbook of Texas Online*. Texas State Historical Association. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/lgtlt> (accessed February 10, 2015).

Kennedy, Diana. 1989. *The Art of Mexican Cooking*. New York: Bantam.

Oxford English Dictionary <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/200001> (accessed February 14, 2015).