



Oaxaca Times®

The inner life of Oaxaca

Issue 29/32

November - December 2009 / January 2010

www.oaxacatimes.com

Christmas in Oaxaca

From the Breaking of the Plates, to the Feast of the Radishes, Christmas time in Oaxaca is a vivid celebration that combine Christian religious traditions with the deeply-rooted sense of community that bind together the pueblos and colonias. You won't find last-minute shopping specials, or Salvation Army Santas on the street corners, what you will enjoy is a generosity of spirit that blossoms throughout the month of December culminating at Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

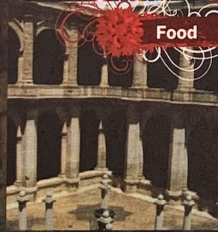
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Three Kings

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Food

What to do and where to go

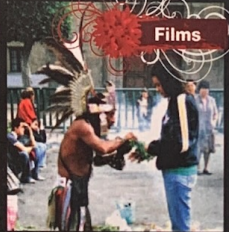
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Mind your manners

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Learn Spanish at the ICC

three

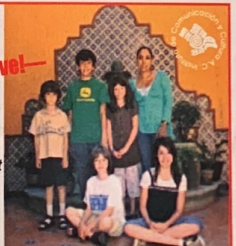
REASONS TO CHOOSE THE ICC:

1. THE INSTRUCTORS have advanced academic credentials to teach Spanish as a second language and are carefully selected and supervised. Other schools train individuals from the community, regardless of education.

2. THE TEACHING APPROACH uses advanced techniques to go beyond the grammar and structure of Spanish and includes a more functional and communicative approach to learning. The focus is on "speaking" Spanish.

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3. THE CULTURAL INTEGRATION COMPONENT of the program helps you meet and mix with Mexicans while you get involved with Mexican culture, thus reinforcing your use of Spanish at the same time.



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Festivities begin with a series of calendas, or parades, featuring processions of huge dancing puppets, decorated autos, carriages, and bicycles, and a strolling brass band. The first calenda begins on December 6, followed by one on the 10th celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe. On the 12th everyone ventures to the Guadalupe church for a festive breakfast served in front of the church.

The richest calenda takes place on December 16th and is dedicated to La Virgen de Soledad. This calenda is the most important in the entire state of Oaxaca and indigenous groups from all over descend upon the city to parade through the Zocalo to the Basílica of Soledad. There on the steps of the church dancers perform the spectacular Danza de la Pluma. December 16 also marks the start of the nine days of posadas that take place throughout the city in the days leading up to Christmas.

The posada is traditionally a neighborhood celebration, in which children selected to portray Mary and Joseph, along with shepherds, and attending families, stop at various homes in their neighborhood looking for shelter. It is a musical event, with both visitors, and recipients singing out the call and response. Ritually turned down at many homes, the children finally reach the home of the padrinos (or godparents) for the event where they will be received with song and prayer.

Following the prayers a feast of tamales and coffee is served and a piñata, filled with fruits and nuts, is attacked and broken by the children.

Not all the breaking around Christmas gets done by children. From the 16th through the 31st of December everyone participates in the "breaking of the plates." If you've ever longed to throw a wineglass into a fireplace this festivity is for you. Outside of the Cathedral Restaurant stands are set up serving hot chocolate, better than grandma ever made, and plates filled with "Bunuelos," the traditional Christmas time pastry. Drink your chocolate, eat your dessert, then smash your plate afterwards. And you don't have to clean up. The tradition is said to have its roots in pre-Colombian tradition which warranted that all of one's personal belongings should be destroyed every 52 years.

The entire city is one big festival during Christmas, with an open air market in the already bustling zocalo, with food



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The Drink of the Gods

In markets and ferias, phalanxes of women stand at attention behind the green glazed tubs of tejate like a broad-bosomed kettle drum section in checkered aprons. Tejate is a drink championed as refreshing, invigorating, aphrodisiacal, and medicinal, once drunk by Zapotec kings; today, campesinos gird themselves for the weary day ahead with this cool and chocolatey concoction. But, to the unschooled eye, oblivious to the tastes of Zapotec royalty, tejate may look like either sink water after a man shaves, or what one might imagine when thinking of the word *âcurdã*. Working from the philosophy that, if people eat it, it must be good (a philosophy of goofy optimism which did not pan out in several cases, for example, that of *âstinky tofuã* in China), I investigated the history and merits of this popular Oaxacan beverage.

Tejate is made of precisely toasted corn, cacao, cinnamon, and the seeds and flowers of a fruit called mamey which has skin like a kiwi and the grainy orange flesh of a yam, but more chalky, and with a central seed the size of a large almond. The tejatera, the woman who makes tejate, several of whom told me all these things,

toasts these ingredients perfectly each night before she uses them. Knowing how to do this is a skill passed from mother to daughter tejateras. The cleanliness of the seeds and bowls is vital. Grease or fruit stuck on the mamey seeds will render the whole stew the wrong color and all the other tejateras will scowl.

In the morning, having guarded cleanliness and toasted all to a turn with Zen-like attention, she grinds everything up on her metate with which every woman comes equipped as a wife, dollops what must be a greyish gravy all into a pot, sloshes in cold water and ice, mixes it until what I would describe as a bubbly spume is developed like foam on a stormy beach, scum to be discarded from boiling chicken, or unhealthy beer. But, two million Oaxacanãs (and this is a Oaxaqueno libation, several Mexicans with whom I spoke had never tried tejate, and thought it looked suspiciously rustic) can't be wrong.

Tejate is a staple at ferias and mercados capturing the romanticism and purity of an agricultural past, thatched roofs, hay in the sun, fields under a harvest moon. Traditionally, it is scooped up and proffered in hollowed, finely painted, gourd bowls, once painted only by the townfolk of the Guerrero hills, now it is swirled into opaque plastic Solo cups. Further, the drink itself has not always been the curdy refreshment we know today. Once more like atole and made with chile de arbol, men could carry chunks of it in their breakfast sacks to the field. Now its wetter, and sweet rather than spicy.

Keeping in mind the sophisticated pallets of Zapotec kings and promises of aphrodisiacal effects, I stepped up to the tejate pot at Oaxaca's hip Conzatti market to ask for one *para levar*. Everybody was gobbling this stuff. I took my place in a substantial line behind a boy of about 12 in a tidy button-down, clearly an afficio-

nado, who took his tejate neat from the flamboyantly enamelled gourd and stood with his mother lapping the creamy froth from the bowl. A tall sleek girl with golden sunglasses on her head and eyes like a deer took hers to go, biting at the foam, and two guffawing school girls with braces on their teeth walloping each other, sloshed their plastic cups and, shrieking, licked the chunks from their wrists.

My turn. From a little galvanized bucket, the tejatera scooped in an inch of sugar water of which you can have more or less, the sweetness must be necessary since unamended cacao is cruelly bitter. Then, swirling expertly for the proper liquid to foam ratio, my tejatera scraped the side of the tub, dolloped it all into my cup and plopped in a chunk of ice. As it turned out, it was delightful, or, at least, cool and chocolatey. A pre-Hispanic Yoo Hoo. Rather than a grainy spume, the froth was melting and creamy, the sweetness invigorating not cloying.

There is in Spanish a specific word, *madrugada*, for the crack of dawn between 3 and 4 in the morning when women get up to start the fire, pat the tortillas, and get the men ready for their long days. One can imagine a cool gourdful of tejate in the early hours to gird you for the long day.

