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The Amazing Tehuantepec

MEXICO HAS ALWAYS BEEN QUITE CONSERVATIVE IN SOCIAL MORES AND CUSTOMS; AND THE PEOPLE OF TEHUANTEPEC ARE NOT MUCH DIFFERENT IN THAT RESPECT. BUT WITHIN THAT CONTEXT, TEHUANTEPECANS ARE MEXICO'S "LIBERATED WOMEN"

A visitor to Oaxaca is often amazed at the variety of ethnic populations coexisting in a relatively small region and impressed by the tenacity with which they've kept their traditions and languages alive.

One of the most remarkable of Oaxaca's 16 ethnic populations stands out because it is run by women -directly against the grain of Mexican machismo. These people occupy the south coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico's narrow waist between the Pacific and the Gulf, and are called Tehuantepecans.

Visitors lucky enough to be in Oaxaca in

April and May have a chance to see manifestations of this unique culture, especially in the velas, or festivals, for which they are justly famous.

Mexico has always been quite conservative in social mores and customs; and the people of Tehuantepec are not much different in that respect. But within that context, Tehuantepecans are Mexico's "liberated women".

While the men stay close to home and tend to many domestic-chores, the women of Tehuantepec are out taking care of business, running the affairs of the town, and trading in distant markets. In other Oaxa-

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can communities, the young men are mobile, often leaving to seek work elsewhere. The young women are encouraged to stay home. In Tehuantepec, it's just the opposite.

Another unique feature of Tehuantepecan culture is an open acceptance of homosexuality.

One of the meanings of Mexican machismo is that in this country there is no gay rights movement, no gay pride, and no tolerance for gay lifestyles. But in Tehuantepec gay men are not only tolerated, but perhaps even celebrated.

A mother may 'show off' her gay son to others, and gay men in female clothing are not an unusual sight on the streets.

The women of Tehuantepec are assertive, take charge types, used to getting what they want. If a girl of courtable age has her eye on a man, the common belief is that he doesn't have a chance against her wiles, her charms, or even her magic potions. For that reason, many women of Oaxaca are loathe to see their husbands visit the region on business.

Many Tehuantepecan women are accomplished entrepreneurs. In April and May, mangos hit the markets of Oaxaca, brought from Tehuantepec and sold in abundance. If you see an ethnic woman in the marketplace who seems to be more self assured, who sits or: occasion "like a man," one leg up on the other, and if she pleasantly cajoles you into buying something, chances are she's from Tehuantepec.

The openness and warmth of Tehuantepecans affects life in many ways. For example, in the Mexican countryside, if a boy seduces a girl and the drops her, it's a serious matter, and he had better watch his back. In Tehuantepec, he can get off with a modest fine negotiated between the two sets of parents.

The most impressive spectacle of Tehuantepecan life that an outsider can witness is the vela, a festival held to honor a saint, a hero, or a harvest. No one plans a vela more seriously than Tehuantepecans, and no one has more fun once its under way. Velas are so called after the candles lit in the church in a ceremony which initiates the festivities. After the ceremony comes the procession, and then an all-night party of eating, drinking, dancing, and celebra-



ting, in which the whole town participates. The procession is a wonder to behold. Ox drawn wagons are beautifully arranged with trees and flowers, and look like rolling gardens. From them young women throw treats to the crowd.

The procession, and indeed every detail of the entire vela, is directed by the gushána, a sort of religious sorority invested with the responsibility of carrying on the traditions of the vela and doing it right.

These women, pillars of the community, are prominently featured in the procession.

They wear long, full dresses of dark velvet meticulously embroidered with bold floral designs making one can take years.

They carry baskets of fruits and sweets on their heads symbols of the bounty their way of life and their hard work provide. And around their necks are layers of gold jewelry, symbols of wealth that escape the bank vault only on these rare occasions.

The vela is carefully planned by the gushána starting a year ahead of time.

One member is chosen to be the mayordomo, or director, for that year. Being mayordomo is a coveted privilege and an awesome responsibility.

She is expected to pay many expenses out of pocket, and it's not unusual for her to spend the equivalent of 15 000 US dollars.

The vela culminates in an all-night pot

luck fiesta. To gather the crowd, a band strikes up at the house of the mayordomo, and then proceeds to the houses of each of the other members of the gushána, where friends and relatives have gathered to await their turn. Everyone contributes something special -shrimp tamales, say- and a few cases of beer.

After a night of dancing and merrymaking, the band strikes up again for the last time, and escorts everyone back to the home where they began.

The origins of the unique traditions of Tehuantepec are lost in the past. Like the rest of Mexico, they're a mix of conquest and indigenous cultures. But it's evident that the matriarchal aspects of Tehuantepec tradition may be closely tied to an ethnic group called the Huaves, concentrated in several small towns in the area, unrelated ethnically to the Zapotecs, having arrived, some think, from either Peru or Nicaragua shortly before the conquest.

To witness the velas of Tehuantepec one must go off the beaten tourist path a bit. But in turn, it's not that far to the Isthmus, and well worth the adventure.

If you care for to experience an incredible time in one Vela you have to visit Juchitan from the 18 to 25 of May. The people are very helpful, you just have to ask at your hotel desk or in the offices of the Major of the city of Juchitan they will tell you about the events.



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For bread Lovers

In my own opinion, I would say that one of the biggest issues that Mexico is facing besides its politics; it's the malnutrition in all social class levels. Mexico it's currently the number one country with obesity problems. This is why a group of friends and I decided to embrace this social cause by opening an artisan bakery which the basic goals are both nourishing knowledge in bread culture and health.

This past two years of working with water, flour, salt and yeasts I've been slowly learning how every living thing has its own timeline so we decided to focus and analyze how living microorganisms that are taken into a process react on ourselves specially with natural leavened bread. In this auto research on the body system I aim to find the best way to keep a good health without quitting bread.

I'm not a nutritionist or an expert baker but I will resume all details based on my own experience.

Since the bakeries in Mexico and perhaps around the world found out the fast reaction capacity of instant yeasts they saw a huge opportunity, increasing productions and reducing working hours, obviously producing much more than one can imagine, we call it "fast bread" you can maybe knead fifty kilos of flour with two big packages of instant yeast and form five hundred "bolillos", proof them for one hour, and bake them in forty minutes, seems like a perfect production line for an industry but the crucial moment comes when trying the baked goods, instant yeasts makes fast bread but also flavorless and with a short shelf life, letting you with an airy light piece of dry flour the very next day you bought it. And not even considering all the bread improves they usually add to the bread.

When I learned to make bread the way I do my whole perception about having a great childhood with bolillos, conchas and doughnuts changed, made me realize that I ate huge amounts of refined sugars, bleached flours, margarines, improvers, fried goods and some colorants, why would bread need colorant?

Changing the style of bread in Oaxaca represented a tough goal, but we never doubted in the quality of the products we use and in the unique sensation of biting a great handmade croissant, for us making bread means much more than just baking and selling, it means the search of good healthy ingredients to mix and finally bake tasteful and nutritious goods.

We bake breads naturally leavened with an old method often called "LEVAIN" or "SOURDOUGH STARTER", this means leavening with natural



fermented yeasts.

In here natural microorganisms or bacteria present in the starter eat all the starch and the sugars that the grain has, making bread really low in carbohydrates and increasing the mineral and vitamin content in the grain, which will help us keeping blood sugars regulated.

There's also the phytic acid, which lots of people suffer from, it's an anti-nutrient present in all beans, seeds and grains responsible from stripping away vitamins and minerals from your body making your digestion much more hard.

This is solved by using "sourdough starter", because this promote the activation of an excellent enzyme called phytase responsible for braking down the phytic acid

and along with it another incredible thing is that the lactic acid predigests the grain for us and the long fermentation process we use help our breads to break down the gluten protein in to amino acids making the bread easier to digest, and even really tolerable for people with gluten sensitivity.

Another thing is that the acetic acid helps our loaf to stay without mold guaranteed with a 4-5 days shelf life so you can store it for a good time, if it lasts before you eat it!!

So all this chemical and physic process makes bread with a much more complex structure and flavor maybe we can not bake five hundred bolillos in two hours but we try to make a few excellent loaves in an eighteen hour process.

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