



Oaxaca Times[®]

Volume XV No 219

THE INNER LIFE OF OAXACA • NOVEMBER & DECEMBER 2007

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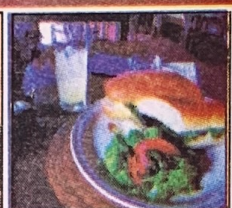
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Christmas in Oaxaca

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.

Festivites 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 cal-

enda 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 de 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

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Learn Spanish at the ICC: Oaxaca's Best Language School

Three kings

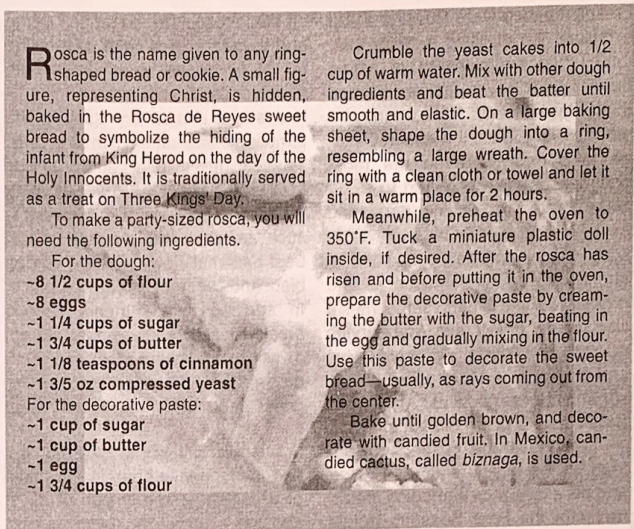
By GAYLE HANSON

IF YOU arrive in Oaxaca too late for the Night of the Radishes and Buena Noche, the good news is that the Christmas holiday lasts until February. And for many *Oaxaqueños*, the real gift giving isn't done until January.

Following Noche Buena and the Mass of the Roosters, Christmas Day itself can be a bit of a letdown for visitors. In terms of color, parades and noise, there's just not that much going on. Not so, however, on January 6, when the *Día de los Reyes Magos* (Three Kings' Day) is celebrated. This is the time for feasting and celebrating and is traditionally the day on which Mexican children receive gifts.

The day commemorates the arrival of the three kings—Melchor, Gaspar, Balthazar—at the manger in Bethlehem to pay homage to the Christ child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Though Santa Claus is making inroads in Mexico, many children still leave out their shoes for presents on the night before Three Kings' Day.

The celebration, as usual, involves a great deal of feasting. The featured food item is a cake shaped like a crown and often filled with fruits and nuts. Mind where you sink your teeth, however, as each cake has a tiny baby-Jesus inside. The idea is that whoever gets the slice with the figure must pay for the next big party



Rosca is the name given to any ring-shaped bread or cookie. A small figure, representing Christ, is hidden, baked in the Rosca de Reyes sweet bread to symbolize the hiding of the infant from King Herod on the day of the Holy Innocents. It is traditionally served as a treat on Three Kings' Day.

To make a party-sized rosca, you will need the following ingredients.

- For the dough:
- 8 1/2 cups of flour
- 8 eggs
- 1 1/4 cups of sugar
- 1 3/4 cups of butter
- 1 1/8 teaspoons of cinnamon
- 1 3/5 oz compressed yeast
- For the decorative paste:
- 1 cup of sugar
- 1 cup of butter
- 1 egg
- 1 3/4 cups of flour

Crumble the yeast cakes into 1/2 cup of warm water. Mix with other dough ingredients and beat the batter until smooth and elastic. On a large baking sheet, shape the dough into a ring, resembling a large wreath. Cover the ring with a clean cloth or towel and let it sit in a warm place for 2 hours.

Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 350°F. Tuck a miniature plastic doll inside, if desired. After the rosca has risen and before putting it in the oven, prepare the decorative paste by creaming the butter with the sugar, beating in the egg and gradually mixing in the flour. Use this paste to decorate the sweet bread—usually, as rays coming out from the center.

Bake until golden brown, and decorate with candied fruit. In Mexico, candied cactus, called *biznaga*, is used.

on February 2—Candlemas Day. Often several baby Jesuses are baked into the cake in order to spread the cost of the Candlemas celebrations among friends.

Candlemas officially marks the end of the Christmas season and is an important religious holiday throughout Latin America. It is the day on which all the candles for use in church are blessed, and marks the day that the Virgin Mary arose from her birthing bed to present the baby Jesus at the Temple. In Oaxaca, it is a time for godparents to accompany their godchildren to church, and when

a feast of *tamales* and hot chocolate is enjoyed by all.

Candlemas also represents the mid-point between winter and spring and, as on Groundhog Day in the US, the weather on the day determines what the next six weeks will hold.

Both Three Kings' Day and Candlemas are of great importance to Oaxacan families. However if you can't get an invitation to someone's home for the feasting, then the sweet bread can be bought from many bakers in town, or you can make your own with the *Oaxaca Times* recipe, on the top.

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INTERESTING

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.

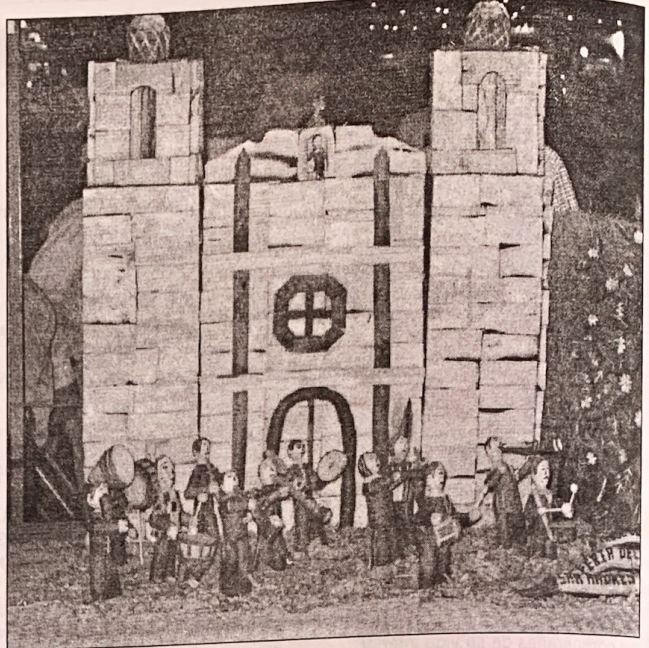
The entire city is one big festival during Christmas, with an open air market in the already bustling zocalo, with food stands, carnival rides, and artisan crafts.

The Night of the Radishes

If you aren't particularly all ho, ho, ho about Christmas then Oaxaca won't let you down during the season. Instead of decking the halls with holly, think about using radishes as your holiday motif.

Legend has it that 350 years ago two Dominican monks came up with a marketing idea designed to help indigenous farmers market their produce. They came up with a plan to have the farmers carve their beets, radishes, and carrots into fantastic shape. Thus was born the "Night of the Radishes" a unique festival celebrating food as folk art.

Celebrated on December 23, the fiesta lasts only a few hours. But what a few hours those are. Since 1897 when the festival was taken over by the Oaxaca City Municipal Government thou-



sands of visitors have ventured to the colonial capital for the unusual celebration.

Visitors who parade through the Zocalo will see radishes sculpted into everything from busts of Maria Sabina, the famed curandera, to exquisitely detailed figures of Gueleguetza dancers. The radishes, which are specially grown for the occasion, are not consumable, but are heavily treated with additives so that they can reach their colossal size, which sometimes reaches 40 inches.

These days the radishes are In addition to the displays of radishes, artisans will compete in two other

categories — dried flowers and corn husks. But without question the radishes are the big draw at the festival. These days they are cultivated in a park by the airport. The harvest takes place on December 18th, and the artisans have five days in which to complete their artworks.

But don't leave the Zocalo after viewing the radishes. The fiesta, one of Oaxaca's most spectacular will continue on until midnight with a fantastic display of fireworks, and this is a city that loves fireworks, at 11 p.m. Following the fiesta, meander back home and enjoy a rich cup of chocolate before going to sleep.

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I Arrived a Gringo and Left a Oaxaqueño.

For 15 years I have lived within a short 15-minute drive of Mexico. In fact, I can see Mexico from both the roof of my apartment and the front office of the school I teach at. Tijuana's close proximity to San Diego provided me with ample opportunities to visit its nightlife while I was in college. After college, friends and I often journeyed farther south to camp, mountain bike, eat lobster, and relax. However, I had never been farther south than two hours within the US-Mexico border. I decided in 2006 I would spend a great part of my 2007 summer vacation in Mexico, but where in Mexico should I go?

For months I talked to whoever would listen about my plans of spending a month in Mexico. Since the majority of my students are Mexican I had many people to inquire to. I was asked what I was hoping to do while I traveled. The main reason I wanted to go to Mexico was to take Spanish classes and immerse myself into the culture. I was also looking for a location that had a rich history, a necessity for all my trips since I am a history teacher. As time passed, Oaxaca was suggested over and over again for its rich history, vibrant culture, wonderful food, and beautiful location.

Once I decided upon Oaxaca the next step was to choose a language school. With the use of the Internet and email I decided the Instituto de Comunicacion y Cultura (ICC) would be the best school for me. The school and experience were better than I could have imagined.

While at ICC this past summer I took

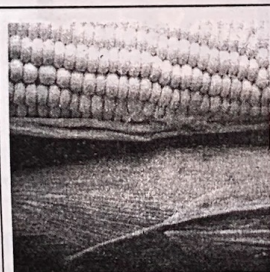


both group and individual lessons. There was a combination of grammar, pronunciation, writing, and speaking. I was made to feel so special while I was there. I was placed with a wonderful family who treated me as one of their own children. The teachers were more than teachers, they became my friends. It was so obvious they were interested in me not only becoming more proficient in Spanish, but also building my awareness and understanding of the Oaxaca culture. I shared chapulines (grasshoppers), mole, and mescal on a number of occasions with them. Each week we would take a short field trip to one of the local museums, markets, or churches. In addition, ICC offered weekend trips to Monte Alban, Mitla, and other local sites.

The learning experience was enhanced further by what I was able to take back with me and use in my classroom in San Diego. The teachers would role play with me regarding talking to the parents of my students. I am now one of the few teachers who can call the Mexican parents and speak Spanish to them. Our school just had back to school night and as parents walked into my classroom I would ask them if they spoke English. More often than not the response would be no. I would then tell them in Spanish that it was no problem because I can speak Spanish. It helped so much to put the parents at ease and made me feel so good to be able to communicate with this part of our parent population.

So much of the reading I did was based upon the culture of Oaxaca and the surrounding area. I learned in great detail about the history of el dia de los muertos. For this year's el dia de los muertos we are constructing alters in my classroom. Rather than the students placing offerings to deceased relatives, the offerings will be to famous historical figures in early American history. It will also be an opportunity for my non-Latino students to learn about el dia de los muertos.

I have highly recommended visiting Oaxaca and taking Spanish lessons at ICC to all of my friends and anyone else I have spoken to who has an interest in learning Spanish in Mexico. ICC offered me a fun, cultural, and educational experience. Exactly what I was looking for.



EDWARD & KIM WESTON
photographers

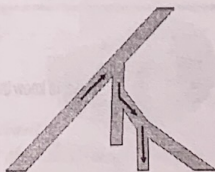


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