

Living

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Moly Mole

A TRADITIONAL MEXICAN DISH



THIS RICH, SPICY SAUCE, DERIVED FROM THE NÁHUATL WORD 'MOLLI,' IS A DELICIOUS COMBINATION OF GROUND SPICES, CHILIES, SEEDS, DRIED FRUIT AND NUTS USUALLY SERVED OVER POULTRY. SOME RECIPES CALL FOR UP TO 100 INGREDIENTS, BUT THERE ARE WAYS TO SIMPLIFY THE PROCESS.



BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

"Más mexicano que el mole," goes the saying, and no food better represents the spirit of Mexico than this famous dark, rich and spicy sauce. "Isn't that the one made with chocolate?" people often ask when the subject turns to mole (pronounced "MOH-lay"), but chocolate is the least of it. While some of the best-known moles do indeed include chocolate among their many ingredients (the dark ones of Puebla and Oaxaca, for example), many do not.

What is mole, really? The word derives from the Nahuatl "molli" which means a sauce of ground chilies and nuts or seeds and spices. Perhaps coincidentally, "moler" means to grind in Spanish. The "Enciclopedia Gastronómica de México" lists 37 varieties of mole from 21 states. It is generally agreed that mole is made of chilies (dried or fresh), spices, herbs, vegetables or fruit, and thickened with seeds, nuts or corn masa. Truly a celebratory dish, in most Mexican families it is reserved for special occasions. Making mole from scratch is a laborious process — some recipes call for up to 100 ingredients, although 15-30 is the norm. It is usually poured over poultry, most often chicken but sometimes turkey or duck, and occasionally pork, rabbit, or even iguana. Non-Mexicans, used to a main course of meat augmented by a little sauce, often miss the point: The sauce IS the dish. That small piece of meat floating in a pool of mole is simply there to accompany the sauce to your mouth.

Eating mole may be easy, but making it is another matter. Culinary historian Jesús Flores y Escalante writes that in the preface to a recipe for mole his great-grandmother emphasizes

that a minimum of 25 ingredients are necessary. Her recipe includes:

MOLE

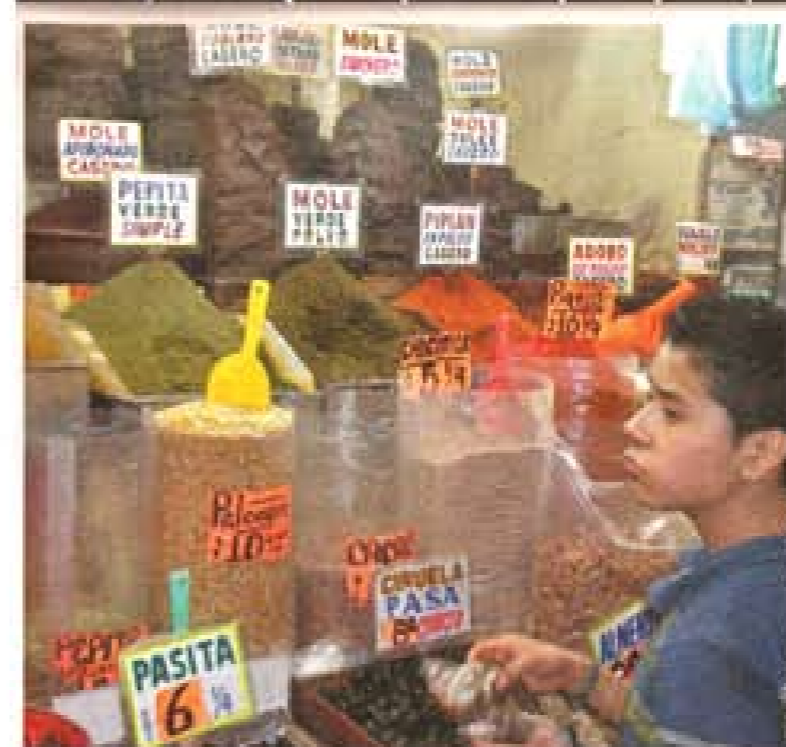
250 grams chile moleto
250 grams chile pasilla
500 grams chile ancho
4 chiles chipotles
(3 mecos and 1 more grande)
250 grams sesame seeds
250 grams almonds
½ kg tomatoes
3 large onions
1 head garlic
8 allspice
8 cloves
1 stick cinnamon
1 tablespoon cilantro seeds
1 tablespoon aniseeds
A pinch of currit seeds
2 tortillas, fried golden
100 grams peanuts
50 grams pumpkin seeds
1 piloncillo (cone of brown sugar)
4 tablets chocolate
¼ kg raisins
1 plantain, not very ripe
1 bottle (roll)
½ kg manteca (lard)

All these ingredients are fried or roasted, then ground and incorporated into the sauce, which is then cooked for hours. And don't forget to prepare the turkey!

The sauce IS the dish. The piece of meat is simply there to accompany the mole.

The state of Oaxaca has more varieties of mole, but Puebla's "mole poblano" is by far the most celebrated. Laura Esquivel describes its preparation for a wedding in "Like Water For Chocolate" — the scene in the movie showing its laborious concoction is memorable. Legend has it that nuns of the convent of Santa Clara in Puebla were called upon to feed a visiting archbishop. Finding their larder bare, they put together a sauce made of everything they had, cooked it for hours, and threw it over an old turkey, the only creature available. One version even has them praying for a recipe which an angel swoops down and

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La Merced market has a large variety of moles and other grains and spices.

provides. These stories are certainly apocryphal, as similar sauces existed since pre-Hispanic times. In the 16th century, Franciscan monk Bernardo de Sahagún describes an Aztec wedding at which a dish he calls "molli" is served to the bride by her mother-in-law — the newlyweds disappear into the bedroom shortly thereafter.

All Mexican markets sell easy-to-prepare moles, either in paste or dry ground form. For 1/4 kilo of paste, make a "sofrito" of 1 onion, 2 cloves garlic and 2 or 3 tomatoes in the blender — add a little water if it is too thick to blend. In a deep skillet sauté this mixture in some oil, then add the mole paste, turning and blending the ingredients with the back of a spoon. Then, little by little, add the hot stock, mixing and turning. The trick is to stop when the sauce reaches the consistency of heavy cream — it's easy to add too much liquid, so be careful. Pour over previously braised chick-

en, or heated tortillas. A good vegetarian option is to serve mole over cauliflower — sounds odd, but the flavors combine well. And be sure to decorate with sesame seeds, sliced white onion and, if you are feeling celebratory, crema.

Nicholas Gilman is the author of "Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining," which is available at www.aztecas.com.



WHERE TO EAT MOLE

Here is a list of several restaurants where you can eat exquisite mole. Make sure you try the different varieties because each one has its own distinctive flavor.

FONDA MI LUPITA

Calle Buertono 22,
near Delicias, Col. Centro
Open Monday-Saturday
1 p.m. - 6 p.m.

This tiny fonda offers only sweet, chocolatey mole poblano; it is among the best in the city. Order chicken, either peducha or pierna, or enchiladas, or simply mole with rice and tortillas, all served with the traditional garnish of raw onion rings, sesame seeds and crumbled queso fresco. They also offer mole to take out.

LA BELLA LULA

Calle Río Lerma 86
(between Río Rhu and Río Sera)
Col. Cuauhtémoc
Tel. 5207-6356

Open daily 10 a.m. - 7 p.m.
There are branches in Coyoacán and San Ángel.
• Miguel Ángel de Quevedo 652.
• Corregidora No. 5,
corner Av. Revolución

This popular Oaxacan restaurant is a good place to try the southern version of mole. Oaxaca is renowned for its "seven moles": negro, amarillo, colorado, colorado verde, chichilo, and almendrado. Five of these seven moles are on the menu, but the almendrado stands out — sweet and tart with a complex fruity flavor.

The tortillas and salsas are top notch here; the ambiance is folkloric and festive.

EL BAJO

Avenida Cutzhuac
2708,
Col. Obesa Popular
Tel. 5254-3763
www.carnitaselbajo.com.mx

Three Branches

• Parque Delta Mall,
Av. Cuauhtémoc 462,
Col. Narvarte
Tel. 5539-1188

• Alejandro Dumas 2, Col. Polanco
Tel. 5281-8245

• Plaza Parque Reforma 222
Tel. 5571-9124

Chief Carmen Titita, author of several cookbooks, is a big name in the Mexico City culinary scene.

Her original restaurant, located north of Polanco, features many traditional dishes.

The duck in black mole (de la abuela) is truly the best I've tasted. Also in the menu is pipilán verde, and an unusual mole blanco thickened with corn masa.

The menu in all four locations is the same; the Reforma and Polanco branches are the only ones open at night.

AZUL Y ORO

Centro Cultural Universitario,
on the second floor above the bookstore (near Sala Nezahualcóyotl)
Cuzdud Universitario
Tel. 5622-7135

Open Sunday - Tuesday, 10 a.m. - 6 p.m., Wednesday - Saturday 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.

Chief and culinary investigator Ricardo Muñoz Zurita's restaurant is off the usual tourist path, but worth the detour. Featuring Oaxacan influences with a modern twist, the changing menu is varied and reasonably priced. Duck ravioli with black mole is a lighter way to try the dark stuff and the anmolada Tlaxcala style are an interesting variation of poblano mole — slightly sweet and very fruity.