

TRAVEL



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MOLE POBLANO AND CHILES EN NOGADA HAVE THEIR OWN FESTIVALS IN PUEBLA, FOOD CAPITAL OF MEXICO'S INTERIOR.



PHOTOS BY RICARDO ESPINOSA OROZCO/CPTM

SOUL FOOD: Puebla's mole poblano, above, and the city's 17th century colonial cathedral, top.

THE ARTISTRY OF FOOD

BY MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ
Special to The Miami Herald

¡Qué suerte! Escape from Mexico City had landed me in Puebla during the annual Chiles en Nogada Festival, a grand showcase of one of the city's traditional dishes. Bound to the independence of Mexico, chiles en nogada was first prepared by nuns in 1821 to celebrate the Emperor Agustín de Iturbide's arrival in the city after signing the Declaration of Independence from Spain.

The dish, poblano chiles filled with picadillo (a ground meat, fruit, and spice mixture) and drenched in walnut-based cream sauce and pomegranate seeds, is a culinary representation of the Mexican flag — green chile, white

• TURN TO PUEBLA, 8J

PHOTOS BY RICARDO ESPINOSA OROZCO/CPTM

SCOTLAND

St. Andrews: Love among the ruins

■ A writer returns to her favorite haunts from when she did a semester abroad at the University of St. Andrews.

BY MONICA HESSE
Washington Post Service

"Bums!"
Katy Barker, whom I've just met, is instructing me to look at the rear ends of four men whom I don't know at all.
"Bummmms!" she bellows again, mimicking the proper way to take a good long gander. "Now, chase!"

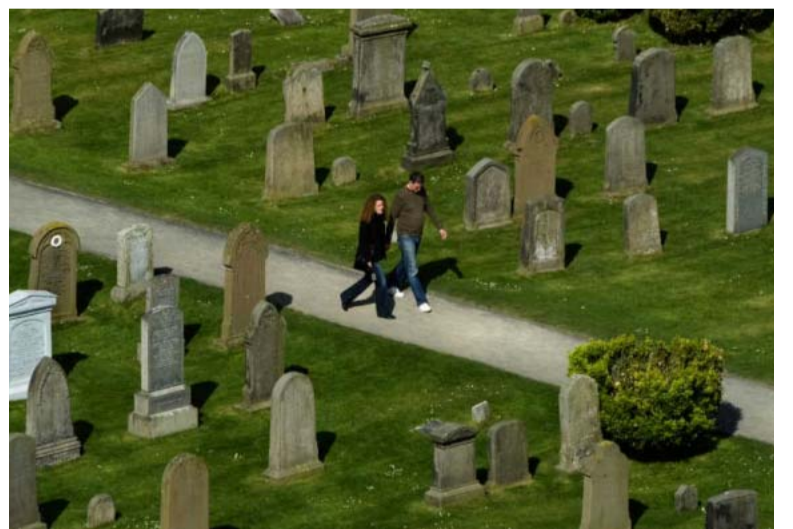
In the course of an hour, I chase. I skip. I *pas de basque* my patootie off, which is good, since it's weighted down with the giant slabs of shortbread I've been eating ever since arriving for a week-end in St. Andrews, Scotland.

Along with 16 other students, I'm taking an intermediate Scottish Country Dancing class in the activities room of the local sports complex. The particular dance we're doing is called "Flowers of Edinburgh," which Katy has explained like this: "First, the ladies want to check out the men's bums. Then the men want to

check out the ladies' faces. Then it gets a little bit interesting because the men check out the men's bums, and the ladies check out the ladies." (Because of an uneven split of the sexes, some of the men are, in fact, ladies. "This is my man sash," my partner Louise says cheerfully, gesturing to the satin ribbon brandished across her chest.)

On the dance floor, Katy's instructions translate into a spider-web pattern of couples weaving behind and in front of each other,

• TURN TO ST. ANDREWS, 6J



LINDA DAVIDSON/WASHINGTON POST

SACRED GROUND: A couple tours hundreds of tombstones, some dating back to the early 1800s, in the ruins of the St. Andrews Cathedral.



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MEXICO

Puebla serves up a feast for the soul

• PUEBLA, FROM 1J

walnut sauce and crimson pomegranate seeds.

Each July, the city kicks off a celebration that brings together 20 local restaurants for a blockbuster chiles en nogada meal that more than 600 people can taste and evaluate. Through September, coinciding with Mexican Independence Day on Sept. 16, special menus and stalls serving this regal dish abound throughout the city. What luck, indeed.

Make no mistake, it's not just about chiles en nogada here in Puebla; it's about food. Though summer showcases chiles en nogada, when walnuts are harvested and pomegranates are in season, in the spring, mole poblano headlines the food festival circuit. Since 1991, in a historic downtown neighborhood anchored by an antique-littered market, Mexicans line up their ingredients on long, folding tables, and shoulder-to-shoulder, pot-to-pot, begin a cook-off that infuses the air with an aroma descended directly from Mayan heavens. Fresh tortillas sizzle alongside cauldrons of multi-colored moles, and the sound of hearty communal eating almost seems to have melody.

A UNESCO World Heritage site, and fabled food capital of the Mexican interior, Puebla is located in the Valley of Cuicatlaxcoapan and surrounded by menacing volcanoes and soaring mountains. Interspersed

are many of the region's important churches, convents, and monasteries, clearly influenced by baroque and Renaissance architecture. Dating back to the 17th century, most are well-maintained relics of a past marked by Spanish and French invasion, giving Puebla a more European feel than other Mexican cities.

On Puebla's *zócalo*, Plaza de la Constitución, perimeter cafés fronted multi-colored buildings, and vocal political activists shared sidewalks with balloon-making clowns. On the southwest corner of the square sat the Catedral, a visual masterpiece of onyx, gold, and marble that boasted the two largest towers in the country, and spoke to the city's wealth.

"New hotels have been putting down roots in Puebla for the last couple of years to handle the rise in tourism," said Moisés Micha, a managing partner of Grupo Habita, which owns 11 luxury boutique hotels around Mexico, and I was beginning to understand why. What everyone failed to mention in extolling the virtues of Puebla's culinary scene was the breathtaking city that met me on arrival.

But first, back to the food.

The concierge at the exquisitely designed La Purificadora hotel directed me to the Mercado del Carmen to understand any basic poblano recipe. Stall after market stall overflowed with vibrant



DUST AND CHAR: Participants in Chef Alonso Hernandez's cooking class learn the fine points of making chiles en nogada.



PHOTOS BY ADAM WISEMAN



AT THE MARKET: Chiles in all shapes and sizes.

MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ

rainbows of chile choices, and scores of different walnuts, fruits and spices. As many as 100 ingredients could go into the perfect chile or mole dish, Rosa, one of the vendors, explained slowly. Assuming my language skills as elementary as my culinary ones, her thick fingers lightly grazed each chile bucket as she gave them names: ancho, serrano, mulato, pasilla.

While substitutes such

as strawberries enable chiles en nogada to be featured on menus year-round, most poblano chefs prefer to stick to summer's authentic pomegranate rendering. Eyeing a mountain of colorful fruits, Rosa continued deconstructing the traditional recipe. The picadillo filling usually contain panchera apple, sweet-butter pear and criollo peach. Variations made each chef's dish unique.

SWEET STREET

For the thick, rich mole poblano sauce, usually served with poultry, Rosa used chocolate, cinnamon, nuts, and a host of peppers, often layered into the sauce at different times. Once saved for special occasions, in a quick-fix world of 30-minute meals many moles are now made from paste. Rosa stocked all of them — pumpkin, almond, cilantro — but her favorite was the traditional kind, made from chocolate. Sensing my excitement at the mention of chocolate, and my penchant for the sweet chiles en nogada, Rosa sent me in search of La Calle de Los Dulces, or Sweet Street, for my first real poblano treat.

Past the Barrio del Artista, a cobblestone lane lined with artists sketching caricature drawings, I arrived at my destination. Candies of all kinds lined the glass cases in competing shops, Willy Wonka wonderful, Candy Land colorful. I sampled camote, a chewy candy derived from sweet potatoes, but better (oh, so much better) were the cookies. The coco (shredded coconut) and canela (almond) varieties were my absolute favorites, and the rest of my stay in Puebla was characterized by surreptitious munches from grease-stained, cookie-filled paper bags.

At most corners throughout the easy grid of Puebla's streets, lines waited on custom-ordered cemitas, the Mexican version of a hero. These are turbo sandwiches for linebackers, sumo wrestlers and pie-eating contest finalists. On one line, a small boy, maybe 7 or 8 years old, licked his lips in anticipation. A frail old woman

Going to Puebla

Getting there: American and Aeromexico fly nonstop from Miami to Mexico City, a trip of 3 hours, 15 minutes; roundtrip airfare starts around \$425. There are no nonstops from Fort Lauderdale; a flight with connections



THE MIAMI HERALD

takes six hours or longer, with roundtrip airfare starting around \$650. A variety of bus lines including Estrella Roja (www.estrellaraja.com.mx) and ADO (www.ado.com.mx) make regular trips between Mexico City and Puebla. About two hours, the trip costs less than \$10.

When to go: The annual Mole Poblano Festival takes place each Sunday in June. The annual Chiles en Nogada Festival runs from July through September.

WHERE TO STAY

La Purificadora, Callejón de la 10 Norte 802; 52-222-309-1920; www.lapurificadora.com. Sleek hotel with 26 guestrooms housed in an old water purification facility. Flat-screen televisions, Kiehl's products, iPod docks, an on-site restaurant and rooftop bar round out the amenities. Rates \$180-\$305.

Mesón Sacristía de la Compañía, 6 sur 304 Callejón de los Sapos; 52-222-232-4513; www.mesones-sacristia.com. Each room is different at this colonial-style boutique hotel and restaurant. With cooking workshops on-site, this is the most food-centric place to lodge. Rates from \$125.

Casareyna, Privada 2 Oriente 1007; 52-222-232-0032; www.casareyna.com. Boasting only 10 suites, this restored Puebla home is enhanced by Talavera pottery and old wood furnishings, an excellent restaurant, and a secluded location. Rates begin just over \$100.

WHERE TO EAT

Street vendors and small shops selling cemitas, sweets and chalupas are not to be missed. All the following restaurants participate in the Chiles en Nogada Festival.

Mesón Sacristía de la Compañía, 6 Sur 304 Callejón de los Sapos, 52-222-232-4513; www.mesones-sacristia.com. The mole poblano and chiles en nogada at this quirky art gallery/restaurant are hard to beat.

La Noria, 41 Poniente y 23 Sur; 52-222-237-7213; www.RestauranteLaNoria.com. Located in the stable of a former 16th century hacienda, this beautiful restaurant serves traditional poblano cuisine. Prices from \$4 for appetizers, \$26 for grilled entrees.

San Leonardo, Av. 2 Oriente 211; 52-222-223-6600; www.hotelsanleonardo.com.mx. Housed in a hotel of the same name, the restaurant serves classic poblano dishes on regal silver dinnerware. Prices \$5-\$20.

El Mural, 16 de Septiembre 506; 52-222-242-0503; www.elmuraldelospoblanos.com. Chalupas, cemitas, and a massive mole menu makes this spot a go-to for local specialties. Entrees \$25 and under.

La Conjura, Calle 9 Oriente 201; 52-222-232-9693; www.laconjura.com.mx. Serving an eclectic mix of Spanish and Mexican dishes' appetizers from \$5, entrees from \$35.

WHAT TO SEE

Museo Amparo, Calle 2 Sur 708; 52-222-229-3850; www.museoamparo.com. Open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Tuesdays.

holding rosary beads stood patiently in another. Unconvinced, for just under \$2, I had to try one. The bread was warm, the flavors popped, and the chicken cutlet was succulent. Unable to finish, I added my leftovers to a growing stash of late-night refreshments.

Desperate for a break from the hard-chew, I hit the frenetic El Mercado de Artesanías El Parián. At this carnival of regional handiwork, toys, and children's clothing, I couldn't scoop up enough gauze sundresses and knit ponchos for my niece and nephew.

Intricate and original Talavera pottery abounded, and I recognized the more popular patterns from the facades of Puebla's buildings.

Here, I also stumbled onto the chalupa. Fried tortillas topped with salsa, onion, and meat, chalupas originated as an on-the-go lunch for the working class, and rivaled the cemitas for Mexican street food bragging rights.

I walked off some calories at Museo Amparo, home to the private collection of Mexican banker and philanthropist Manuel Espinosa Yglesias. One of the finest collections in Latin America, exhibited work is by pre-Hispanic, colonial, and modern artists. The temporary retrospective of Neexpressionist Mexican painter Julio Galán that I saw was sublime and kept my mind off

food, if only for the hour.

Finally, I returned to festival business. Like the folks around me, I sampled multiple variations of the silky chiles en nogada from restaurants like La Noria, San Leonardo, and El Mural, lapping up the various incarnations of velvety sauces at each successive stop. Boasting expositions, artistic events, and gastro-workshops, all felt secondary to the food.

Palate (again) whet, I arrived at Mesón Sacristía de la Compañía for a big finish. A restaurant housed in a 17th century hotel, this was the spot to indulge.

It was at Mesón Sacristía, which offered cooking workshops of one to seven days, that the labor that went into the preparation of each treasured dish was explained to me.

In a colorful dining room, chock-full of antiques-for-sale, I tasted my final sampling of chiles en nogada. More sweet than spicy, every mouthful unearthed another gem of the flavor profile. Each time my waiter came by, I blushed in embarrassment. My mouth was always stuffed.

Check paid, I labored to rise from my table. "You come back, sí?" questioned my waiter. God, yes. And it wasn't just about food. Puebla was about culinary tradition and community, and that was something I could easily get used to.

Well, minus the few extra pounds ...

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