

## SELECTION 6

## TASTE SOME MEXICAN FOODS

**OBJECTIVE**

To learn something about the Mexican diet by preparing and tasting some popular Mexican foods, and to have fun doing so!

**INPUT**

People in the United States and Canada are becoming increasingly familiar with and fond of some of Mexico's specialties—tortillas, tacos, salsas, enchiladas and other dishes.

These are just a smattering of Mexican foods, however. The Mexican cuisine is exceptionally creative and diverse. Special dishes vary from region to region. The Mexican diet is produced from a unique fusion of foods the indigenous people cultivated with products introduced by the Spanish.

Some of the foods that indigenous peoples cultivated and used long before the Spanish arrived include:

- corn
- beans
- cacao (from which chocolate is made)
- pumpkins and squash, especially zucchini
- peanuts
- chile peppers
- tomatoes
- vanilla

From Europe, the Spanish brought:

- bananas
- citrus fruit
- sugar cane (originally from Asia)
- onion (originally from Mongolia)
- wheat (originally from Mesopotamia)

The Aztecs enjoyed a beverage made from cacao. The Spanish found it distastefully bitter. But when cacao and sugar were combined, chocolate—similar to what we know now—was born. And it's difficult to imagine a Mexican salsa without onion. The melding of the indigenous and foods brought from Europe created a pleasing palette of foods for the creative Mexican cook.

In the area of Mexico (the state of Jalisco) where the editor lived, three foods form the core of each day's diet. Women prepare them early in the day, and add other foods to round out the various meals.

The three dishes are cooked dried beans, tortillas and salsa. Many women still make their tortillas by hand, although increasing numbers are purchasing them at *tortillerías*, or tortilla mini-factories. Some rise at 5 or 6 a.m. to get their corn—cooked the night before with the mineral lime to help soften it—to the mill. (See Cheli's story on page 15.) They carry their pails of ground corn, called *nixtamal*, home, build a wood fire and start patting out the tortillas and baking them on a large metal or clay griddle over the fire.

They also put a clay pot of beans on to cook and prepare a salsa in a *mocajete*, a mortar and pestle carved from a special gray, porous volcanic rock. Sometimes they prepare green salsas and sometimes red salsas, using different combinations of tomatoes, tomatillos, chile peppers, onions and other seasonings, including garlic and cilantro. Tomatillos look like cherry tomatoes, but are green and have a brown paper-like husk covering them; they are only eaten cooked.

The pot of beans stays on the back of the stove all day, and leftover tortillas and salsas are available for quick snacks.

Early risers, including laborers and school children, usually eat a light breakfast, or *desayuno* (deh-sah-YOU-noe), of milk or hot chocolate, tortillas or bread, and sometimes eggs. Farmers and workers engaged in heavy labor stop for a hearty 10 or 11 a.m. lunch, or *almuerzo* (ahl-MWHERE-sew), with tortillas, beans, beverage, perhaps a soup. School children take along a small, packed lunch, or *lonche* (LOHN-chay), to eat mid-morning.

The main meal of the day, called *comida* (coe-MEE-dah) or dinner, is anywhere between 2 and 4 p.m. and consists of chicken or meat (when the family can afford it), tortillas, salsa, a fruit drink called *agua fresca* (AG-gwah FRES-kah), and often a side dish of rice or potatoes prepared with vegetables and/or seasonings.

Most people think all Mexicans love spicy chile-hot foods. But tastes vary from individual to individual. While many, if not most, Mexicans enjoy their salsas, some do not. Since the salsas are often served on the side, each person can add the amount they prefer. Some people we know pour gobs of salsa on everything they eat, even on popcorn! Stores sell lollipops made with some chili powder to even the youngest of children. Thus many children acquire a taste for fiery foods from an early age—but not all!

In the evenings, anywhere between 7 and 10 p.m., some people enjoy a light meal called *cena* (SAY-nah), or supper. *Cena* often consists of *atole* (ah-TOHL-lay), which is a warm corn-based beverage, hot chocolate or tea with bread or rolls.

Before tasting the dishes you prepare, sing the grace on the next page, or follow along with the grace on the audio-cassette tape included in the learning and activity box. The grace is the last song on the *Viva! Children's Songs from Latin America* tape.

**LEVEL: PRIMARY**

**SOURCE:** Latin America & Caribbean Series  
Published by Mennonite Central Committee, 1997

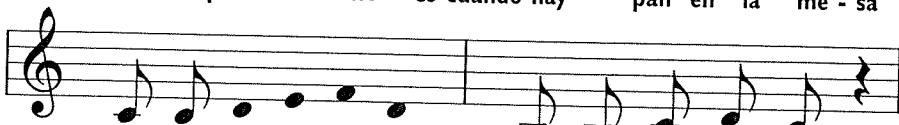
## MIRA QUE BUENO



Mi - ra que bue - no que bue - no es



Mi-ra que bue - no es cuando hay pan en la me - sa



Es la ben - di - ción de nues - tro Pa - dre Dios



Te da - mos gra-cias O Señ - or



Te da - mos gra-cias por tu a-mor

Mira qué bueno,  
qué bueno es.  
Mira qué bueno,  
qué bueno es.  
Mira que bueno es,  
cuando hay pan en la mesa.  
Es la bendición  
de nuestro Padre Dios.  
Te damos gracias, O Señor  
Te damos gracias, por tu amor.

See how good,  
how good it is.  
See how good,  
how good it is.  
See how good it is,  
when there's bread on the table.  
It's the blessing  
of our Father God.  
We thank you, O Lord.  
We thank you for your love.

## CONNECTING ACTIVITIES

1. Have students research the various types of chile peppers available in Mexico—what they look like (shape, color, size, etc.), if they're used dried or fresh or both, how "hot" each is, the dishes in which they're typically used, etc.

Some they will come across or should be on the lookout for include: chile ancho (or poblano), chile de árbol, chile cascabel, chile chipotle, chile guajillo or travieso, chile

güero (or Yucatán), chile Habanero, chile jalapeño, chile japonés (or puya), chile mulato, chile pasilla (or negro or chilaca), chile pequín, chile de ristra, chile serrano, chile tepín, chile verde (or Anaheim or Fresno or California).

If any Mexicans or Mexican-Americans live nearby, you might want to ask them to bring an assortment of chiles and talk about their use in Mexican cuisine.

**Atole de fruta (ah-TOH-lay day FROO-tah),  
Hot creamy fruit punch**

*Atoles* are hot, filling drinks traditionally offered during the Mexican Christmas *posadas*, when groups of people go from house to house in remembrance of Mary and Joseph's search for a birthplace for Jesus. Serving *atole* is a warm gesture of hospitality on any chilly night.

Combine in large saucepan:  
**2 tablespoons cornstarch**  
**2 cups water**

Heat until mixture begins to boil.

Add:  
**1 quart milk**  
**2/3 cup sugar**

Remove from heat and set aside.

Puree in blender:  
**1 1/2 pounds fruit (strawberries, mangoes, peaches, raspberries)**

Strain.

Return milk mixture to heat and add:  
**pureed fruit**  
**1 cup cream or evaporated skim milk**  
**1 teaspoon vanilla**

Bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly. Serve warm in mugs.

**Option:** Substitute 1 cup strawberry jam for fresh fruit; decrease sugar to 1/2 cup.

**Variation:** For a hot chocolate *atole*, omit fruit. Add 2 squares unsweetened chocolate or 6 tablespoons cocoa, 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon and 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg.

*(Recipe is from Extending the Table . . . A World Community Cookbook, by Joetta Handrich Schlabach and Kristina Mast Burnett. Herald Press: Scottdale, Pa., Waterloo, Ont. 1991. Page 34.)*

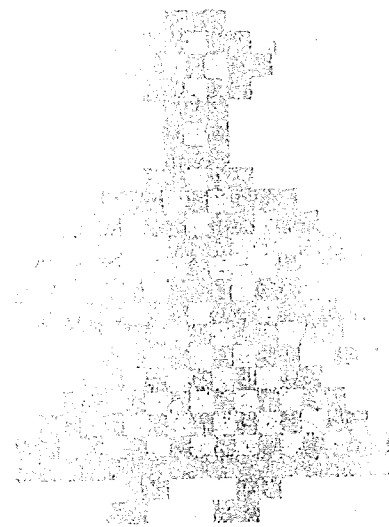
**Cacahuates enchilados (kah-kah-WAH-tays ehn-chee-LAH—dohs), Spicy Peanuts**

This is a fast, easy snack for kids who don't mind a little "fire power"!

In a heavy skillet, heat:  
**2 teaspoons vegetable oil**

Add to oil:  
**2 cups dry roasted peanuts**  
**1 to 1 1/2 teaspoons ground dried chilies or ground red pepper**

Cook and stir peanuts and dried chilies/ground pepper in oil over medium heat 2 minutes; cool.



2. Make and serve some Mexican foods, using the recipes below or others you may have.

**Agua Fresca (AG-gwah FRES-kah), Fruit Drink**

Mexicans love their fruit—even some vegetables—made into a refreshing drink. All that's needed is a blender, some fruit—just about any kind—or a vegetable, plus water and sugar.

**Directions:** In a blender container, place fruit/vegetable of choice, sliced in small pieces and with any undesirable seeds removed. (Possibilities include banana, cantaloupe, carrot, cucumber, mango, papaya, peaches, pineapple, pineapple/alfalfa, strawberries, watermelon and many others.) Add water and ice, if desired, and blend until smooth. Sweeten to taste.

**Quesadillas (kay-sah-DEE-yahss)**

The word “quesadilla” is derived from “queso,” which means “cheese” in Spanish. Quesadillas are simply quick cheese turnovers, made with tortillas—either corn or flour tortillas. In Mexico they are usually made with flour tortillas.

To make, place desired type of cheese (cheddar or Monterey Jack are good choices), on half of each tortilla and fold the other half over. Heat on a grill or in the microwave until cheese is melted. Eat as is or with a taco sauce or tomato salsa.

**Options:** Children can use their imaginations and food likes to decide upon other ingredients to place in their quesadillas along with the cheese. Refried or mashed beans, vegetables, such as spinach leaves or canned mushrooms, guacamole, and/or pepperoni slices are a few possibilities. Squash or zucchini blossoms are fun additions, too.

**Salsa Picante (SAHL sah pee-KAHN-tay), Mexican salsa**

Mix together:

- 3 red tomatoes, chopped**
- 1 onion, finely chopped**
- 2 cloves garlic, minced**
- 4 jalapeño peppers, finely chopped**
- salt and pepper to taste**
- 2–4 tablespoons chopped cilantro (optional)**

Use as a dip with tortilla chips or as a topping for cooked beans or other Mexican foods. How hot or “picante” it will be depends on the number and “heat” of the peppers used. Vary quantities of chili peppers and other seasonings to taste. Try to get the children to taste cilantro, as it is a favorite Mexican seasoning. Store leftover salsa in refrigerator.

*Recipe is from Extending the Table . . . A World Community Cookbook, by Joetta Handrich Schlabach and Kristina Mast Burnett. Herald Press: Scottdale, Pa., Waterloo, Ont. 1991. Page 284.)*

**Guacamole (gwah-kah-MOH-lay), Avocado Dip**

In bowl, chop or mash:

- 1 avocado, peeled**

Stir in:

- 1 small tomato, finely chopped**
- 1–2 tablespoons onion, minced**
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice**
- 1 clove garlic, minced or crushed**
- salt to taste**
- cilantro, chopped (optional)**
- 1/2 fresh green chili pepper, minced (optional)**

**Options:**

- Substitute a dash of Tabasco pepper sauce or a bit of coarsely ground black pepper for green chili pepper.
- Add 2 tablespoons sour cream

Serve guacamole with tortilla chips or raw vegetables, or as an accompaniment to quesadillas or other Mexican dishes.

*(Recipe is from Extending the Table . . . A World Community Cookbook, by Joetta Handrich Schlabach and Kristina Mast Burnett. Herald Press: Scottdale, Pa., Waterloo, Ont. 1991. Page 258.)*

**Fresh fruits and vegetables**

In the cities, street vendors offer a variety of nutritious snacks—fruits and vegetables cut up and ready to eat, seasoned to the customer's taste with salt, chili powder or Tabasco sauce and lemon juice. Some of the displays are strikingly colorful and attractive—plastic bags filled with uniform wedges of watermelon, papaya and pineapple, for example. Mexicans seem to approach life with an artistic eye—displayed even in the humblest street vendors' ware. Large mangos, green and ripe, are often peeled and sculpted to look like flowers, and sold on sticks.

With your students, try some or all of the following fruits and vegetables, peeled and sliced—cucumber, jícama (a large fleshy root with a thin brown skin, which is removed, and a crunchy, white interior that resembles water chestnuts in appearance and taste; jícama is increasingly available in regular supermarkets), mango, papaya, pineapple, watermelon.

Put out chili powder, salt and lemon juice (small, fresh Key limes, sliced in half, are what Mexicans use) and allow children to experiment with the seasonings.