

'The natives ... enquired what the Spaniards wanted. [They] answered "Food".'

(Peter Martyr, *De Orbe Novo*, 1521)

The British Academy and the Mexican Embassy collaborated to organise a public study day at the British Museum on 'Moctezuma's Feast', linked to the Museum's 'Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler' exhibition. The event, which took place on 21 November 2009, offered lively presentations on topics ranging from the mystical powers attributed to the frothy foam that topped cups of Aztec hot chocolate, to the relationship between 'Tex Mex' and 'Mexican' food. The organiser, **Dr Rebecca Earle**, here describes the clash of culinary cultures following the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico.

During the Spanish conquest of the Americas, two scenes typify the encounters between Europeans and Amerindians: a battle, and a shared meal. When indigenous peoples and Iberians did not try to kill each other, they usually ate together. Hungry Spaniards were often desperate for food, and Amerindians were curious about the peculiar things consumed by the exotic bearded strangers. Spanish chronicles are full

of descriptions of such communal meals. In December 1492, Columbus recorded in his journal that after landing on one Caribbean island he offered a local ruler 'Castilian food'. Columbus did not describe the king's reaction, beyond noting that he ate only a mouthful, giving the rest to his entourage. Other accounts offer more detail. A 16th-century Italian traveller wrote that on being given a Spanish meal one group of Amerindians in Venezuela, 'laughing at such food', threw it to their dogs. Another early colonial indigenous source reports that Spanish food was almost like 'human food'.¹

The Spaniards who settled the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries displayed similar ambivalence about indigenous foods. Certain items, such as the snakes and insects widely consumed by Amerindians in Meso-America, were generally dismissed as disgusting. Cannibalism, which was not merely disgusting but also a dreadful sin, was often presented as another characteristically mistaken indigenous culinary



Figure 1. Dr Rebecca Earle talks about the chocolate drink at the study day in November 2009. Photo: Tracey Croggon.



Figure 2. An indigenous woman pours chocolate from one pot to another to develop a froth. *Codex Tudela, 16th century.*

Figure 3. An early image of a pineapple from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's 16th-century *Historia general y natural de las Indias*.

practice. The 17th-century Spanish Jesuit Bernabé Cobo, who lived for many years in Peru, thus observed that the Indian palate 'does not spare any living thing, plant or animal, from the most noble, which is man, to the most disgusting bug or filthy thing.'² While Europeans ate proper food, Amerindians ate spiders and each other. Such contrasts, Spanish writers maintained, spoke volumes about the relative ability of Europeans and Amerindians to govern themselves.

Unequivocal hostility, however, does not typify all colonial responses to Spanish America's culinary offerings. A number of New World foods received a very positive reception from Spanish settlers. Pineapples were universally admired, chile peppers were approved for those with strong stomachs, and by the late 16th century cacao, in the form of chocolate, was widely consumed across the hemisphere. Indeed, within a few decades of the establishment of colonial settlement, chocolate was being described as a drink particularly preferred by women, and it subsequently became a major expense in Mexican convents. When their superiors tried to get them to cut back, nuns insisted that it was an aid to fasting. Colonial chroniclers and officials carefully recorded which New World foods were safe for Europeans to consume, and lavished praise on the delicious chirimoyas, the delicate avocados, the savoury vanilla pods and the tasty sweet potatoes that Europeans were encountering for the first time only after Columbus's fateful voyage in 1492.

My current research focuses both on indigenous reactions to European food, and also on how Europeans made sense of the new foods, and

new environments, of the Indies. In early modern Europe food held an unrivalled importance in assuring good health and bodily integrity, because the dominant humoral models for understanding the human body ascribed to food a unique role in determining both physical appearance and overall character. Europeans who travelled to the New World were deeply concerned about the changes that eating unfamiliar foods might provoke in their bodies – at the same time as they enjoyed chocolate and pineapples, they worried that too many tortillas would darken their skin and impede the growth of their elegant beards. They also wondered about what would happen if Amerindians stopped throwing Spanish food to the dogs and started eating it themselves. Perhaps their skin would lighten and Amerindian men would sprout beards. Were that to happen, how could one tell Europeans from Indians? Overall, I am interested in the ways in which food not only reflected, but also helped create, the most basic of the divisions shaping colonial society: that between colonisers and colonised.

Indeed, Amerindians did not throw all European food to their dogs. Although many indigenous communities remained sceptical about the value of the cattle and other European livestock that trampled their maize fields and destroyed their vegetable gardens, the less destructive chicken was quickly incorporated into indigenous domestic husbandry in many parts of Spanish America. As a result, some scholars maintain, the nutritional balance of the indigenous diet actually improved after the advent of colonisation.³ Moreover Spaniards often complained that Amerindians were all too fond of European wines and spirits, whose intoxicating effects were put to use in village festivals and celebrations, to the dismay of priests and moralists. Over time, out of these complex blendings of New and Old World ingredients and culinary systems emerged the distinctive set of cuisines that form the basis of what today are called 'Mexican' or 'Colombian' or 'Argentine' food, whose characteristic dishes are extolled by nationalists, savoured by young and old, and desired by emigrants far from their homelands. Food holds a particular power to instil a visceral sense of national identity. Speaking of the iconic Mexican dish *mole poblano*, a spicy sauce usually served on turkey, one Mexican writer insisted that to reject it 'could practically be considered an act of treason'.⁴

A history of Spanish American food, in other words, reveals something both about the nature of the colonial encounter – characterised as it was by a potent mixture of violence, hostility, anxiety and curiosity – and also about the transformations set in motion by European colonisation, which led, some 300 years after Columbus's first voyage, to the establishment of independent nation-states from Tierra del Fuego to the Rio Grande. By paying attention to food, we pay attention to some of the most important forces – colonialism, slavery (whose predominance in the Americas was due almost entirely to the European demand for sugar), and nationalism – that have shaped the region's history, and we also acquire a more nuanced sense of how these large historical processes intersected with the lived experience of individual people, such as the Amerindians who laughed at Spanish food or the Mexican nuns who refused to abstain from chocolate, despite the condemnation of disapproving Spanish superiors.

Eating, in sum, is a fundamental and quotidian human activity, and for this reason, as the anthropologist Levi Strauss put it, food is usually food not only to eat, but also to think with.

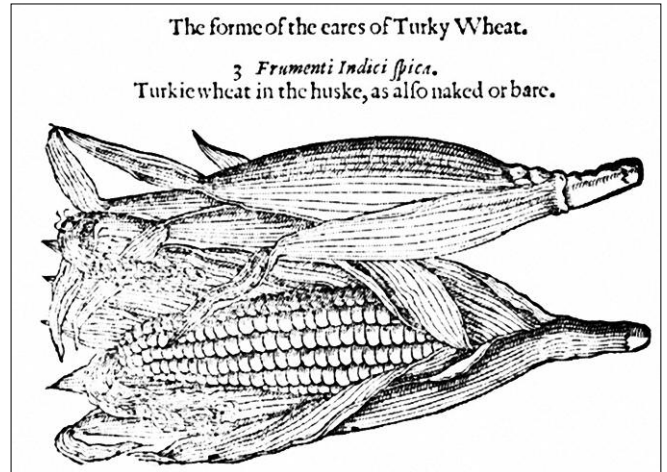


Figure 4. A staple from the Americas. Left: a variety of maize cobs. Right: an early English illustration of 'turkey wheat', from John Gerard's 1633 'Herball'.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Columbus, *Los cuatro viajes del almirante y su testamento*, ed. Ignacio Anzoátegui (Madrid, 1971), p. 92; José Rafael Lovera, 'Intercambios y transformaciones alimentarias en Venezuela colonial: diversidad de panes y de gente', *Conquista y comida. Consecuencias del encuentro de dos mundos*, ed. Janet Long (Mexico City, 1997), p. 66; and Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico City, 1992), book 12, chap. 7 (p. 766).
- 2 Bernabé Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, 1653, *Obras*, ed. Francisco Mateos, 2 vols (Madrid, 1956), book 11, chap. 6 (vol. II, p. 20).
- 3 John Super, *Food, Conquest, and Colonization in Sixteenth-century Spanish America* (Albuquerque, 1988).
- 4 Alfonso Reyes, 'Memorias de cocina y bodega', *Pequeño antología*, descanso XIII, Centro Virtual Cervantes, http://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/escritores/a_reyes/default.htm

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The Aztec Herbal

The latest volume in *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo* series catalogues Cassiano's copy of the Codex Cruz-Badianus, an Aztec herbal prepared for the son of the Viceroy of Mexico in 1552 and the earliest medical text to have survived from the New World. The original codex was presented to Cassiano's patron, Cardinal Francesco Barberini, during a papal legation to Spain in 1626, and was copied on the Cardinal's return to Rome for Cassiano's fellow members of the Accademia dei Lincei, who at that time were completing their own vast illustrated natural history of Central America.

Cassiano's copy of the Codex Cruz-Badianus is preserved in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle together with the larger surviving part of his 'Paper Museum', an encyclopaedic collection of prints and drawings of antiquities, architecture and natural history subjects, acquired by George III in 1762. The collaborative endeavour to produce a catalogue raisonné of this invaluable resource is a British Academy Research Project.

The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo, Series B, Part VIII, *Flora: The Aztec Herbal*, by Martin Clayton, Luigi Guerrini and Alejandro de Ávila, was published by the Royal Collection in association with Harvey Miller Publishers in 2009.

