



Spice Up Your Meals with Mexican Flavors

Long before the Spanish arrived in the land of Mexico, the Mayan and Aztec Indians had created a highly developed agricultural system. Besides the corn, beans and chiles that form the basis of Mexican cuisine, there were orchards full of avocados, coconuts, papayas, pineapples and pears and early forms of tomatoes, sweet potatoes, squash, peanuts, vanilla and cocoa as well.

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sixteenth century, other European influence, including the French, Austrian and Italian, have left their mark on Mexican cooking.

True Mexican cooking bears little resemblance to the foods found in many Mexican restaurants in America today. Authentic Mexican food typically is not oily, heavy or highly seasoned. Here are some tips to cooking or choosing more healthful Mexican foods.

The Spanish brought a new set of foods such as wheat, chickpeas, melons, onions, radishes, salad greens, grapes and sugar cane. Rice, citrus fruits and nuts were not far behind. The Spanish also expanded the variety of meat, introducing beef, lamb and chicken to the already thriving venison, turkey, wild birds and a large variety of fish and shellfish from coastal waters. The spice traders of Europe brought cinnamon, black pepper, cloves, thyme, marjoram and bay leaves. Since the

- ◆ Substitute plain cooked beans for refried beans. Try sauteing onion and garlic in a small amount of oil and then adding mashed pinto beans, tomato paste, chili powder and ground cumin. If you buy commercial refried beans, look for those that use oil instead of lard.

- ◆ Ask for plain tortillas to dip in salsa instead of deep-fried tortilla chips. These can be baked until crisp at home instead of frying.
- ◆ Use salsa for toppings. Guacamole and sour cream should be used sparingly. Use low-fat sour cream and low-fat cheeses at home.
- ◆ Look for baked and grilled entrees instead of fried items. Grilled chicken fajitas are a good choice. Snapper is often grilled with garlic, cilantro and fresh lemon, a low-fat treat.

The versatile tortilla can be stuffed, rolled, layered or used as a bed for a wide variety of ingredients. Whether they are the traditional Indian corn tortillas or the soft flour tortillas developed after the Spanish brought wheat to Mexico, these flat, round, unleavened breads wrap up many popular Mexican foods. With a little imagination, you can use a variety of wholesome, high-fiber vegetables and beans to make nutritious Mexican meals at home. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- Make fajitas using thinly-sliced chicken or lean beef. Add red, yellow or green bell peppers and thin-sliced red onion. Saute' in a small amount of chicken stock instead of oil and season with garlic, lime juice and cumin. Place your fajitas on a warm flour tortilla, add salsa and roll up to enclose the filling.
- Create a vegetable burrito in a flour tortilla with sauteed, chopped

onions, mushrooms, zucchini, bell peppers, tomatoes, ripe olives, jalapeno and green chiles and season with chili powder, oregano and cumin. Cooked navy, kidney or pinto beans can add extra fiber. Too with a bit of shredded, low-fat cheddar cheese.

- Tostadas can be baked and topped with a cooked mixture of ground turkey, red kidney beans, tomatoes, onion, garlic, jalapeno peppers, chili powder, cumin and oregano. Add shredded lettuce, chopped tomato and low-fat sour cream or nonfat yogurt.
- Seafood makes a great filling or topping for tortillas. Try a soft crabmeat taco or an enchilada stuffed with shrimp.

By using a combination of savory seasonings and the versatile tortilla, it's easy to enjoy an inexpensive, flavorful Mexican dinner without a lot of extra fat.

Not All Chiles Are Hot!

Chiles are a great way to season foods without using fat. There are dozens of varieties, both mild and hot, that can be used to add flavor to any appetizer, entree, snack or vegetable dish. Here's a grocery guide to some of the most popular chiles.

- Jalapenos: small, shiny and dark green. Found fresh, canned or pickled. Very hot.
- Serranos: green and only about one inch long. Very hot.

- Fresno: about two inches in length and may be green, orange or red. Vary from mild to painfully hot.
- Ancho chiles: resemble a dark green bell pepper. Mild to hot.
- Anaheim or California chiles: green about six inches long. Sweet, mild pepper.
- Banana peppers: yellow, tapered peppers. Mild-flavored.
- Dried chiles: Ancho: mildly hot. Cayenne: extremely hot. Pequins: small red-hot chiles. Cascabels: round, brownish-red chiles with a mild, slightly nutty taste.

When working with hot chiles, it's a good idea to wear rubber gloves to avoid burning your skin and to prevent you from rubbing your eyes.

Glossary of Terms

Burrito: a large flour tortilla wrapped around a filling.

Chimachanga: a fried burrito.

Chorizo: spicy Mexican sausage.

Enchilada: tortillas that are filled and drenched in a cream or tomato sauce.

Frijoles Refritos: refried beans.

Nacho: appetizer made with chiles, cheese and tortilla chips.

Relleno: a stuffed chile pepper that is breaded and fried, usually served with a tomato sauce.

Salsa: colorful garnish and condiment usually containing onions, garlic,

tomatoes, herbs and chiles.

Taco: tortillas that are stuffed and rolled up, either crisp or soft.

Tamale: a corn based bread, usually filled with meat and then steamed.

Tostada: a fried tortilla, served flat and topped with beans or meat and garnishes.

Quesadilla: a tortilla that is filled and folded in half like a turnover.

References:

- Bayless, D.G. *Authentic Mexican*, 1987.
- Righter, E. *The Best of Mexico: A Cookbook*, 1992.
- Tausend, M. *Mexico the Beautiful Cookbook: authentic Recipes*, 1991.

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MEXICAN COOKERY

PRE- OR POST-TEST

1. T F Traditional Mexican food is not oily, heavy or highly seasoned.
2. T F Chiles are a great way to season foods without using fat.
3. T F Burritos are a corned-based bread, usually filled with meat and then steamed.
4. T F When working with chiles, it is okay to use your bare hands.
5. T F Corn tortillas are a better choice than flour tortillas.

☛ Having experienced the Mexican Cookery lesson, you have been exposed to some diverse flavors and food components. Please let us know how the lesson affected your eating habits.

☛ Have you incorporated healthful Mexican foods into your diet?
 Yes No

☛ How many times a week do you cook or eat out Mexican?
 0 1-3 3 or more

☛ If you eat out, do you make healthy choices based on the Mexican Cookery lesson?
 Yes No

☛ Have you passed the information onto other members of your family or friends?
 Yes No

☛ What food safety tips do you remember?

Answers:

1. True. Mexican cookery bears little resemblance to the foods found in many Mexican restaurants in American today.

2. True. There are so many varieties of chiles, both hot and mild, that can add flavor to any dish.

3. False. Burritos usually consist of flour tortillas filled with beans and/or meat and topped with cheese. Tamales are a corned based bread, usually filled with meat and then steamed.

4. False. One should wear rubber gloves to avoid burning your skin and to prevent you from rubbing your eyes when working with chiles.

5. True. Corn tortillas are usually made with almost any fat while flour tortillas