



STRAIGHT TO THE SAUCE

Mexico's culinary heartland, Oaxaca is famed for its array of complex, spiced sauces, known as moles. So much more than side dishes, they're very often the main event

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“If we’re going to talk moles, what better place to do so?” asks chef Carina Santiago, as she welcomes me to the al fresco kitchen of her restaurant, Tierra Antigua. Campfire aromas mingled with the scent of dark chocolate fill the air, accompanied by a distinct rustling noise. It’s the sound of the escobetilla — a densely bristled broom, which a member of kitchen staff is using to move cacao seeds around, flicking her wrist back and forth as she does so.

The cacao is toasting on a comal — a large, flat ceramic griddle first created by the Indigenous Zapotecs — which is ubiquitous in Oaxacan cuisine. Held up by two adobe bricks, the comal is elevated just enough so the wood fire beneath can lick its underbelly, transmitting heat evenly across the griddle. Outdoor cocinas de humo (‘smoke kitchens’) like this have been used by generations of Oaxacans to make their moles.

A sauce, a dish, a food, a tradition, a technique, a celebration: mole isn’t one single thing. With a name originating from the Nahuatl (Aztec) word ‘mōlli’, meaning ‘sauce’, this is a foodstuff that incorporates influences from Indigenous Mexico, Europe and even the Middle East. Recipes are studded with ingredients native to these regions, including chilli, chocolate, olives, cinnamon and raisins.

Endless variations exist, but each mole tends to feature a common technique and presentation: ingredients are toasted separately, ground into a paste, fried, then loosened with chicken stock (usually) before being served alongside some form of protein (often), rice (sometimes) and tortillas (always). There’s no shortage of great food here in Oaxaca — Mexico’s culinary heartland — but it’s the moles that are prized above all else.

Oaxaca is famed as the ‘land of seven moles’ — a gastronomic slogan spun decades ago to advertise the mole festival in the southern Mexican state, back when it had seven regions (today it has eight). I learn this from Olga Cabrera, chef and owner of local institution Tierra del Sol. Olga hails from the mountainous region of La Mixteca but came to Oaxaca city over 20 years ago to raise her family and open her first restaurant. “When I began to cook here in the Central Valleys, I wondered why there were seven moles. I myself had eight and not one of them was part of ‘the seven,’” she tells me.

Olga’s restaurant is known for its 30-plus mole recipes. My walk there takes me past Santo Domingo, the baroque church that serves as the central hub of downtown Oaxaca, and past street vendors hawking huipiles (traditional clothing) and Styrofoam cups of street corn, before turning down the cobblestone walkway toward Tierra del Sol. I sit on the rooftop terrace overlooking the entrance to the botanic gardens, while the sun sets behind the Sierra Norte Mountains, pulling the heat from the day down with it. I sip a mezcal,



Clockwise from top left: Olga Cabrera serves her Mole Tres Generaciones at Tierra del Sol; an assortment of moles and other dishes at Carina Santiago’s Tierra Antigua restaurant, including mole coloradito, mole negro, enchiladas de fandango, and mole de maiz; Central de Abastos market in Oaxaca; Mole Tres Generaciones served over turkey at Tierra del Sol. Previous spread: Carina Santiago prepares a mole de maiz in Codina de Humo in Teotitlan Del Valle





Clockwise from top left: Fresh bread is delivered inside Tlacolula market just outside Oaxaca; tomatoes roasting on hot coals — these will be used in the mole coloradito at Alfonsina; Thalia Barrios García turns a corn tortilla on the comal at Levadura de Olla; wild mushroom mole served with red rice, mole verde and mole de cenizo at Levadura de Olla



neat, while I wait for the Tres Generaciones mole — Olga's recommendation — to arrive.

Jutting out of a rust-coloured sauce is the slim, foot-long leg bone of an heirloom turkey, blanketed with aromatic mole. The mole itself is velvety and weighty, a good match for the tender smoked meat, and has a slow heat that creeps up my tongue from the back of my palate. My mental Rolodex of flavours whirls as I taste chocolate, peanuts, sesame seeds and thyme, all of which I know it contains. I coat my spoon with the creamy sauce, lift it to my nose and inhale. I smell, taste and smell again, desperate to identify more of the 27 ingredients. Yet I struggle to pinpoint specific flavour profiles — a fact not entirely unexpected. They say the essence of a great mole transcends its individual components.

The complexity of Tres Generaciones is on my mind as I sit down with chef Jorge León the next evening at his acclaimed restaurant, Alfonsina. "We just see a plate of mole, but we don't know all the work there is behind it," he says. "People think mole is just a jarred chilli paste," he adds, in reference to the pre-ground blend available at markets and shops throughout the city. "But mole is a process — it's going to collect the chillies, cleaning them, deseeding them and toasting them."

Chillies are just one component; the same procedure must be gone through with the other tens of ingredients, which vary depending on the mole in question and can include almonds, chocolate, peanuts, banana, cloves, raisins, pineapple and fresh or dried herbs, alongside staples such as onions and tomatoes.

At Alfonsina, Jorge eschews traditional ingredients like the pork lard, for frying the paste, and the chicken stock, used to loosen the mole into a sauce, instead relying on seeds for fat content and vegetable stock. The result comes alive on the palate. It's the lightest, most vibrant mole coloradito — a guajillo-chilli-based variety — I've ever tasted. Jorge serves his version with a thick, flaky and tender mahi mahi fillet, and it's spectacular.

In other ways, Jorge's dishes, including the moles, are the epitome of ancestral, incorporating as many ingredients native to Oaxaca's various microclimates as possible. "That a tortilla would be made from quality, local corn — that's how I see contemporary cuisine," he says. For Jorge, returning to his roots is an innovation. "Cooking with what we've always had, that is contemporary," he tells me.

At Levadura de Olla, chef Thalia Barrios García also designs her menus to emphasise the depth and breadth of the state's larder. During the rainy season, when wild mushrooms crop up across the cloud forests of Oaxaca, Thalia prepares a duo of foraged-mushroom moles that are dished up alongside one another. The mole de cenizo is rustic and roughly ground, served with burnt tortillas and toasted chillies. Light in body

Olga Cabrera's mole estofado almendrado

Almond mole is one of Oaxaca's best known and beloved moles. Normally served with chicken, it also pairs well with pork or duck.

SERVES: 6 AS A SIDE TAKES: 1 HOUR

INGREDIENTS

100g whole almonds
50g toasted sesame seeds
50g raisins
½ tsp thyme leaves, plus a sprig of thyme
½ tsp cumin
¼ tsp oregano
1¼ tsp black pepper
½ tsp cloves
4 bay leaves
1 clove garlic, minced and sauteed
15g onion, chopped and sauteed
50g peanuts
75g ripe plantain
50g pork lard
250g tomatoes, chopped
125g tomatillos, chopped
750ml chicken stock
250ml jar escabeche (pickled jalapeños and carrots), or pickled jalapeños, thinly sliced
35g olives
35g capers
2 bay leaves
75g sugar
cooked chicken, pork or duck, to serve

METHOD

- 1 Fry the almonds in a large frying pan until golden. Add the sesame seeds and cook for 5 mins, then tip in the raisins and continue frying until they plump up.
- 2 Add the thyme leaves, cumin, oregano, pepper, cloves, 2 bay leaves, the sauteed garlic and onion, the peanuts and plantain and cook for 5 mins.
- 3 Remove from the heat and tip into a blender. Blitz to emulsify. Heat half the pork lard in a large pan, add the blended mixture and fry until it forms a paste that detaches easily from the pan.
- 4 In a separate pan, fry the tomatoes and tomatillos in the remaining pork lard until well-cooked. Blitz thoroughly in a blender, return the mix to the pan and set over a medium heat. Add the fried paste and cook until smooth, stirring every few minutes to prevent it sticking to the pot.
- 5 Add the chicken stock, jalapeños, olives and capers and cook for 20 mins on a low heat, stirring regularly to avoid the mixture sticking to the pot.
- 6 Add the sprig of thyme and the remaining bay leaves. Add the sugar and cook for 5 mins more, stirring every minute or so. Season to taste. Serve alongside chicken, pork or duck.



Degustación de Mole, served at Coronita, offers guests a chance to try seven different versions of the sauce

with a good amount of smoke and a touch of bitterness, it's topped with brunoise enchilado de monte mushrooms, giving it additional heft and texture. Plated alongside it is mole verde, which stands in contrast as a bright, herbaceous, acidic dish with slick ribbons of pan de indio mushrooms throughout. As Thalia says, "it tastes of the countryside".

A sacred act

The following afternoon, curious to try the famed seven moles served alongside each other, I make my way past bustling Zócalo plaza in search of Restaurante Coronita. Here, around a heavily lacquered mahogany table, is strung fuchsia, indigo and lime-green papel picado (traditional perforated paper bunting). The waitress assures me that, yes, the mole flight is filling, and when the seven red clay bowls arrive on a single platter, each dotted with shredded chicken or pork, any doubts are assuaged.

She recommends I begin with the chichilo, amarillo and verde, before moving on to the manchamantel, almendrado, coloradito and negro. The almendrado is my favourite, its Moorish influence apparent in the sweetness of raisins, the delicate fruitiness of almonds, and the hunks of briny Manzanilla olives.

In popular food culture, mole is a culinary embodiment of mestizaje, the narrative pushed by post-Mexican revolution nation-building elites in the early 1900s, which emphasised the diverse roots of Mexicans as a point of unity, while downplaying individual racial and ethnic identities. Mestizaje propagated the idea that all Mexicans were the same, a single race and national identity, despite the rampant racism and classism that continues to this day. Mole — with its Indigenous and European origins — became the dish to embody a blended, united Mexico.

On the ground in Oaxaca, however, it's more emblematic of the Oaxacan penchant for celebration. "Mole is a special occasion," says Jorge. There's a different type of mole for every event — and its preparation can span days.

Flavours of Oaxaca

MEZCAL

This agave spirit has roots that go back millennia in Oaxaca, which is the largest producer in Mexico. While you'll find plenty of cocktails made with mezcal, arguably the best way to experience it is the traditional way — neat.

QUESILLO

Referred to as 'queso Oaxaca' outside of the state, quesillo is a chewy, salty, stringy cheese that tops just about everything in Oaxaca. Visitors can head to Reyes Etlá, just outside the city, to make it fresh and learn all about its fascinating backstory.

TEJATE

Known as 'the drink of the gods', tejate is an ancestral beverage made from corn, cacao and mamey seeds. Culturally and historically significant for the Zapotec people, tejate is still used ceremonially today. But visitors can also find it for sale at stands in the city.

TLAYUDA

Nicknamed 'Mexican pizza', the tlayuda is a large, chewy, crispy tortilla, warmed on a comal and brushed with pork lard, then topped with a smear of black beans, shredded lettuce, cured meat and quesillo. Tlayudas El Negro serves one of the best.

NIEVE

An Oaxacan sorbet, nieve is available at street stands, but head to La Soledad plaza to try some of the city's longest-standing establishments. Standout options include the leche quemada con tuna, or burnt milk with prickly pear, an iconic local flavour.



“When you get married, there’s mole. When you die, there’s mole. For every celebration, we have a mole,” Thalia tells me.

Regional variations in recipes abound, as does the specific mole for each occasion. In the Central Valleys region, where Oaxaca city is located, mole chichilo is most often made for funerals. “We all have that lump in our throat when a family member passes away, and the intensity of mole chichilo eases our tension and grief,” Thalia adds.

Yet, in Teotitlán del Valle, a Central Valleys village just 20 miles outside the city, it’s mole amarillo that’s made in homage to the deceased. It’s also here that Carina Santiago’s family recipes and two restaurants have made her a well-known maestra of moles. Driving from Oaxaca, I take a dusty turn off the highway and onto the two-lane road that brings me into town. Brick compounds that double as family homes and weaving studios line the road, their foot-loomed geometric rugs hanging against the building, rustling in the arid wind.

Seated in her kitchen, Carina tells me her family’s mole story, which goes back several generations. How her great-grandmother taught her to “always treat the ingredients with the respect they deserve”, she says. How the gruelling physicality of making mole — cleaning the chillies, toasting the ingredients, grinding them all together, by hand, with the metate (a sloped, knee-high, four-legged basalt grindstone) is tantamount

to a sacred act. “Even kneeling to use the metate is a form of respect,” Carina tells me.

Not all mole is made with the metate, however. When it comes to large celebrations for which hand-milling would be unduly onerous, the ingredients are brought to the town molino, or grinder. Even then, Carina says, mole should be ground with a stone mill, so as to most closely replicate the effects of the metate — although many Mexican home cooks just use a blender.

At Carina’s restaurant, Tierra Antigua, I order the Cerdito de Fiesta (fried pork ribs in a chileajo mole). A burnt-orange sauce arrives with a sprig of coriander alongside a small mound of rice cooked in chicken stock and a basket of blue-corn tortillas. Taking one of the soft, pliable tortillas, I bring it to my nose and breathe in. Even after having lived in Oaxaca for over four years, doing so is still a delight. The chileajo, meanwhile, is light in texture and has a decent amount of heat — the kind that fools you at first, building slowly from the throat. Its name translates as ‘chilli-garlic’, and the sauce’s sweet allium bite is a punch to my taste buds. It’s savoury, tangy, bright and spicy, each spoonful revealing something new.

Heading back to Oaxaca, I pass a sea of blue-green agave fields, the clouds clinging to the Sierra Norte Mountains in the distance. I’ve tasted many moles, each with its own distinct, layered flavour — but I’m nowhere near having tried them all. As Jorge says, “Oaxaca doesn’t have just seven moles, it has infinite moles.” ☐

Above: Elvia León Hernández grinds ingredients for mole coloradito on her metate at Alfonsina

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Aeroméxico, American Airlines and British Airways fly from Heathrow to Oaxaca with one stop. Airlines including Air France and Lufthansa offer indirect services from other UK airports to Mexico City, from which Oaxaca is a 75-minute flight. aeromexico.com aa.com ba.com

WHERE TO STAY

Grana B&B is a 14-room property in a renovated 18-century mansion in Oaxaca’s historic centre. From 2,600 MXN (£119) a night. granabnb.com

HOW TO DO IT

Abercrombie & Kent offers a four-day Oaxaca for the Masterchef tour from £1,105. Includes accommodation, cookery classes and some meals, but excludes flights. abercrombiekent.co.uk

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