



P1329

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Desperately Seeking Authenticity

But what would an "authentic" cookbook really look like?

By RACHEL LAUDAN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Since I live in Mexico, my American foodie friends are always asking me, "Which is the most authentic Mexican cookbook? Should I trust Diana Kennedy? Or would Rick Bayless be better? And what do you think of Zarela Martinez?"

"All are wonderful books," I reply, "but the most authentic? I don't think such a thing exists."

Authenticity has come to be the most prized quality in an international cookbook, but exactly what does that mean? If you look at what's in the books or ponder how you yourself would go about writing an "authentic" cookbook, the problems become evident.

To begin with, "authentic" cookbooks obviously tell us little about how modern-day Mexicans (or Italians or Thais or Chinese) shop, cook and eat. Reading them, you would never guess that anyone except Americans ever resorted to stock cubes. Their authors shun ingredients such as the condensed milk that I see Mexican housewives putting in their shopping carts and would never dream of giving recipes for the sushi and barbecued ribs that are big sellers in my local Guanajuato Costco.

A lack of processed ingredients does not make a dish traditional, nor would we probably want it to be. As recently as the early 20th century, even in countries as renowned for their cuisines as France and Italy, peasants had the sparsest and meanest of diets: thin soups, rye breads, chestnuts—whatever they could scrounge. Definitely not what most of us would want to read about in cookbooks.

The rich ate better, of course. Yet even for them, dinner was probably not something we would regard as "authentic." The well-to-do in most countries—with the exception of India and China—ate some more or less distant version of French cuisine. The 19th century family cookbooks I'm helping a Mexican friend transcribe include more recipes for dishes such as turkey in aspic and strawberry charlotte than for tacos and tamales.

Neither do our "authentic" cookbooks reflect a full selection of what the people themselves today would consider their most authentic foods. Mexicans, for example, are passionate about their culinary traditions, and few more so than chef Ricardo Muñoz, who dedicates himself to researching and promoting Mexican cuisine. But although some of the recipes in his book, "Verde en la Cocina Mexicana" ("Greens in the Mexican Kitchen") (Fundación Herdez, \$65), would belong in the Ameri-

Please see Authentic, H2

Authentic: Does It Really Exist?

Continued from H1.

can pantheon of "authentic" Mexican dishes; others, such as turkey stuffed with *xoconostle* (a type of cactus), most certainly do not.

So if our "authentic" cuisines are not what people now eat, nor what they used to eat, nor what they themselves believe to be authentic, what are they?

This is where thinking about how those cookbooks are put together helps. If I wanted to write a Mexican cookbook for an American audience, I'd have to pick and choose from Mexico's glorious, confusing, changing culinary scene. *Carnitas* from pigs slaughtered in the backyard, *pipián* from a mix bought in the supermarket, *chilaquiles* like those served at ladies' lunches, tortillas slathered with mayonnaise, trendy *pastel de tres leches* and chicken in chipotle cream sauce, *tortitas* of dried shrimp for Lent, *machaca* from the north and little sausages of black bean paste stuffed with plantain from the south.

I couldn't include everything. So I'd probably leave out the spinal cord soup, the *sopa de medula* so popular in Central Mexico (fear of mad cow disease makes that a no-no), and I'd leave out *quelites*, the mixed wild greens sold already cooked in the markets (too difficult to get ahold of in the States). I'd probably also leave out tripe, sugary milk and fruit confections and *atoles*, the family of thick

gruels that warm Mexicans on cold winter mornings (not at all to my conception of American taste).

Just as important, I'd omit anything at odds with our idea of authentic. The high-end cookbook market, in the grip of a nostalgic anti-industrialism, insists on hearing about fresh, rather than preserved, foods; natural, rather than processed; and local, rather than imported. So I'd include photos of colorful fruit and vegetable stalls but not my neighborhood supermarket shelves stocked with Danone yogurt and cornflakes.

I'd ignore my friend's mother's recipe for lemon Jell-O with evaporated milk. I'd pass over dishes that used Worcestershire sauce, pita bread and Gouda cheese, as well as recipes for Cornish pasties, hot cakes and biscuits, even though all of these are commonplace in Mexico.

And if I were writing for an English readership rather than an American one, the choices would be different as well. Tortillas are all but unavailable there, corn is still thought more fit for animals than humans, and the range of chiles is limited. The "authentic" Mexican food of English cooks is not at all the same as the "authentic" Mexican food of Americans.

And that's the point. Our definition of "authentic" suits our resources, our kitchens, our prejudices and our tastes. It is our selection (and adaptation). At best, the notion is a harmless delusion. At worst it leads us to condescend to others, believing that we, not they, know the true essence of their culinary tradition.

So why keep talking about the authentic? Why not just face the fact that what we have can only truly be "our-thentic"?

Laudan, author of "The Food of Paradise: Exploring Hawaii's Culinary Heritage" (University of Hawaii Press, \$24.95), which won the 1996 Julia Child/Jane Grigson Award, lives in Mexico and is completing a book on global food history.