

The Foods of New Mexico

What foods are indigenous to New Mexico
... and those brought by the Spaniards?

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There's Mexican food, Tex-Mex food, and there's New Mexican food. Where did our flour tortillas, frijoles, calabacitas -- and, of course, chile -- come from? It's an interesting and tasteful history.

The Oñate Expedition

Much has been written about the famous Juan de Oñate that brought the first colonists to New Mexico in 1598. Oñate brought 200 soldiers and their families, along with some Franciscan friars, who accounted for more than 500 people who first settled New Mexico.

In his book on the Camino Real, Marc Simmons describes the caravan: *"The column, when completely spread out, stretched more than two miles ... From a distance, the train must have resembled a giant caterpillar crawling slowly under its canopy of dust."* Simmons further describes the train as *"eighty wagons and ox carts ... seven thousand head of livestock; beef cattle, spare oxen, horses, pack mules, donkeys, sheep, and goats. And finally, the people -- Oñate's colonists."*

Most of these animals were foreign to the Pueblo Indians encountered along the Rio Grande. An important aspect of bringing all these people to New Mexico is how to feed them in a strange new land. The livestock served as work animals, were slaughtered for their meat, and provided milk for making cheese.

Of particular interest, which receives little attention, were the implements and supplies these first colonists brought with them. Inventory lists show more than 40 plow shares and many iron-tipped hoes. Oñate wagons also carried seeds and tree cuttings for planting gardens and orchards. These colonists were clearly prepared to farm and live in the region for a long time.

The First Farms

In August 1598, Oñate and his colonists entered the Tewa pueblos of Yungue and Ohkay at the confluence of the Chama and Rio Grande rivers. The colonists settled on the east side of the Rio Grande and named the area San Gabriel -- today's village of Alcalde north of Española. Oñate renamed the pueblos to San Juan, although today's tribe has recently reverted to their original name, Ohkay Owingeh.



Library of Congress photo
An early photo of Ohkay Owingeh (San Juan pueblo), similar to the scene that greeted the Spaniards in 1598.

The Tewa people were accomplished farmers. The fertile river valley, filled with cultivated fields of corn, beans and squash, and watered by an extensive irrigation system, must have been an envy to the arriving colonists. These fields had fed the Ohkay people for centuries.

While many assume Oñate selected this pueblo as his capitol for some strategic reason, it was the friendly Ohkay people and hundreds of acres of fertile farm land that caught his eye. He, and most of his colonists, thought they had found the perfect location for establishing lucrative farms and building New Spain.

Oñate carefully planned the expedition to colonize New Mexico. The only real logistic error was their late August arrival – far too late in the season to plant their fields. Instead, they spent the autumn and winter readying their fields, building acequias and, of course, haciendas in which to live.

When the spring of 1599 arrived, both the pueblo people and the colonists began planting their fields. To the pueblo Indians, this meant their time-tested crops of corn, beans and squash. The Spaniards planted wheat, the main staple of Europe, and other Old World crops such as lettuce, carrots and melons.

During the dry months of June and July, the Indian crops continued to flourish while awaiting the monsoon rains and coping with low river flows. Growth of the wheat fields, on the other hand, seemed to stall with the lack of water. The Tewa Indians must have laughed as the wimpy stands of wheat struggled to grow in the dry, blazing sun of the New Mexico summer.

The Spaniards, on the other hand, may have been on the verge of tears wondering how they were going to feed their families.

Finally, the monsoon rains arrived, the rivers filled with water and the acequias flowed again. While not all the wheat survived, some of the acreage was rescued from the throes of death. Small as it was, the Spaniards had their first harvest in the New World. They learned to adjust their planting cycles over the following years to increase their yields. And, no doubt, they developed a quick appreciation for the



The main staple to the pueblo Indians is what they often called the “three sisters:” corn, squash and beans – the food of New Mexico long before the Spaniards arrived.



Photo by Paul Harden

Maturing corn and a modern day acequia on Corky Herkenhoff’s farm in San Acacia. The pueblo Indians introduced corn to the Spaniards and remains a major New Mexico crop. Today’s corn is much larger than the native varieties cultivated by the Pueblo Indians.

agricultural skills of their neighbors – the pueblo Indians.

Researcher William Dunmire, author of the book “Gardens of New Spain,” estimates the first year’s yield was a paltry dozen bushels of wheat and a little barley, with possibly 200 bushels of wheat the following year. With these first disappointing harvests, there is little doubt the colonists leaned hard on the pueblo residents for their survival. The people of the Ohkay pueblo responded well.

Likely with the help of the pueblo, the colonists honed their farming skills and harvested about 5,000 bushels of wheat in 1601. A bushel of wheat weighs about 60 pounds, and a yield of five or six bushels per acre was typical.

This seems to suggest the Spaniards were off to a good start. However, as Dunmire notes, this yield of wheat “must have been barely enough for the five hundred soldiers, settlers, and their families ... Colonists had to supplement meals with Indian-grown corn.”

The Franciscans

While the colonists around the San Juan pueblo were developing their farms, Oñate sent the Franciscans to the larger outlying pueblos to establish missions. Where the missions were erected, the Franciscans also directed the building of large gardens. In addition to teaching the pueblo people European farming techniques and

new varieties of foods, they also taught them how to graft fruit trees and vines. This resulted in the first *huertas* (orchards) in New Mexico of peaches, apricots and plums. This included the missions built at Socorro and the nearby pueblos of Sevilleta (La Joya) and Senecú (San Marcial).

The first apple trees seem to be the handiwork of Franciscans at the Abo and Quarai pueblo missions. Planted in the 1630s, the friars also taught the pueblo Indians and the nearby colonists how to graft the seedlings for a hearty crop. Within years, apple trees and orchards were flourishing along the mountains north of today's Mountainair. When the Spaniards returned to the area following the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, they found apple trees and the *huertas*, still bearing fruit, all along the mountains. So dominant were these apple trees, the returning settlers named the mountain range the "Manzanos" – the Spanish word for apple trees.

Today, New Mexico has numerous apple orchards from the Manzano Mountain Orchard, with more than 2,000 fruit-bearing trees near Torreon, to the Dixon Apple orchard near Cochiti Pueblo. Some of the oldest apricot trees in New Mexico are located in Abiquiu and Truchas – and they are still bearing fruit.

Linking the Cultures

While the colonists had initial difficulties growing wheat in New Mexico, they did have good success with some of the other seeds and cuttings they brought from Spain and Mexico. This included lettuce, cabbage, carrots, cucumbers and melons. Onions and garlic were also grown for seasoning. All of these garden plants were foreign to the pueblo Indians.

The Pueblo Indians had generations of farming experience under their belts and lived off of their cultivated corn, beans and squash for centuries. Still,



Photo by Paul Harden
Nick Keller shows white radishes grown on the UK Farm in Polvadera. Radishes are another root crop brought to New Mexico by the early Spanish colonists.

during years of drought, lack of hunting game, or other calamities, the pueblos occasionally found themselves in want of food to survive the winter. A drought year with a poor crop caused hundreds to go hungry and even die from lack of food. The same was the case with the Spaniards, who also experienced good years and bad.

It doesn't take much imagination to realize that the two cultures quickly learned to trade food, farming techniques and prepared foods for their mutual survival. While the Indians would often spend days searching for wild greens to add iron to their diet, lettuce, cabbage and other greens were readily available from the colonists' gardens.

Likewise, the colonists learned to appreciate the native beans and squash in their diets, and the pueblo corn flour when wheat was scarce. A few heads of lettuce for a sack of corn or squash was probably a fair trade.

However, there were two items that linked the two cultures together: chile and watermelons.

Chili or Chile?

Throughout the inhabited Earth, Chile, with an "E" on the end, is a country in South America; chili, with an "I" on the end, is the fiery pod. After all, the Aztecs, who made the green pods into a major food group, named it chili. The Mexicans call it chili. Those in Chile call it chili. There are habanero chilies, cayenne chilies and, of course, jalapeño chilies. All with that "I" on the end.

However, New Mexico marches to its own drum beat. Here, and almost exclusively here, hot peppers are spelled "chile," and chili, with the "I" on the end, is that hearty bowl of stew with meat, potatoes or beans liberally diced with green or red chile. It is Hatch Green Chile or Socorro Chile. And, restaurants like El Sombrero and El Camino make a mean bowl of chili. Got it?

Fortunately, they are pronounced the same. Chili, or chile, is pronounced like "chilly," the opposite of hot – which makes no sense at all. In English, "hot" can mean scalding hot water, the blazing sun or spicy hot. In Spanish, hot scalding water is *caliente*; the hot sting of good chile is spicy hot or *picante* – not *caliente* hot, unless of course it is hot. Then there's *cachonda* hot – a subject for a future article.

And if that isn't confusing enough, consider this: chile is technically a fruit. Yet, at the grocery store, it is found among all the other green vegetables.



Photo by Paul Harden

From the Aztecs to Lemitar, the Gutierrez family's green chile – a local favorite – is grown in part on Valerie Moore's farm.

Chile -- Red or Green?

Other than spelling conventions, there's several things that sets New Mexico apart from the rest of the country, and the world's best green and red chile is certainly one. For most New Mexicans, an enchilada without picante chile is unthinkable. While chile is native to the Americas, it was not native to New Mexico.

Chile is a native from Mexico and into South America. Archaeologists have found evidence of chile cultivation in Central America from at least 3000 B.C., making chiles one of the oldest crops cultivated by man. Around 1500 B.C., the Mayans appear to be the first to mix chile powder with water to make a sauce for spreading on tortillas. (Yes, tortillas are that old, too).

However, it was the Aztecs that developed chili into a dominant foodstuff. It became an important part of their culture. In fact, the name "chili" is the original Aztec word for the fiery fruit, not the Spanish word. Like New Mexicans today, the Aztecs put green chiles, or dried red chile powder, on almost everything. A favorite Aztec refreshment was called *xocolatl*, a spicy drink of chocolate spiced with hot red chile. New Mexicans haven't latched on to that one – yet.

It is often joked that chile is addictive and once you acquire the taste, you can't live without it. Perhaps so, since the Spaniards and Franciscans wasted no time bringing the Aztec varieties of

chile to New Mexico. It was grown by the Spanish farmers, the pueblo Indians, and even in the Franciscan mission gardens.

One can imagine life in the early mission monasteries. As the sun set, the Franciscan friars would enter a dark adobe room in the *convento*, to sit down at a dimly lit table for evening prayers and supper. The *cocinero* (cook) would enter and simply ask the padres, "Red or green?" The rest is history, as well as the official state question.

Regardless of how the "red or green" question came about, it clearly makes New Mexico unique from the rest of the country. Chile has been a part of the local diet since its introduction by the Franciscans in the early 1600s.

The Watermelon

If bananas are the world's most perfect fruit, then watermelons have to be a close second. They grow quickly and almost anywhere, even in the dry climate of New Mexico. Their succulent, normally red, flesh is sweet and refreshing.



Photo by Paul Harden

A large, tempting watermelon is weighed by Smith's Food & Drug employee Nikki Munguia. Watermelons were first brought from Spain to New Mexico by the Coronado Expedition in 1540.

Traditional New Mexico Foods at Socorro's Farmers Market



Many varieties of squash are native to New Mexico. One variety is grown locally on the Shy-Ky Farms by Kathy and Fred Berger in Lemitar.



Harvesting honey was a specialty of the Mayans long before the arrival of the Spaniards. Al Smoake shows two varieties of local honey.



Richard Rivera shows several varieties of green peppers that he grows in Laborcita. The Farmers Market, on the Plaza, offers many locally grown foods.

If it wasn't for having to spit out those darn seeds, it would be the perfect fruit.

Watermelons were not native to the Americas. They originated in Africa, planted by the ancient Egyptians, and spread from Persia to China. Muslim Moors planted watermelons north of the Sahara desert along the Mediterranean in Algeria and Morocco around 600 A.D. The succulent melons ended up in Spain, when the Moors invaded the Iberian Peninsula. Centuries later, the Spaniards, in turn, spread them throughout the New World.

Oñate and his colonists brought the black seeds to New Mexico when they blazed the Camino Real. They grew well and became an instant hit with their neighbors at the San Juan Pueblo.

The Indians had nothing in their diet that was sweet, except for occasional wild berries and the fruits of certain cacti. One can imagine the taste sensation enjoyed when the Pueblo Indians first bit into a ripe sweet watermelon. Instead of the tease of a few berries, one could eat the sweet fruit of the watermelon to their heart's content.

When the Franciscans began visiting the outlying pueblos, they found watermelons in some of their gardens. This baffled historians for years, since they knew watermelons were not native to New Mexico. They were found at the pueblos of Zuni, Kuaua (Bernalillo) and Nafiat (south of Bernalillo) -- all places where Francisco Coronado and his soldiers camped in 1540-1542. It is now believed Coronado was the first to bring and plant watermelons in the region. Although

watermelons were planted primarily to feed his 500 soldiers, they became a treasured fruit in the pueblos visited by Coronado.

When Spanish colonists settled with the people of the Nafiat Pueblo, in 1617, they renamed it Sandia Pueblo – *sandia* means watermelon in Spanish. Some claim the name was changed for the extensive watermelons grown by the pueblo in the bosque along the Rio Grande. Others claim it was because the mountain behind the pueblo – today's Sandia Mountain – looked like a watermelon at sunset.

The watermelon quickly spread throughout the pueblos and villages of New Mexico. It remains a favorite in New Mexico's gardens and farms today.

Spanish Rice

Rice is a common staple found among today's New Mexican food, although it is a recent addition. Rice thrives in hot climates with high rainfall or plenty of fresh water. That pretty much excludes the Southwest desert. China comes to mind with its terraces of rice fields in the rainy mountain regions. Rice has been the main staple of the orient for thousands of years.

Rice arrived in Europe around 700 A.D., thanks again to those invading Moors. Centuries later, when Iberia became Portugal and Spain, and was rid of the Moors, the Spaniards continued cultivating the fields of rice – although it was mostly a food of the privileged class.

In the 1500s, the Spaniards brought rice to the

New World and planted fields first in Hispaniola, and later in the lakes and marshes around Mexico City. However, for unknown reasons, the supply wagons along El Camino Real brought very little rice to New Mexico.

In the meantime, rice plantations became plentiful in the southern U.S. by the mid-1700s. Their high yield and high profits were unfortunately due to the overwhelming use of slave labor. Many of these slaves were captured in the rice fields of Africa and Madagascar. Any slave with prior rice cultivation experience brought top dollar at the auction piers in Charleston, S.C. These slaves taught the American plantation owners how to build and dyke marshes for growing rice on flat land. To add insult to injury, many of these “rice slaves” perished from disease, owing to the stagnant waters of the rice fields, for which they had no immunity.

Following the Civil War, and the end to slavery, rice production fell dramatically in the Southern states.

Rice did not appear in New Mexico until the arrival of the railroad in the 1880s. Much of this rice came from the emerging rice fields in California. This rice was planted by Chinese farmers to support the thousands of Chinese who were building the western railroads in the late 1800s. It was not until the Great Depression, in the 1930s, that inexpensive rice became a popular staple for New Mexican foods.

Our rice never came from Spain. Most of it comes from California, Louisiana, or the Mississippi river bayous. So why is it called Spanish rice? All I can figure is it must be a marketing ploy. Now that you know the real story, eat your “Spanish” rice and keep the secret to yourself.

Grapes and Wines

When Oñate arrived in 1598, Spanish law prevented the export of grapevines to the New World, under penalty of death, to protect the Spanish vineyards and wine industry. Wine was shipped from Spain to the Franciscans at the missions for holy communion, central to each mass, although delivery was often unreliable. The friars needed a local source of wine.

In 1629, Fray Garcia de Zuniga, a Franciscan, and a monk named Antonio de Arteaga, smuggled vines out of Spain. They were secretly planted south of Socorro at the Senecú Pueblo mission.



Photo by Paul Harden

The first vineyard in New Mexico was planted near Socorro, in 1629, by Franciscan friars. Grapes are still grown in the area, like this vineyard in Lemitar.

The wine from Senecú was secretly sent to other New Mexico missions. Thus, Socorro County has the distinction of having the first vineyards in New Mexico. These grapes were those known as “mission grapes” and are still grown in New Mexico today.

In 1633, Spanish law allowed wine to be made at the missions. The Franciscans and Piro Indians at Senecú became a favored winemaker for New Mexico until the 1680 Pueblo Revolt forced the abandonment of the missions.

By the 1800s, New Mexico became a major grape growing region, with most vineyards located along the Rio Grande, from Bernalillo to Socorro. After 1880, the arrival of the railroad allowed New Mexico wines to be sold in distant markets. More than a million gallons of wine was produced along the Rio Grande during this time. However, Prohibition brought a sudden end to most vineyards – including those from San Pedro to Polvadera. Those that were left produced grapes for non-alcoholic purposes. Most of those were wiped out in the flood of 1929.

Some of the oldest vineyards in New Mexico still exist around San Pedro and Lemitar. A resurgence in vineyards has seen a variety of grapes and wines that are still being produced in New Mexico.

Navajo Fry Bread

An especially unique local bread is one that is called “fry bread.” Being a Navajo invention, one would think it must be hundreds of years old. Actually, the date of the invention of fry bread is fairly well known: 1864.

Following the Civil War, the U.S. Army went on a campaign to round up all the Navajo. Christopher “Kit” Carson captured about 4,000 Navajo in Canyon de Chelly. He and his troops killed their livestock, burned their homes and orchards, and even poisoned their wells. Left desperate and with no means of support, the Navajo were forced to surrender. In what is known as the “Long Walk,” Carson marched the starving Navajo 450 miles to Bosque Redondo, near Fort Sumner, in 1864.

Many perished on the trail. In all, about 9,000 Navajo were held captive at Redondo, and the U.S. Army was unable to properly feed them – truly a sad chapter in Army history.

The main commodities rationed to the Navajo were wheat flour and lard. The women learned to mix these ingredients with water and salt to make a dough, which slowly rose into a baked bread in the hot sun, unless one was fortunate enough to have access to an horno or campfire and skillet.

The crude fry bread filled their empty stomachs and has since become a favorite among the Navajo and Apache, the Pueblo Indians and, for that matter, most of us. Today, fry bread is eaten either plain, or often covered with honey or honey butter. The bread is also used for making the equally famous “Navajo taco.” Both are favorites at county fairs, powwows, and on many of the tribal lands. Fortunately, now fry bread is baked under far more favorable conditions than in Redondo. A yummy bread with a sad history.

New Mexican food (not to be confused with Mexican food) is a unique blend of native foods nurtured by the early pueblo Indians, mixed with European vegetables and fruits brought by the Spanish colonists. It is this unique blend of ingredients that leaves New Mexican food with no equal. Every bite is not only *sabroso* (tasty), but full of *historica* (history).

Now, where are those bisquochitos?
