

## **Mexico and its Cuisine**

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### **Overview**

The focus of this curriculum unit, entitled “Mexico and its Cuisine”, will focus on the historical and cultural development of Mexican cuisine. The unit will include, but not be limited to, a discussion of how maize, chocolate, and chilies are an integral part of Mexican cuisine. The Columbian Exchange’s contribution to the Mexican diet will also be presented.

The research for this curriculum unit will emphasize how pre-Columbian, Spanish, and a variety of other cuisines have influenced Mexican cuisine. The Aztec diet will be examined in order to illustrate the possible origin of the modern day Mexican cuisine. A deeper look into Spanish cuisine will relate European influence upon Mexican cuisine. Also, French contribution to Mexican cuisine cannot be ignored in the unit.

My decision to focus this curriculum unit on Mexican cuisine stems from my current Spanish teaching position at The Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA) located in the Cultural District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. CAPA High School provides students an opportunity to study in an academically challenging environment while receiving a quality arts education. Professionals in the areas of visual arts, literary arts, dance, theatre, and music train each student. In order to attend this magnet high school our students must first apply and then be evaluated based upon their

application along with an interview/audition. Once admitted, the student begins a rigorous 4-year program that runs on a non-traditional block schedule. The students attend 3 academic blocks in the morning followed by three intense hours of arts training in the afternoon.

I chose this particular unit to create another tool for integrating culture and academics. This unit is designed for high school students in grades 9-12. With some adaptation the unit could be implemented in grades 5-8 as well. The unit is designed to meet both the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, as set forth by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and the Pittsburgh Public Schools Content Standards. Thus the majority of the activities detailed in this unit will be presented to the students in the target language. This unit is designed for upper level language classes but can easily be adapted for lower levels with minor adjustments in the activities and requirements.

The World Language Department in the Pittsburgh Public School District greatly emphasizes the goal of attaining oral proficiency in the target language. The district has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the development of an online oral proficiency exam that is given annually to between 1500 and 2000 students. The PPS Oral Exam, as it is known, uses open-ended prompts to elicit speech samples from students.

## **Rationale**

American Heritage Dictionary defines cuisine as “a characteristic manner or style of preparing food”. Mexican cuisine is characterized by the fusion of hundreds of years of historical and cultural influence. In fact, Mexican cuisine is sometimes referred to as fusion cuisine. Nonetheless, Mexican cuisine is rich in history, flavor, contrast, texture, and color. A variety of fresh meats, fish, shellfish, fowl, vegetables, and fruits are commonly consumed. It is said that cuisine is culture. I agree wholeheartedly with that statement. Mexican culture has such a direct correlation with its cuisine in my opinion.

Mexican cuisine has been, and is still being, affected greatly by numerous influences. Its influences range from the pre-Columbian era to modern day subtle variation.

Historically, Mexico has undergone a myriad of changes. Their cuisine has also endured a similar transformation. The pre-Columbian era gave way to a period of European conquest and colonization by the Spaniards. Eventually, the Mexican Revolution allowed for Mexican independence from the Europeans. Many years later a period known as “la Reforma” also contributed to the ever-changing Mexican cuisine. I will discuss a variety of these influences that have affected Mexican cuisine.

Pre-Columbian cultural influences include the contributions of the Aztec, Maya, Nahua, Totonac, and Zapotec societies, among many others. In spite of the diversity among these groups, a common, mainly vegetarian cuisine existed. It consisted of a combination of corn and beans with chilies and herbs that provided a sufficient daily intake of protein, among other nutrients.

Prior to Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the New World in 1492, several foods were consumed in the Americas. Among them were beans, chocolate, corn, vanilla, avocado, papaya, pineapple, chili pepper, squash, sweet potato, peanuts, fish, and turkey. Without a doubt, corn was the most influential contribution of the pre-Columbian era to the present-day Mexican cuisine. For that matter, it is one of the most influential contributions to most cuisines worldwide.

According to Betty Fussell, “For thousands of years before corn was popcorn, corn was grass.” Botanically, corn is known as maize, or more accurately, *Zea mays*. Fussell goes on to mention that there are thousands of varieties of corn, so many that they are loosely grouped into more than three hundred races of corn in the Western Hemisphere alone. It is believed that maize domestication took place approximately 9,000 years ago in central Mexico. There are several theories as to how this process evolved. Essentially it is the combination of a Mexican annual teosinte and material from *Zea mays*.

A process performed by Indians called nixtamalization enhanced corn's nutritional value tremendously. The process involved soaking corn in an alkaline solution, typically limewater, to improve the nutritional value, increase the flavor and aroma, and to allow it to be ground more easily. Traditional and industrial methods of nixtamalization have been a vital step in the processing of corn in the production of tortillas, tamales, etc.

Corn was a major part of one of the earliest influences of Mexican cuisine. *Comida prehispánica*, or pre-Hispanic food had a typical dish known as tlacoyos. Tlacoyos are small fish cooked in cornhusks. *Comida prehispánica* also included what is now considered exotic fare such as deer, rabbit, armadillos, rattlesnakes, iguanas, spider monkeys, pigeons, turtles, frogs, and insects.

During the period of conquest and colonization corn was one of many foods native to the Americas that was exported back to Europe and consequently all over the world. This period of export, but also import, is known as the Columbian Exchange. This exchange benefited everyone involved. Some of the more common foods leaving the Americas were beans, potatoes, squash, berries, chocolate, vanilla, and of course chilies. The New World benefited immensely from the arrival of vast numbers of European foods that were brought to the New World by the Spaniards. Among them were wheat, oats, rice, beef, pig, poultry, and sugar to name a few.

Aside from corn, chilies may be one of the widest spread foods to come from the Americas. According to Jean Andrews, the Spaniards called the peppers they encountered *pimiento* based on what Columbus thought he would find, *pimienta*. *Pimienta* is the Spanish word for black pepper. As time went on Columbus heard the peppers referred to in Nahuatl as what he thought was *chilli*. Today's Spanish translation *chile* is derived from the Nahuatl term.

Chilies are a vital part of Mexican cuisine. Their color, aroma, and flavor offer a distinct addition to authentic Mexican dishes. Suggested reading in this unit offers a much more descriptive and detailed look at the chili pepper and its uses.

Sophie and Michael Coe point out the origin of cacao lies with the Maya as opposed to the Aztecs. A thousand years before the Spaniards arrived in the Americas the Maya were writing the word for chocolate on pottery vessels used to serve the drink to nobility. Later the Spanish and English word chocolate came from the Nahuatl word *chocolatl*. During the Spanish conquest, Hernan Cortés and emperor Moctezuma were said to have consumed quite a bit of a chocolate drink. Moctezuma was known to have consumed upwards of 50 small cups of chocolate in a very short amount of time. Chocolate has a crucial role in cuisine as well. Many dishes include chocolate as an ingredient. One of the more authentic Mexican dishes containing chocolate would be *pavo en mole poblano*. The use of chocolate in food would have been something that the Aztecs would have frowned upon. Thankfully the use of chocolate became more common as time went on and spread throughout the world. It took some time to catch on in Europe, but eventually became the multi-million dollar industry that it is today.

Several years after Mexico gained its independence from Spain, a period of Mexican history known as “La Reforma” took place. During this period Mexico’s president, Porfirio Díaz pushed what is known as *comida afrancesada*, or food with a French influence. His infatuation with the French culture was integral in augmenting an existing desire to incorporate French cuisine into Mexican cuisine. French cooking terms and techniques began permeating Mexican cuisine. The Mexican cooking technique known as *Baño Maria* derived from the French technique *Bain Marie*. This was a method of cooking in a pot that was submerged within another pot of water. Many Mexican pastries and desserts have a French background. *Bolovanes* were originally French known as *vol-au-vent*. The bread, known as *bolillo*, used in making the common Mexican sandwich called a *torta* had a French touch.

## **Objectives**

The National Standards for Foreign Language Learning outline what are known as the “5 C’s”. The “5 C’s” are Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Keeping the National Standards as well as our district’s content standards in mind I have come up with the following objectives for this curriculum unit:

- Students will identify significant historical figures, dates, and concepts relevant to Mexican culture.
- Students will discover the relationship between historical circumstances and the development of cuisine.
- Students will learn various aspects of the Aztec civilizations.
- Students will learn various aspects of the Spanish conquest.
- Students will increase overall vocabulary by a minimum of 25 words.
- Students will improve their writing skills with regards to descriptive elements, essay organization and structure, and the difference between the Spanish Preterite and Imperfect verb tenses.

Ultimately the objective of this unit is to reinforce with students the premise that in order to truly understand a language, you must also have an understanding of the culture of the people speaking that language.

### **Strategies**

In this unit the strategy will be to familiarize the students with the historical, cultural, and technical concepts relevant to Mexican cuisine.

The students will examine Mexican history, as far back as the pre-Columbian era coupled with the more recent history. In order to do this effectively the students will be required to do their own research, make oral presentations, write essays, and create recipes of their own.

The activities included in the unit require a certain level of target language on behalf of the students. If the students have not yet attained this level please adjust the activity or create a new one that will allow the students to succeed. Ideally the students will better understand how language learning can be combined with other disciplines to analyze aspects of customs and practices that are foreign to them. The discussion generated in the classroom will allow students to express their points of view and ideas stemming from their interaction with the historical references and the accompanying cultural resources.

### **Classroom Activities**

Due to the varying length of classes, and/or time available to complete this unit, I will leave the length of time spent on the following activities up to the individual instructor.

It is essential that the students get an overview of Mexican history and current cuisine. Using the various resources presented in this unit, introduce the background information for three of the major time periods of Mexican history. Begin with the pre-Columbian period, then the independence and reform period, finishing with the revolution.

After presenting the background information, the following, or a similar activity, can be used to assess the students' knowledge:

Nombre \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

Bloque \_\_\_\_\_

### Guía de Vocabulario

#### **La Historia**

Los Azteca \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Quetzalcóatl \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Hernan Cortés \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Benito Juarez \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Porfirio Diaz \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Alvaro Obregón \_\_\_\_\_

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Francisco Madero

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Emiliano Zapata

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**Conceptos**

Hacienda

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La Reforma

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Mexicanidad

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La Independencia

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**Fechas Importantes**

1521

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1821

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1861

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1910

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Using food realia, introduce as much of the food vocabulary as possible using the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. Possible realia could include, but is not limited to, plastic food, photographs of food, or Internet images of food. There are several ways to use TPR to teach and to reinforce vocabulary. In particular, my students thoroughly enjoy tossing plastic foods about the room when prompted.

If you would like to include a grammar component in this unit I suggest that the teachers have the students complete a cloze activity. An example would be to provide the students with a historical description omitting several of the preterit and imperfect verbs. They would then fill in the missing verbs with the correct conjugations.

Once the students have the background under their belts they are ready to begin discussion of the cuisine. I would recommend making transparencies or using an LCD projector to project the vibrant food images being examined on a large screen or wall. This tends to promote a better discussion in my opinion. The impact from this view intrigues the students and seems to make for a better discussion. Ideally, authentic food would be used. Unfortunately, that may not be a realistic resource for most of us.

Have the students describe what they see in the target language. Ask them to describe what the food is that they are looking at. Ask them what ingredients are most likely used to make the food. Ask them about the colors they see and how that influences their desire to eat the given food. Ask if the students have had the opportunity to eat what is being displayed. You may want to talk about authentic restaurants in the area that may serve these types of dishes. Basically, you want the students to say as much as they possibly can about the images they see. Allow them to express their opinions, no matter what they are. As long as they are in the target language, of course.

The students now have the tools to conduct their own research. Put the students in groups of three or four, depending on the class size. Have each group look for recipes that are intriguing to them. After compiling a minimum of 20 recipes, have the students analyze the ingredients included in the recipe. The students need to determine whether the recipe would have been possible during the pre-Columbian era or would it have to have been created after the Columbian Exchange.

Make the students aware that they will receive both an individual grade and a group grade for their effort and enthusiasm during the cookbook project.

Possible Vocabulary Quiz Words:

Nombre \_\_\_\_\_

Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

Bloque \_\_\_\_\_

Ajo

Albóndigas  
Al Horno  
Antojito  
Arroz  
Asar  
Bizcochos  
Borracho  
Buñuelo  
Calabaza  
Caldo  
Camarón  
Canela  
Carnero  
Carne a la Tampiqueña  
Carnitas  
Cebolla  
Ceviche  
Chalupa  
Chiles en nogada  
Chiles rellenos  
Chipotle  
Chorizo  
Churro  
Chuleta  
Cilantro  
Comal  
Crema  
Elote  
Empanada  
Enrollado  
Ensalada  
Fideos  
Flan  
Flauta  
Galletas  
Gazpacho  
Habanero  
Harina  
Helado  
Huevo  
Huevos revueltos  
Jugo de Naranja  
Leche  
Lechuga  
Maíz  
Mano

Mantequilla  
Manzana  
Mariscos  
Masa  
Nixtamal  
Hoja  
Olla  
Pan Dulce  
Pepino  
Picadillo  
Picante  
Pimienta  
Piña  
Posole  
Puerco  
Rábano  
Refrescos  
Relleno  
Repollo  
Salsa  
Seco  
Sopa  
Tacos al carbón  
Tacos al pastor  
Tamale  
Tomatillo  
Torta  
Tortilla  
Uvas  
Vainilla

## **Annotated Bibliography**

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Smith, Andrew F. The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America.  
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### **Internet Resources**

<http://www.foodtimeline.org/foodmaya.html#aztec>

<http://www.cambridge.org:80/us/books/kiple/mexico.htm>

[http://www.inmamaskitchen.com/Mexican\\_Food\\_Cooking/Mexican\\_Food\\_Cooking.html](http://www.inmamaskitchen.com/Mexican_Food_Cooking/Mexican_Food_Cooking.html)

<http://www.fotosearch.com/photos-images/mexican-food.html>

<http://www.egolionline.com/recipes/Mexican%20Cuisine.html>

[http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_search.php?action=file&text=%22mexican+cuisine%22&58b8613f9928e141fad5eff798bd90e6\\_4\\_105062=mexican+cuisine](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_search.php?action=file&text=%22mexican+cuisine%22&58b8613f9928e141fad5eff798bd90e6_4_105062=mexican+cuisine)

<http://www.foodtimeline.org/foodmexican.html>

<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/proceedings1996/V3-479.html#HISTORY>

[http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/recipes/puebla/kg0205.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/recipes/puebla/kg0205.html)

<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/mexican-food-history.html>

<http://www.texmextogo.com/Glossary.htm>

<http://www.mexicanmercados.com/food/foodhist.htm>

<http://www.foodreference.com/html/artmexicancuisine.html>

<http://www.mexconnect.com/MEX/austin/0996food.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hominy>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nixtamalization>

## **Appendix – Content Standards**

### **A. NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

## COMMUNICATION

### Communicate in Languages Other Than English

- Standard 1.1: Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions
- Standard 1.2: Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics
- Standard 1.3: Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

## CULTURES

### Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures

- Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied
- Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied

## CONNECTIONS

### Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information

- Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language
- Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures

## COMPARISONS

### Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

- Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own
- Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

## COMMUNITIES

### Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home & Around the World

- Standard 5.1: Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting

## **B. Citizenship**

1. All students demonstrate an understanding of major events, cultures groups and individuals in the historical development of Pennsylvania, the United States, assess their own relationships between geography, historical, economic, and cultural development.
2. All students demonstrate understanding of themes and patterns of geography, know the location of major bodies of water, landmasses and nations, and describe the relationships between geography and historical, economic and cultural development.

4. All students examine and evaluate problems facing citizens in their communities, state, nations, and world by incorporating concepts and methods of inquiry of the various social sciences.
5. All students develop and defend a position on current events, confronting the United States and other nations, conducting research, analyzing alternatives, organizing evidence and arguments, and making oral presentations.
7. All students demonstrate their skills of communicating, negotiating and cooperating with others.
8. All students demonstrate that they can work effectively with others.
9. All students demonstrate an understanding of the history and nature of prejudice and relate their knowledge to current issues facing communities, the United States and other nations.

### **C. Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening**

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform, or describe.