

ORGANIC LIVING

By

Robert Rodale

Mexican Food Has Health Advantages

At last there's a new food sensation that's not just good-tasting, but good for us, too. I'm talking about Mexican foods, the most popular of the ethnic foods that have started to catch on in the United States in recent years.

Enchiladas, tacos, posole, guacomole, jalopeno bean dip and other southwestern specialties are exciting the palates of folks who've never ventured south of the Mason-Dixon Line. And at the same time they're adding solid nutritional value to our snacking and dining-out habits.

People in Mexico, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico have lived on those foods for hundreds of years, through necessity. They created a healthful diet, high in vitamins, minerals and natural food fiber, but low in refined flour, sugar and other health-wreckers. The emphasis is on whole ground corn, vegetables, beans and rice with very little rich or fatty meat.

Chili pepper is a central ingredient in Mexican cookery. A member of the nightshade family, like potatoes and tomatoes, chili was used in Indian and Spanish folk medicine as a remedy for inflamed kidneys, diarrhea, chills, heart pains, internal tumors and many other ailments.

New Mexicans who eat large amounts of chili have very low heart disease and cancer death rates. Medical experts aren't sure just why that is, but Dr. Lora M. Shields, a biologist at Highlands University in New Mexico, has theorized that "the action of chili peppers consumed often and liberally may rid the body of enough fats to lower the consumer's blood fat level and reduce his chances of having a heart attack."

Scientists DO know that the peppers are a fabulously concentrated source of certain nutrients. One ounce of ground dried chili can contain as high as 20,000 units of



vitamin A. And fresh pods even more. It's estimated that a typical serving of some Mexican food can supply more than 100,000 units of vitamin A! Chili peppers are also an excellent source of vitamin C and calcium.

If fiery foods are not for you, don't despair. Chili peppers are available in varying degrees of strength, and researchers have found no difference in nutritional values between the mildest and the hottest.

The red chili is also an effective natural food preservative. It retards the oxidation of meat and fats and delays rancidity. Chicken, beef, and other frozen meat dishes can be stored longer when they contain chili.

Corn is another staple food of the Southwest. It's not a completed food in itself, mainly because it's low in niacin and lysine, an amino acid needed to provide high quality protein. Yet whole civilizations have survived eating little else. Now we know how.

The secret is in the way the corn is prepared and served. Southwestern people have traditionally heated the dried corn in an alkaline, limewater solution, before making it into tortillas (the Mexican equivalent of our bread). The lime treatment makes lysine and other nutrients more available, as well as increasing the calcium content as much as twentyfold.

"Without alkali processing of corn, there would be a considerable degree of malnutrition in societies where corn is the major part of the diet," three University of Pennsylvania researchers reported recently in the journal Science.

The early originators of Mexican cuisine also had the wisdom to combine corn with beans, which contain the amino acids that former lacks. The garbanzo bean was a particularly good choice. One cup provides protein equal to 4½ ounces of lean steak.

Whether you're just beginning to sample the excitement of Mexican food at restaurants, or already involved in preparing your own fresh dishes at home, a few words of advice are in order:

-When you're buying ready-made tortillas, be certain they're made of corn, not white flour. Flour tortillas taste like paste, and their nutritional value is close to zero. That is also something to keep in mind when you're ordering in restaurants.

-Proceed carefully when you try new chili dishes if you're a novice. Taste a little bit. The chili should be pleasantly warm in the mouth. If it's too hot, drink a little milk or add some honey. If you're dealing with red chili and it's too much for you, thin it down with tomato juice or sauce.

-Be cautious in eating anything containing chili seeds. If they appear, the food is HOT.

-In the kitchen, never handle chili without rubber gloves if you've got any cuts on your hands. Never put your hands anywhere near your face when you're preparing chili dishes.

Chili can't injure, but it can cause considerable discomfort if it gets into the eye.

Here's a recipe you can try that will introduce your family to the delights of homemade Mexican cuisine:

Mexican Pan-Bread

- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon oil
- ½ cup dried kidney beans, cooked
- ¾ cup bean liquid (reserved from cooking the beans)
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 cup corn meal
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- ½ teaspoon cumin, ground
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1-3 cup grated cheese

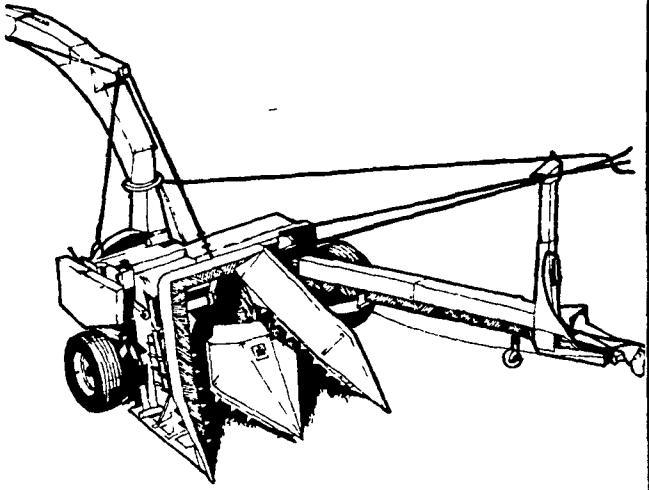
In a heavy-bottom skillet, saute onion and garlic in oil. In a medium-sized mixing bowl, mix together all the remaining ingredients, except the cheese. Pour this mixture into the skillet and stir to mix well. Sprinkle grated cheese on top and bake in preheated 350 degree oven for about 10 minutes. Yields four servings.

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The creators of Mexican cuisine got along fine without chemical preservatives, flavoring and coloring. You can too, after reading the 48-page booklet, "Make It With Natural Foods." It's available for fifty cents from Robert Rodale, Organic Living, in care of this newspaper. Please ask for the booklet by name and allow at least three weeks for delivery.

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