

YUCATÁN: A CULINARY EXPEDITION

INGREDIENTS



MAÍZ

Botanical name

Zea mays

Mayan name

Xi'im

Common English names

Corn, maize

Etymology

- *Maíz* was first reported to the Old World by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in 1492, when he wrote about Columbus' exploration of Cuba. He noted that the Arawak speaking peoples of the Caribbean islands called this New World food *maiz* or *mabiz*, which the Spanish absorbed into their own vocabulary.
- *Zea mays* is the scientific name given by Linnaeus in 1753, which he created by joining the ancient Greek/Latin word for "grain" (*zeia* Gr. *zea* L.) with the Arawak word *mabiz*.
- *Corn* is an Old English word derived from *kernam* or "small seed" which in turn derived from the Latin *granum*.
 - *Maize* is a derivative of the Spanish *maíz*.
- **NOTE:** Most of us use the word "corn" incorrectly. The word originally referred generically to any number of primary grains, such as wheat in England and oats in Scotland. If we wish to refer specifically to the New World grain, we should probably use the word "maize".

History and heritage

The most cultivated and evolved grain, *maíz* in a primitive form was waiting for humans by the time they arrived in the Americas 40,000 years ago. The precise origins of *maíz* as we know it today are difficult to trace because fossil evidence is limited and few wild varieties still exist for study. There are many theories explaining its appearance, but the most prominent suggests that present-day *maíz* evolved in a single step from a more ancient grain, *teocintle*, as humans worked at cultivating the grain. Once this domestication began, humans selected the best grains for planting, which over time gave rise to entirely new and improved varieties. While natural selection occurred over millennia, the truly radical evolutions in *maíz* occurred more quickly due to such human intervention. The domesticated *maíz* we know today is *Zea mays*, which emerged as a species by human hand some 4,600 years ago in the valley of Tehuacán in present-day Puebla. But it was not until 1500 B.C. that the Olmecs – predecessors of the Maya – first grew an improved variety characterized by a large, hard kernel suitable for long term storage. *Maíz* was the Maya symbol of life, and *maíz* rituals marked the beginning and the end: the umbilical cord of a newborn was cut over a *maíz* cob, and a ball of *maíz* dough was placed in the mouth of the recently deceased. According to the Mayan book *Popul Vuh*, man was created from *maíz*, lives by it and has it flowing through his veins.

Culinary uses

While *Zea mays* dries and stores efficiently, the Olmecs realized that grinding and consuming the grain could be made easier by first rehydrating the kernels, which they did through a process known as *nixtamalization*, involving boiling the dried grain in water mixed with calcium hydroxide. Coincidentally, this process greatly increased the nutritional value of the food, making it possible to become a true staple. It is inaccurate to say that *maíz* was an important part of the Maya diet. Instead, *maíz* and above all the tortilla (*waaj*) was the Maya diet. The elaboration of *maíz* dishes over the centuries took so many forms that it is impossible to list them all. From beverages to thickened gruels, from *tamales* to *tortillas*, *maíz* formed the major part of the diet throughout Mesoamerica and is still the staple diet of indigenous peoples in Yucatán. In fact, it is the Maya people who maintain "the most ancient and continuous cultural relationship with maize among extant aboriginal peoples of Mesoamerica."¹

1. Salvador, Ricardo J. "Maize". In *The Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Culture and Society*. London, England: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997.