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CONACULTA (Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y Las Artes, Mexico): *Cocina Indigena y Popular*. Mexico City: Conaculta, 1999-2001. 54 v.

This set of 54 small cookbooks is a striking achievement in culinary ethnography. Mexican food is a unique and complex fusion of Mediterranean and Native American traditions. Mexico being a diverse nation ethnically, the food is correspondingly varied. Around 60 indigenous languages are still spoken in the nation. Communities derived from Old World roots include not only those of Spanish background, but also Arabs, Afro-Mexicans, Ukrainieans, Low-German-speaking Mennonites, and many others.

Mexico's government branch dedicated to arts and culture, CONACULTA, includes the Dirección General de Culturas Populares, an agency dealing with popular and indigenous culture. This agency has recently issued a 54-volume series of cookbooks from traditional communities around the country. About half the volumes deal with the cuisines of various indigenous groups. Other volumes cover such minorities as Afro-Mexicans and Mennonites. Still others deal with particular plants or types of food; volume 48 is devoted to cactus foods, volume 50 to flavouring plants of Veracruz, and so on. The series is a highly commendable effort to provide ethnographic documentation for cuisines that have heretofore been, at best, poorly documented. Several of the volumes are bilingual, using indigenous languages. (Where else are you going to find recipes in Tepehuan or Totonac?)

The first volume, *Recetario nahua del norte de Veracruz* by Marina Ramirez Mar (1999, second edition 2001), has recently been reissued with a foreword by Laura Esquivel (the author of *Like Water for Chocolate*). It is typical of the series; other volumes generally share its good and bad points.

Among the good points are the usually clear, systematic, easy-to-follow recipes. The food of the Nahua is comprehensively covered. Also, the book is bilingual. (Standard – i.e. Mexico City area – Nahuatl is used, rather than the Nahua dialect of Veracruz.) In addition to the recipes, there are some bits of local folklore, such as the idea that armadillo meat can be poisonous because the animals eat 'vipers and herbs' (p. 113 – presumably toxic herbs are meant), actually, armadillos live on insects, and are safe eating.

Among the bad points: little background is given; we are not told how, or from whom, the recipes were obtained. A problem with this book is that it provides no identification – let alone suggestions for substitution – for most of the local animals and plants mentioned. Thus,

unless one has a dictionary of Nahuatl to hand, one is hopelessly lost trying to understand or reproduce many of the recipes. The brocket deer is defined only as being like a gazelle (p.137). Some local Spanish words also need definition. We are not told, for instance, that the '*tejon*' of Veracruz (p.139) is not the badger (the *tejon* of standard Spanish – for which recipes appear in other volumes of the series) but the coati, a raccoonlike animal that is generally considered far more edible than the badger. The author notes that the 'tejon' is in danger of extinction, which is not the case. Unfortunately, she provides no such note for the brocket deer, which genuinely is in danger, or for some other animals becoming all too rare. Even armadillos are being eaten to extinction in much of their range.

Other volumes range from extremely thorough, authoritative and clear to quite superficial. Most have accounts of the peoples treated, with food-related information ranging from local geography to festivals and celebrations. Some, such as volume 26 (*Recetario pame de San Luis Potosi y Querétaro*, 2000), will be of interest to social scientists as well as food scholars. The Pame are a very poorly known group, and this work gives an excellent short ethnography of them.

Almost all are, unfortunately, plagued by failure to identify key ingredients; sometimes these are actually misidentified, with potentially dangerous results. Many include recipes for threatened or endangered species, without the slightest indication that such recipes must now involve substitution, for both legal and moral reasons. The first volume's concern for the *tejon* is, alas, typical. Volume 32, *Recetario exótico de Sinaloa* (2000), is perhaps the worst; the recipes are exotic largely because they involve wild foods, yet there is not a word about the desperate plight in Sinaloa (a north-west Mexican state) of the animal species mentioned, even though their rapid decline is, in fact, due in most cases to their popularity as food.

In spite of limitations, the series is extremely important. It provides unique ethnographic documentation of a vast, wonderful, little-known spectrum of related cuisines.

The books are issued in press runs of 2,000. Most of the early volumes are already unavailable, at least in book stores. The rest will be sold out soon. Anyone interested in this unique resource should move quickly. The relevant address is Dirección General de Culturas Populares, Av. Revolución 1877, 6th Floor, San Ángel, CP 01000, México, D.F., México.

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