

Processed Modernity: Cooking Ingredients and the Materiality of Food

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the meanings and values articulated through the use of preserved and (ultra)processed foods in everyday cooking in Mérida, Yucatán. Most studies on the practices deployed in the kitchen have tended to focus on cooking instruments and appliances, as well as on the part played by cookbooks and other instruments in the reproduction of culinary knowledges and practices. In contrast, here I focus on the very ingredients used in by cooks, arguing that through their materiality and their aesthetics, cooking ingredients contribute to the objectification of local values. The choice of ingredients by one or another cook expresses values such as “modern” and cosmopolitan, and simultaneously support claims of “authenticity” and “tradition,” and thus are lived as constitutive of regional identity. The use of preserved and processed foods is a common practice in Yucatán’s domestic and restaurant kitchens, which, as elsewhere, has historical grounds. There have been in the city of Mérida, since the turn of the twentieth century, industrial plants making beer, cookies and crackers, vegetable oils, soda drinks, chili pepper sauces, and recados (different pastes of spices). More recently, local industries have begun to package local dishes to sell them frozen, canned or vacuum-packed in plastic containers. I argue that these ingredients are important in transforming the local taste of and for Yucatecan food, and that, as objects that receive and give meaning to regional culinary culture, they become an important locus for the discursive and praxis-based negotiations of local forms of “modernity.”

Keywords

Ingredients; Materiality; *Recados*; Processed foods; Yucatán



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Переработанная современность: кулинарные ингредиенты и материальность пищи

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Аннотация

В данной работе я исследую смыслы и ценности, артикулируемые посредством использования консервированных и (ультра)обработанных продуктов в повседневной кулинарии в Мериде, Юкатан. Большинство исследований, посвященных практикам, применяемым на кухне, как правило, сосредоточены на кухонных инструментах и бытовых приборах, а также на той роли, которую играют поваренные книги и другие средства в воспроизводстве кулинарных знаний и практик. В отличие от этого, здесь я фокусируюсь на самих ингредиентах, используемых поварами, утверждая, что благодаря своей материальности и эстетике кулинарные ингредиенты способствуют объективации местных ценностей. Выбор ингредиентов тем или иным поваром выражает такие ценности, как «современность» и космополитизм, и одновременно поддерживает претензии на «подлинность» и «традиционность», а значит, переживается как конституирование региональной идентичности. Использование консервированных и обработанных продуктов – распространенная практика в домашней и ресторанной кухне Юкатана, которая, как и везде, имеет исторические основания. В городе Мерида с начала двадцатого века существовали промышленные предприятия по производству пива, печенья и крекеров, растительных масел, газированных напитков, соусов из перца чили и рекадос (различные пасты из специй). Совсем недавно местные предприятия начали упаковывать местные блюда, чтобы продавать их замороженными, консервированными или упакованными в вакуумные пластиковые контейнеры. Я утверждаю, что эти ингредиенты играют важную роль в трансформации местного вкуса юкатекской кухни, и что, будучи объектами, которые получают и придают смысл региональной кулинарной культуре, они становятся важным местом для дискурсивных и практических дискуссий о местных вариантах «современности».

Ключевые слова

ингредиенты; материальность; рекадос; консервированные продукты; Юкатан



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Introduction: the Routinization of Industrialized Foods

In October 2019 I visited a new store specialized in lamb cuts. Next to the counter where they keep the frozen meat, a small box displayed small packages (100 gr each) of vacuum packaged *cochinita pibil* and *lechón en relleno negro*. The former is a long-established dish in Yucatán, while the latter is a recent innovation on the recipe of *lechón al horno*. Each of these individually sized pouches contains a portion of a meal that correspond with “traditional” recipes for which *recados* exist. Both packages list only natural condiments and no artificial preservatives, color or flavor enhancers. *Recados* are a local combination of spices, herbs and flavoring and thickening ingredients (usually garlic and the juice of Seville oranges) used to convey the “correct” flavor of a meal, much like Oaxaca *moles* and Indian *masalas*. For example, *lechón al horno* (baked piglet) is supposed to be piglet baked in an oven –although piglets are difficult to acquire, and cooks are constrained to use pork meat. Cooks marinate the meat with the juice of Seville oranges, and a *recado* made grinding black peppercorns, garlic, salt, oregano and bay leaves. After marinating for several hours, they bake the meat along with some guano leaves (*Thrinax radiata*) for aroma. *Cochinita pibil* is pork cooked in a pit oven (locally called *pib*). Cooks previously marinate the meat for several hours with a paste made with the juice of Seville oranges, *achiote* (annatto), black pepper, cumin, nutmeg, onion, garlic, and depending on the cook, with ground allspice peppercorns, cinnamon, and cloves (see Rodríguez, 2015, pp. 58-59)¹. After wrapping the meat with banana leaves cooks place it in the pit oven, covering it with branches and leaves, and bake it for eight or more hours.²

¹ Most, but not all the ingredients I have listed are found in Rodríguez's cookbook (2015).

² Recipes may vary from cook to cook. Some may use or omit one of the ingredients, but still, the taste must be alike and recognizable. Sometimes variations are introduced because of fluctuations in access to ingredients. For example, despite its local importance and production, sometimes coriander seeds are not easy to find. Illustrating these variations, a cook in a small city in the northeast of Yucatán told me he uses small amounts of *achiote* in preparing *lechón*. Despite this unusual ingredient, he says his customers like it, and some have told him they prefer his rendition over other more “traditional” formulae.



Fig. 1. Cook preparing the pib for cochinita pibil. Tixkokob, Yucatan, 2019.

The company, named *Maya Foods*, began processing and vacuum packaging these dishes in small pouches. In a newspaper interview they stressed values associated with modern foods: they assure that their meat is hygienic, free of bacteria and other living microorganisms, and most important, they claim to have improved the process, making the meat more appealing (they point out that early attempts to can cochinita pibil by other companies turned the meat into a paste, instead of the texture of shredded meat – similar to pulled pork) (*Progreso Hoy*, Oct. 8, 2018. See also the Mayan Foods company's website at: <https://www.mayanfood.com.mx>).

Variations in a few of the ingredients transform similar dishes into locally discernible ones. More often, cochinita is made with achiote, lechon is not. Allspice peppercorns in cochinita impart the aroma and flavors of cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves, missing in lechon. Banana leaves and guano leaves also add different aromas; and baking the meat (in both cases pork and not piglet) in either a pit oven or a bakery oven result in different textures. In principle, the cook must use the “right” recado, otherwise his or her dish will taste differently of what all consumers expect. In this context, “lechon in relleno negro” is a new urban development. I have found people who say they like this new version, and suggested the best places to find it, but others have said to me that don’t even consider tasting it, preferring the established, “traditional” style.¹ These differences in flavor, aroma, texture, color, are the result of using recados, well-known spice pastes that should make us pay attention to the materiality and meaning of edible ingredients, especially those of spices and condiments.



Fig. 2. Home made Lechón al horno. Tizimin, Yucatán. 2028.

¹ I have found a similar response to different “innovations.” For example, queso relleno (stuffed cheese) is the emptied shell of an Edam cheese stuffed with ground pork mixed with capers, saffron, chopped sweet green pimientos, onion and tomatoes, and ground allspice peppercorns. One restaurant introduced for lent days the same cheese stuffed with cazón (hogfish), and friends who tried it told me it was out of curiosity, they liked the taste, but prefer the “traditional” version.



Fig. 3. Cochinita serving at a Yucatecan Restaurant. Mérida, 2019.

Although vacuum packing these meals in plastic pouches may seem an insignificant practice, it signals a small, but apparent incongruity: despite tacit references to a concern for “natural,” “organic,” and “traditional” ingredients, the portions of cochinita and lechon are sold in plastic pouches. This seems to be almost a trivial fact, except that it is precisely its *apparent* insignificance that heightens the routinization and the widespread everyday social acceptance of industrialized edible goods. If vacuum packaged meals in plastic seem ordinary and inconsequential, they coincide with other “trivial” practices that are indexical of the routine acceptance of industrialized food. For example, some five years ago, at a birthday party, I found that our hosts served fruit salad sprinkled with phosphorescent red and green salts. I was surprised, but younger guests explained to me that this is not a new practice. People at the table said to enjoy the citrusy flavor of the salt and the almost effervescent hotness of the chili pepper. For several decades prior to this party, a fruit salad (*xek* in Maya language) – made with green fruits such as mango, along with slices of bananas, pineapple, Valencia oranges, small San José oranges (*Citrofortunella mitis*), and jicama – has been served as a snack at parties. They were usually sprinkled with ground dry red chili peppers (*chile de árbol*, *Capsicum annuum* L.), salt and lime juice. Today, the dressing often includes chem-

ical color and flavor enhancers as well as, very often, Monosodium Glutamate (MSG). Several brands are widely available to enhance the fruits' flavors. Many friends, both in Yucatán and in Mexico City have told me that they enjoy the flavors of these artificially colored and flavored salts.

Yucatán consumers have grown used to the flavor and texture of canned ingredients (Ayora-Díaz, 2014). Several local friends in Yucatán, including some who claim to be “foodies,” have told me that they find no discernible difference between the flavor of freshly made refried and black beans stew, and the flavor of their canned versions: “they taste like the real ones” – although some have confessed that they need to “correct” them adding fried onions, fresh epazote leaves, and chicken stock cubes, rich in MSG. Consumers tend to see (and defend) canned, industrially processed goods as important relief in their busy contemporary life. Likewise, I have found many men and women who have praised industrially processed and ultra-processed foods as means to save money and time in their everyday chores, especially so when they are single mothers or when they must fulfil their roles as wives, mothers, and in addition work outside their homes. They often defend their use of these canned and preserved ingredients and meals highlighting their convenience, hygiene, price, and ready availability. Thanks to these products they can, in a short time, put a whole meal together.

Drawing from the texts of classical economists, Robin Leidner (1993, p. 1) discusses the routinization of work in fast food chains. She argues that work is routinized by fragmenting tasks and making them repetitive. This production strategy leads to product uniformity, and this logic is subsequently transferred to the relationship between workers and service consumers, and then to consumers who, in general, come to accept this mode of interaction as “natural.” In this chapter I am concerned with the routinization of flavors and taste as they are mediated by mechanisms of repetition and fragmentation that, as I have argued, lead to the “naturalization of taste” (Ayora-Díaz, 2012). This is a lasting global trend that has led to what Winson (2013) has called the industrial diet. Here I argue that these ingredients and meals are important elements for local material culture that contribute by constructing, *but also in undoing* regional identity. To support this argument, I stress the Yucatán people's appropriation and naturalization of modern values that support the consumption of industrialized ingredients and meals. In this sense, the favorable disposition toward processed and ultra-processed foods becomes “naturalized” through its repetitive consumption and the appropriation of corporate reasons (convenience, hygiene, price) that justify judging them with positive values (Shove, 2003).

The Materiality of Cooking

While usually classified as immaterial culture, cooking and food have a materiality that we need to recognize to better understand the material foundations of the relationship between cooking, eating and identity. In discussing the importance

of social and cultural matters on material culture, Daniel Miller emphasized the importance of looking at the materiality of the world and, at the same time, warned against fetishizing it (Miller, 1998). In a later text, he suggested (2005, loc. 147) that “objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not ‘see’ them.” Along those lines, Lemonnier (2012, pp. 11, 14) has argued that anthropologists must pay attention to mundane objects, because, despite their apparent ordinariness, they can, in some circumstances, and for specific groups, play an important part articulating practices, ideas, cultural values and social relations into meaningful things. For example, for most Mexicans corn tortilla is an everyday staple, but others (for example those using the Michoacan Paradigm, recognized by UNESCO, for nationalist purposes) see it as an object charged with symbolic, historic, cultural importance that needs to be defended.

Miller (2010, pp. 6-7) also suggests that by looking at “stuff” (humans included), that is, at everyday objects and their relational and contextual meanings, we can acquire a deeper understanding both of persons and our social arrangements and aggregates. I believe this is the case in point for food production and consumption. Often, the production of meals is a hidden process in domestic and restaurant kitchens – although for some customers the spectacularization of cooking is perceived as an asset in some restaurants, and for some types of food (like the Japanese *teppanyaki*). However, often we do not see (or are uninterested in) what technologies are used to make our food, nor we witness the selection and use of ingredients – other than when watching TV shows. When we consume a meal, we tend to pay attention to its aesthetic qualities: colors, aroma, flavor, textures, or composition on the plate, but many people are unable to identify the ingredients in their meal. Because they are usually ground, fried, stewed, ingredients in sauces or stews, for example, may be concealed from our sight and we may like or dislike the flavors or aroma, but we are not aware, for example, of which ingredients were used to make it, nor of the instruments employed in their production; or whether, for example, before searing the steak in a high temperature oven or a coal grill, the chef precooked it in a *sous vide*. And yet, the technologies used in the kitchen are often an important locus for studies of the materiality of food.

The importance of these objects is reflected in many studies. For example, all 39 chapters in the volume *Food and Material Culture* (McWilliams, 2014) focus on the tools and instruments used for cooking, serving, or consuming meals. Even the two chapters on etiquette look at the way in which, and how, different utensils were used at the table (Riley, 2014; Sutton, 2014). These objects have been the focus of many publications on the material culture of domestic kitchens: How were they furnished? What appliances could be found at home in different historical periods? How was/is the gendered categorization of kitchen work related to the availability and everyday use of the appliances, instruments and utensils found in the kitchen and the table? Consequently, objects, instruments, and tools such as knives, pots,

spoons, different types of ovens, fridges, tableware, receive privileged attention in seeking an understanding of how the meanings of these mundane objects is negotiated among different agents (Cockburn & Dilic, 1994; Freeman, 2004; Johnson & Lloyd, 2004; Miller, 2001; Pink, 2004). Similarly, in the volume *Cooking Technology. Culinary Transformations in Mexico and Latin America* (Ayora-Díaz, 2016), most authors examine the part played by different cooking instruments, tools, and appliances in shaping the meaning of the food cooked and shared in different contexts.

Although several chapters in the latter volume highlight the use of specific ingredients in making Mexican foods, only two chapters explicitly examine the part played by ingredients in the elaboration of meals (in addition to the use of different appliances). Ayora-Díaz (2016a) defines ingredients as a technology (because of their techno-scientific nature) and thus as meaningful material elements in meals (2016b). On her part, Pérez (2016) recognizes the importance in using different varieties of chili peppers to render and distinguish among different varieties of Oaxaca moles. In this context, I argue that the use of different ingredients as meaningful markers of the identity of a food, should make us examine, in addition to other technologies, the presence of different types of ingredients as part of the kitchen and of cooking material culture. Thus, during his examination of the transformation of food into waste, Evans (2014) was already pointing at the use of ingredients in the kitchen – although he focused on the cultural construct of waste rather than on the meaning of ingredients themselves.

Ingredients, I argue, are an important part of the materiality of food that draws from and gives meaning to the everyday practices of cooking and food consumption, and are turned into a node in which cultural values, social practices and forms of cultural representation converge. “Natural” and “organic” ingredients are the product of agricultural and farming practices in which seeds are planted, grown, harvested, processed (dried, smoked, milled, salted, toasted); animals are inseminated, their offspring are fed, grown, and then, after killing them, processed cutting them in meaningful parts (sirloin, New York, etc.), processed (salted, smoked, dried, pickled, salted, etc.). Then they are placed in the local, regional, national, or international market, where place of origin may add or decrease their value (Parasecoli, 2017). Consumers buy them because they favor their appearance, flavor, aroma, and texture. Despite their everydayness, they are important material elements in our food, and they are marked by values (moral, economic, political, symbolic) ranging from local to global ones. The choice of ingredients for cooking, despite their apparent “mundane” existence, is instrumental in underlining the identification of subjects with different cultural “identities.”

Ingredients for “Tradition” and Change

For over two decades I have been studying the cooking and gastronomy of Yucatán, a Mexican state in the eastern peninsula of the same name. As I have been arguing, it is the preference for certain ingredients and their combination that root

the identity of regional food, and has become, along with other forms of cultural representation, an important element in the foundation of the (hegemonic) identity of the state (Ayora-Díaz & Vargas Cetina, 2010; Ayora-Díaz, 2010, 2012; Vargas Cetina, 2017). While the taste of food may seem to have an abstract and immaterial existence, taste is derived from the use of material ingredients and from the use of cooking instruments that achieve meals with the preferred aesthetic set of properties. Thus in contrast to Mexican predilection for beef, Yucatecan cooks prefer (in order): pork, turkey and chicken, fish and seafood, and beef. Most iconic dishes from Yucatecan gastronomy are based on pork or use it along other meats. For example, turkey is stuffed with ground pork, both in its 'white' or 'black' sauce (*relleno*) versions. *Puchero*, a Sunday stew consumed during family gatherings, in its fancy version combines pork, chicken and beef along with seasonal vegetables, rice and pasta. *Cochinita pibil* and *lechon al horno* are available, every day, at street food stands and popular markets. Also, like in other Caribbean islands, and in the Mexican region of Veracruz, black lima beans are favored over other colors (the different colors are associated with different textures, aromas, and flavor). In Yucatán, among the most common spices we find combinations of annatto, all spice, black and white peppercorn, cinnamon, cloves, coriander seeds, and cumin; common herbs are bay leaves, chaya, cilantro, epazote, oregano, parsley, and thyme; garlic, red and white onions, and radish are often used in cooking or as garnish; chili peppers such as habanero, dry red (*Capsicum annuum* L.), *max* (*C. annuum* var. *glabriusculum*) and *x'kat* (*C. Annuum* I) are used to flavor stews and as side dishes; Key and Persian limes, *limas* (*Citrus x limetta*) and Seville oranges are common additions to garnish the food, and to marinate meats; avocado, cabbage, tomatoes, carrots, potatoes, sweet potatoes, *chayotes* (*Sechium edule*), and plantains can be added into stews or served as side dishes; and rice or noodles can be side dishes as well. Evidently, none of the listed ingredients is exclusive of Yucatecan cooking and gastronomy. What makes them part of the regional cuisine is the form in which they are assembled, their combinations, their aesthetic effects over the colors, aromas and flavors of the meal.

Based on this recognition I have moved from the notion of the "field" to the concept of "assemblage." The former, drawn from Bourdieu (1977), has spatial and temporal connotations that may suggest that the 'gastronomic field' is unchanging and self-contained. While the concept has advantages in understanding how different social actors might work toward creating and establishing a well-defined gastronomic "tradition," in everyday life, cooking practices change all the time on account of the continued interaction among multiple culinary codes in local, translocal and global-local scales (Ayora-Díaz, 2020). In contrast, the concept of "assemblage" (de Landa, 2006, 2016), privileges what Manuel de Landa calls *relations of exteriority*. Here, these relations suggest that the components may be extracted or aggregated into any assemblage without losing their identity. Cumin is assembled with other ingredients in other Mexican regions, however,

the specific way in which it is assembled with other ingredients in the Yucatán region supports the identity of Yucatecan food. When used in other cuisines is not seen as a “Yucatecan” ingredient. In addition, the gastronomy of Yucatán draws its taste from the use of multiple ingredients originated in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, but these ingredients, through time, have become localized during the creation of specific regional recipes and through local cultivation. Recipes adopted from elsewhere became adapted to Yucatecan taste. They have become part of the Yucatecan culinary and gastronomic assemblages.¹ In the same manner, some Yucatecan foods have detached from the Yucatán region, so that today it is possible to find them re-signified and reinterpreted in different locations. For example, once I ate a sandwich of *cochinita pibil* at the O’Hare Airport in Chicago at Rick Bayles’ *Tortas La Frontera*, and although I found the food tasty, I found its flavor very different from the Yucatecan version of the meal. As Wilk (2019) argues, the US consumer perceives it as “Yucatecan,” even though it does not meet local standards in its place of origin.

In this sense, spices, herbs, meats, instruments, appliances, and procedures, become movable parts of different assemblages, each with its own “identity,” which at the same time are part of other, sometimes larger, assemblages. The mobility of people is usually accompanied by the mobility of cooking technologies and edible goods. As detachable parts of culinary assemblages, they become instrumental in the local, ethnic, and national transformation of cooking and eating practices.

¹ I should note here that the theory of assemblages encompasses the concepts of territorialization, de-territorialization and re-territorialization. The first refers to those processes that make a practice, set of cultural values, a cuisine, co-extensive with a society and territory. The second designates the processes that question, challenge that co-extensiveness, for example, the fragmentation of cooking practices along ethnic, national, or regional codes that, multiplying within a territory lead to the weakening of the first processes. And the third refers to the efforts made by individuals, groups and/or institutions to reaffirm the co-extensiveness of a gastronomy and a “people.” Despite what these terms suggest, their presence is not sequential but simultaneous, and they are multi-scalar (Ayora Diaz 2020).



Figure 4. A sample of Yucatecan dishes at a restaurant. It includes, clockwise from the top: turkey in black stuffing, panuchos topped with turkey, longaniza from Valladolid, cochinita pibil, turkey in escabeche, salbutes topped with turkey, chicken pibil, garnishes and, in the center pork loin from Valladolid, topped with boiled egg. Merida, 2019.

Recados and the Culinary-Gastronomic Assemblage of Yucatan

Ingredients are key material objects employed to achieve the taste of Yucatecan food. The way they are put together during the preparation of a meal is very important to bring a recipe into existence as a locally recognizable and meaningful dish. The reproduction of taste is achieved through the transmission of culinary knowledge from one generation to the next, and from one neighbor to another. It is by sharing this knowledge that a culinary-gastronomic “tradition” becomes coextensive with an inhabited space. During the nineteenth century, literacy was uncommon, and this culinary knowledge was mostly based on the bodily imitation of practices and on the oral transmission of instructions. Still, historically, cookbooks have long been important in maintaining culinary-gastronomic codes and culinary-gastronomic identities (Bower, 1997; Floyd & Forster, 2003). Spain granted independence to the peninsula of Yucatán in 1821 (Campos García, 2002). Only eleven years later, a Merida woman published a culinary guide (*prontuario*) in which she provided housewives with cooking guide (Aguirre, 1832). As most cooking texts of the time around the world, the instructions were very general, and unlike today’s cookbooks, they were probably used

as mnemonic devices dependent on the cooks' their relatives' or their customers' experience and memory of taste. It was later, at the end of the nineteenth century, when the Yucatán elites were enjoying the benefits of the regional economic boom stemming from the henequen plantations, that new regional cookbooks emerged reflecting the newly acquired wealth, including recipes of meals from around the world. Recipes that today are recognizable as iconic within the Yucatecan gastronomic canon, were then in an inchoate stage. At the end of the nineteenth century, specific combinations of spices and condiments were prescribed to prepare recipes for regional meals. The assemblage of spices began to be codified, but they were not yet named *recados*.



Figure 5. Spices for white recado. Clockwise from the top: cumin, allspice, red onion, garlic, cinamon, bay leaves, cloves, and in the center black pepper. Tiizimin, 2019.

I propose that the taste of Yucatecan food is the product of an assemblage of multiple objects charged with local meanings. Aguirre's and later cookbooks are themselves material objects, sometimes in view of everybody, sometimes hidden in drawers in the kitchen. Women collect recipes in handwritten notebooks, sometimes copying their favorite recipes from friends' or relatives' cookbooks, sometimes inserting newspaper clippings between pages. The recipes in these notebooks include references (implicit) to the cookbooks they were borrowed from, but they list as well other material objects considered necessary to cook a meal correctly: types of pans, skillets, and other cooking instruments. They advise on the use of open fires or ovens, on boiling or roasting or frying. Lastly, but more importantly, they list ingredients that the cook, domestic or professional must use to cook a specific meal. Today Yucatecan cookbooks can be seen moving away from general instructions regarding the use of ingredients for the domestic manufacture of *recados*. Recipes for *recados*, in turn, have changed from the simple provision of the list of ingredients, to their "modern" version in which the author prescribes exact measurements of the ingredients required to prepare them.

Yucatecan cooking employs several *recados*, and each is specific for one given dish. Hence, each *recado* results from the combination of different quantities of spices and other ingredients. For example, the *recados* required for cooking *puchero*, turkey in black stuffing, turkey in white stuffing, turkey in *escabeche*, pork *pibil*, baked piglet, *ajiacó*, and steaks, to name just a few of them, are different from each other. The use of each *recado* imparts on the meal the flavor, aromas, and colors Yucatecans associate with each recipe. Although I have examined several cookbooks published since the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, many are no longer available, and those that are, are those that were popular and widely used, leading to numerous reprints. Still, in two important cookbooks from the end of the nineteenth century, there is no mention of *recados*. However, the cooking instructions list the spices and condiments that today define the taste of iconic Yucatecan meals (Navarrete Arce, 1898; Rendón de García, 1889). It was until 1940 that the name *recados* appeared in two widely available cookbooks – at least at that time (Hernández Fajardo de Rodríguez, 1940; Ruz viuda de Baqueiro, 1940).¹ In the latter cookbooks, *recados* appear prescribing the assemblage of specific ingredients in precise proportions. Some *recados* may appear to be similar to others regarding the spices included, but they differ in proportions and on the addition of one or more spices, changing thus the aesthetics of the meal in which they are used.

¹ These were self-published cookbooks. The authors and later their descendants published several reprints through the decades. However, by the time I began my research on the regional food of Yucatán, they had become difficult to find. The descendants of Hernández Fajardo told me that the recipes were too elaborate for today's rhythm of life, the demand had declined, and they decided not to reprint it anymore. The more recent cookbook by Will Rodríguez (2015) includes the recipes for eight different *recados*.

As an illustration, the following cooking instructions were written at different times for the same meal, *relleno negro* (turkey with black stuffing). There are coincidences and variations. But it was the 1940 cookbook that uses the term “recado,” and provides two lists of these spice blends (one in each volume). *Relleno negro*, is the name given to turkey stuffed with ground or minced pork and boiled eggs. Today it can be found, every day, at restaurants, but it used to be the preferred meal at weddings and baptism ceremonies. It is one of the very few dishes in Yucatán cooking that *may be* spicy hot. In the following paragraphs I am quoting only the portions of recipes in which the ingredients are listed:

RELLENO NEGRO DE VALLADOLID. [You] need to burn an *almud* [a variable measure. Between 1.75 and 5.68 liters] of chili peppers. Soak it in water for two days, changing the water periodically. After taking them from the water they should be ground very thick with a head of garlic, a large piece of achiote paste, ten or twelve oregano leaves, one spoon (soup spoon) of black pepper, and twelve allspice peppercorns. ... (Rendón de García 1938 [1889], p. 94).

Gran relleno negro, de Valladolid. To obtain a good *relleno*, [you] must burn old chili *bobo* eight days in advance, three *almudes*, charring them but not like coal; as they are taken from the skillet they must be soaked in salted water, being careful to change the water four times a day and stirring them well with a sieve for the chilies to release their hotness ... When it is ready to be served, it is strained and ground with enough achiote, one raw garlic head, and black peppercorns; adding half a *cuarta* [750 ml] of nixtamal to thicken the chili [sauce] ... (Navarrete Arce, 2010 [1910/1898], pp. 62-63).

RECADO DE CHILMOLE o RELLENO NEGRO

1 kg of dry red [*colorado*] chile
1 large Tabasco peppercorn [allspice] or two medium size
¼ teaspoon of cumin
1 full spoon of black pepper
1 and ½ spoons of achiote
1 raw head of garlic
5 or 6 oregano leaves

The top and seeds of the red chili pepper are removed and [the chili] is charred sprinkling it with alcohol until it turns black, then it is soaked and ground with the recados and everything else; it is dissolved in water and strained ... (Hernández F. de Rodríguez n.d. [1940], p. 35).

Like these, most *recados* combine spices that must be roasted and ground along with (usually) garlic and the juice of Seville oranges. It is the latter two that contribute to reach the consistency of a paste that domestic and restaurant cooks use in the proportions they have learned to reach the aromas and flavors locally expected from each meal. However, there have been progressive transformations in their manufacture that lead to changes in the relationship of local people to regional food and, as I discuss in the next section, to their effects on the expected taste of long-established recipes.

Processing Modernity: Recados and the Transformations of Taste

Recados are an important component for reproducing the taste of Yucatecan food. Iconic recipes are found all over the state, as well as in the neighboring states of Campeche and Quintana Roo. The meals obtained from these recipes have played an important part in the process of territorializing Yucatecan cooking and gastronomy. However, their repetition all over the region consists of a repetition *with* difference; that is, they are not a repetition of the same, of an identical taste. Ingredients are repeated in each locality, but somewhere cooks use a bit more, somewhere else they use a bit less of different ingredients, and yet cooks strive to maintain the overall structure of the dish. For example, when cooking turkey in black stuffing some family cooks and small handcraft producers of recados may include all the prescribed spices but may choose to burn chili peppers which are less sharp than those preestablished; others, in contrast, may chose habanero pepper to craft their recado, making it an extremely spicy meal. These are important variations, as each corresponds with the taste preferences of different consumers who, despite the differences in recado composition, are expecting to eat turkey in black stuffing. Hence, cooks choose where to buy their recados depending on the flavors they prefer. I have met, for example, people who willingly travel 160 km from Merida to Valladolid just to buy their favorite recados at the popular market, or within Merida, cooks who buy their recados at a market that is on the other end of the city because they do not like the recados in the market near their homes.¹

Recado handcrafters, both those who produce small quantities to sell in the market, and those who make them at home for domestic consumption, must be very careful in their attempts to “innovate,” as they would not wish their recados or their food to be rejected or criticized by customers, relatives, and/or friends. Likewise, when making recados, the cook must be careful not to eliminate any ingredient at the base of a recipe. For example, the *recado* for *escabeche de pavo* (turkey stewed with pickling ingredients) must be made with salt, black pepper, white pepper, allspice, garlic, and the juice of Seville oranges. The elimination of any of these would produce a different flavor-aroma effect. Nonetheless, gradually, consumers are beginning to neglect some flavors. Some ten years ago, at the public market in Valladolid, I asked the woman selling recados for a small bag of recado de escabeche. She took a small plastic bag from a batch and handed it to me. Next I asked for a bag of recado for steaks. She took another bag from the same batch and handed it to me. When I pointed out that it was the same recado she nodded, ‘yes, it is’. However, they are different spice blends. Recado for steaks

¹ Making recados at home is not easy, and it is time consuming. Additionally, one must own the right appliances to make them. Achiot seeds are very hard, and they must be first soaked and then pulverized in a mortar, a grinding stone or an electric mill, and burning chili peppers induce fits of coughs within the house and among neighbors. Also, the quantities needed to make them and to prepare meals may well exceed the needs of a nuclear family.

However, it is also very common to find domestic cooks who use industrially processed recados. If handcrafted ones kept the identity of a recipe while making room for family and local differences, industrially processed recados tend to homogenize the flavor of Yucatecan recipes. They are produced with the aid of large electric grinders, and each commercial brand must keep the rates of different spices fixed and controlled to ensure customers will remain faithful to their products. Also, they must ensure hygienic conditions. These industrially produced recados lead to the homogenization of taste and to the “naturalization” of taste

preferences that change, gradually, over time. For example, sometimes I have wondered how in Valladolid consumers accept as “authentic” a rendition of *Escabeche de pavo de Valladolid* marketed by a local business that specializes in its production. I have found that this business’ food resembles little the food as it is still prepared by some domestic cooks.¹ This acceptance, seems to me, stems from the generalized acceptance of industrially processed ingredients and meals. Most consumers cannot afford the time to replicate a recipe and thus adopt adapted recipes to their low income and contribute to routinize the acceptance of homogenized flavors.

There is today a widespread acceptance and adoption of industrially processed ingredients and meals, including recados. Industrialization in Yucatán began following the blueprint of the European industrial revolution, and the industrialization of food took off by the end of the nineteenth century – although the local diet had already incorporated different industrially processed ingredients (Negroe Sierra & Miranda Ojeda, 2007), and alcoholic beverages (Hernández Álvarez & Cámara Gutiérrez, 2019) imported from Europe and the United States. The industrialization of Yucatán began during the 1870s. Food ingredients and beverages became industrialized during the last part of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century as chocolate, sugar, soda drinks, beer and pasta became industrially processed local products (Zayas Enríquez, 1908, pp. 312-313).

Though the first cookbooks where I found instructions for the manufacture of recados were from 1940 (the 7th edition of Rendón de García, published in 1938, does not include recipes for recados), the first small processing industry, *La Anita*, began operating in 1913, twenty-seven years earlier, suggesting that even if they were later consigned into print, recados were in use decades earlier before their published appearance. In 1968, another company, *El yucateco*, launched its own line of regional recado pastes and condiments. Brands have since multiplied: *La Carmita*, *Mi lindo Yucatán*, and *Del Mayab*, recados are found in local markets. Some, like *El yucateco* and *La Anita* have expanded into chili sauces into which they add color and flavor enhancers, and food stabilizers. Although each small industry produces a range of recados, those of achiote, relleno negro/chilmole, and ‘for everything,’ are in greater demand. Most cooks I know indistinctly use one brand or another, and I have not found domestic cooks faithful to any specific brand. Depending on need and availability domestic cooks buy whichever one they find.

¹ My mother, who was born and grew up in Valladolid followed a very elaborate recipe: she marinated the turkey with recado de escabeche and the juice of Seville oranges. Then she boiled the turkey but did not thoroughly cook it. After taking it from the broth, she would do a new marinade with the same recado and some white vinegar. Then proceeded to roast on coal whole garlic heads, white onions and *xkat* chili peppers. After shredding the meat by hand, she would put the meat, onions, garlic, and chili peppers back into the broth. Before serving the meal, she would take out the meat and reserved the broth to cook pasta elbows served as side dish. For garnish she sliced red onions and soaked them in the juice of Seville oranges along with bay leaves and allspice peppercorns. The flavors, aromas, look and textures of this food were significantly different from the boiled chicken that now locally passes as “escabeche.”

After all, for them, the replicability of the recipe using industrialized recados as time-saving devices, is more important than replicating flavors of the past.

The homogenization of Yucatecan flavor is partly recado-based and coincides with the explosion and fragmentation of the urban foodscape of Yucatán. If, as I have discussed (Ayora-Díaz, 2012), Yucatecan food was hegemonic in the region, since the 1970s there has been a multiplication of food choices: the food of other Mexican regions, from South America and the Caribbean, from Europe, Asia and of US food chains (hamburgers, pizzas, pulled pork, Chinese, sushi, and other fast foods) have relativized the value of Yucatecan taste. Currently, many teenagers and young adults prefer Chinese, Italian, and Japanese food, or hamburgers and fries, over Yucatecan meals. Thus, Yucatecan food, at least among young people, has been displaced as an anchor of regional identity. The nostalgia for flavors of the past is more important for older people. New restaurants are emerging where cooks seek to be recognized for their “innovations” on long established recipes. As one chef explained to me, “We are seeking to attract young customers who will then become more interested in Yucatecan food.”

Conclusion: Processed Cooking and Identities

Meals are the material expression of the taste of Yucatán – that is, the taste favored by the inhabitants of the state. In their materiality they assemble historical, ethnic, cosmopolitan, and cultural images and representations. The most common appliances needed to prepare Yucatecan meals are basic and simple, and in urban kitchens I found aluminum and non-stick skillets, as well as pots, casseroles, griddles (*comales*), knives, ladles and spoons, blenders, and gas and microwave ovens. Yet, it is the ingredients in the pantry and refrigerator that underscore cooking and eating preferences: onions, garlic, epazote, habanero pepper, oregano, black pepper, bay leaves, chaya, and cilantro are still common. In addition, one finds small boxes of recados industrially processed, bottles of habanero and Tabasco sauce, mayonnaise, canned tomatoes, canned beans, canned tuna, canned jalapeño peppers, and bottles sauces of *pico de gallo* (or *salsa Mexicana*), and green tomatillo sauce. Once, a lady my wife and I know was frustrated as she could not find a small jar or can of green sauce, and we told her: ‘look, there is tomatillo, onion and garlic over there, why don’t you make it?’ She replied that she had no time and she just needed a small quantity. It is in this sense that the ideology of modernity highlights convenience and price (certainly it is cheaper to buy a small can of sauce than to make it) in industrially processed food and ingredients. Despite revelations in newspapers and other media of the adulteration of dry leaves, ground spices, and tuna, for example, modern domestic cooks prefer to rely on canned ingredients. They are convenient, hygienic, last longer, and they are cheaper; one only needs to open a can or a bottle, and the ingredients are ready for enjoyment.

In Yucatán it is common, since the twentieth century, to find women working outside the home. As elsewhere, when women abandoned the kitchen, men did not

take their place, neither they shared cooking responsibilities (of course, there are exceptions). As several women confided me in interviews, cooking has become for many a burden. Some said they do not like cooking, but they must do it because they feel responsible for feeding their husbands and children. Others have told me that they prefer to buy ready-made meals to avoid cooking. This spirit has been captured by a cookbook titled *Cocina al chingadazo* (Cooking in a whack) that recommends women to cook using many processed ingredients during weekdays, and suggest that, on weekends, it is the obligation of husbands to take their wife out for meals, as they have already cooked all weekdays (Arjona Martín, 2006). Using processed ingredients has become routinized, and they today part of the “modern” local diet, displacing its importance in the construction of regional Yucatecan identity.

Acknowledgments

The research on which I base this article has been conducted in Yucatán since the year 2000. At different times I have received administrative support from Francisco Fernández Repetto, Genny Negroe Sierra, Celia Rosado Avilés, and Rocío Cortés López, who acted as chairs of the Facultad de Ciencias Antropológicas. As always, my wife and colleague anthropologist Gabriela Vargas-Cetina has read and critiqued my arguments in this article, forcing me to improve them.

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