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## **UNESCO Recognizes Mexican Cuisine as Cultural Heritage of Humanity**

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Socioeconomic Issues

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Food was on the minds of many Mexicans in November, after the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) added Mexico's traditional cuisine to its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Mexico's addition to the prestigious list came as the country wrestles with other aspects of its diet, including concerns about the growing rate of obesity among its citizens. In a report issued in November, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) said obesity in Mexico is the highest among emerging economies. The country is making some efforts to address the obesity problem, including education and access to better foods in the schools.

A special committee meeting in Kenya in mid-November decided to include Mexico's traditional cuisine among 46 cultural treasures that were added to the UNESCO list. The list includes two other Mexican cultural traditions: the Parachicos festival in Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas state, and the Pirekuka, a traditional folk song of the P'urhépecha peoples in Michoacán. Parachicos is a nearly three-week festival honoring three Catholic saints that includes music, dance, religious ceremonies, and traditional cuisine. The Pirekuka is a diverse mix of musical styles that draws on African, European, and indigenous American origins, with regional variations identified in 30 of the 165 P'urhépecha communities.

Other cultural traditions selected by UNESCO for the list include the Peking Opera, Spain's Flamenco tradition, the Aalst Festival in Belgium, and traditional carpet weaving in the Kashan region of Iran.

### ***Recognition could support cultural-preservation efforts***

In Mexico, UNESCO's addition of a regional festival and a language was important, but the recognition of the country's cuisine was a source of national pride. "We are pleased by UNESCO's recognition of our culture and tradition," said syndicated columnist Cholyn Garza, who is also a human rights advocate and social commentator. "But this means that each of us now has the responsibility to commit to pass on these traditions to our children and grandchildren, so that we do not lose this valuable legacy. Mexico has much to offer the world, and we are responsible for preserving our patrimony, not only for our descendants but for humanity."

Gloria López, president of the Conservatorio de Cultura Gastronómica Mexicana (CCGM), said the designation would motivate the Mexican agriculture and culinary sectors to continue efforts to preserve traditional cuisines. "As a conservatory, we will create a system of coordination that will bring together various players, including chefs, restaurant owners, tequila and wine producers, and farmers, all of which had been working independently," said López.

The CCGM president said efforts would go beyond simple preservation of culture and cuisine. "Mexican cuisine has entered its golden age and will serve as an extraordinary platform to promote development in our country," López told the Mexico City daily newspaper.

On its Web site, UNESCO described traditional Mexican cuisine as a comprehensive cultural model comprising farming, ritual practices, age-old skills, culinary techniques, and ancestral-community customs and manners. "It is made possible by collective participation in the entire traditional food chain: from planting and harvesting to cooking and eating," said the UN organization. "The basis of the system is founded on corn, beans, and chili; unique farming methods such as milpas (rotating swidden fields of corn and other crops) and chinampas (man-made farming islets in lake areas); cooking processes such as nixtamalization (lime-hulling maize, which increases its nutritional value); and singular utensils including grinding stones and stone mortars."

"Native ingredients such as varieties of tomatoes, squashes, avocados, cocoa and vanilla augment the basic staples. Mexican cuisine is elaborate and symbol-laden, with everyday tortillas and tamales, both made of corn, forming an integral part of Day of the Dead offerings," said UNESCO. "Collectives of female cooks and other practitioners devoted to raising crops and traditional cuisine are found in Michoacán and across Mexico. Their knowledge and techniques express community identity, reinforce social bonds, and build stronger local, regional, and national identities. Those efforts in Michoacán also underline the importance of traditional cuisine as a means of sustainable development."

Michoacán was a focal point of the UNESCO designations, not only because cuisine from that state was used as a representative sample but also because of the selection of the Pirekuka for the list of cultural treasures.

"The representative sample brought before UNESCO was Michoacán, a state that has been hammered by violence and which deserves a better future," Garza said in relation to the rash of drug-related killing in the state during the past several years ([SourceMex, Aug. 19, 2009](#)). "The recognition is received with joy not only by this beautiful state but by all of Mexico."

Mexico has received several recognitions from UNESCO in the past several years. Most of the designations have involved sites considered important to the patrimony of humanity, including a whale sanctuary in Baja California Sur ([SourceMex, March 8, 2000](#)), the agave-growing region in western Mexico ([SourceMex, July 19, 2006](#)), and the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere in Michoacán and México states ([SourceMex, July 9, 2008](#)). UNESCO also recently added the flying-dancers ritual, which originated in Veracruz, to its list of cultural treasures ([SourceMex, Oct. 7, 2009](#)).

### *OECD report cites high rate of obesity in Mexico*

Mexico also received a not-so-flattering food-related recognition in November from the OECD. The 35-member organization, comprising primarily middle-income and wealthy countries, issued a report suggesting that the rate of obesity in emerging nations was beginning to approach levels commonly found in wealthy industrialized countries. The report measured obesity rates among the adult population in six countries, of which Mexico had the highest rate at 70%. In comparison, rates were measured at 53% in South Africa, 51% in Brazil, 50% in Russia, 29% in China, and 16% in India. Of those countries, only Mexico is a member of the OECD.

"The OECD strongly recommends that developing countries address the pending obesity epidemic now, as part of wider comprehensive health prevention strategies, rather than wait until the costs of treating obesity-related illness is much more expensive," the organization said on its Web site.

The study, carried in the OECD-sponsored magazine, suggested that governments employ coordinated actions to tackle the problem, including mass-media campaigns promoting healthier

lifestyles, taxes and subsidies to improve diets, tighter government regulation of food labeling, and restrictions on food advertising.

"A multiple intervention strategy would achieve substantially larger health gains than individual programs, with better cost-effectiveness," said OECD health policy analyst Michele Cecchini, who authored the study.

The report also examines the growing rate of childhood obesity in developing countries, which is below the levels found in OECD countries but also moving quickly in the wrong direction.

The growing rate of obesity in Mexico has not escaped the attention of state and federal officials, who have implemented programs to promote consumption of fruits and vegetables and discourage the sale of junk food in schools. For example, in early November, the Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA) launched a program that would allow farms to sell produce directly to schools.

There have also been legislative efforts. In October, the Chamber of Deputies approved reforms to the federal education law (Ley General de Educación), requiring school districts to choose the types of foods allowed in school based on their nutritional levels.

Some agricultural organizations and food companies have also added their voice to the debate. In late September, the Consejo Mexicano del Arroz launched a campaign to boost rice consumption. Luís Bueno Torio, president of the organization, said there is the misperception in Mexico that rice is fattening. But the opposite is true, said the official, as evidenced by the low rates of obesity in Asian countries where rice is a primary staple.

There are also some efforts to increase the nutritional level of tortillas. One company, Gastronomía Mexicana de Exportación, has used several varieties of the nopal cactus, along with linseed oil, to develop tortillas that are highly nutritious and appropriate for the diets of people suffering from diseases like diabetes. The nopal cactus contains several properties that tend to reduce concentrations of glucose, cholesterol, and triglycerides in blood and also help prevent the formation of fat in the body. Linseed oil also helps reduce bad cholesterol and triglycerides.

"One of these nopal-based tortillas preserves the nutritional properties of the original product while providing a product for people who suffer from obesity and diabetes," said the online newspaper .

Gastronomía Mexicana de Exportación manufactures its products primarily for export to customers in Canada, France, and Germany but is planning to make the product widely available in Mexico.

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