



A tale of two moles

Complex sauces fuse pre-Hispanic and European ingredients into signature dishes

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Oaxacan chef Pilar Cabrera has arrived in Toronto on a culinary mission to persuade Canadians to think about Mexico with their stomachs.

She has brought an arsenal of dried chilies and other ingredients to cook some of the seven famous moles of Oaxaca at local restaurant and cooking school events.



KEITH BEATY / TORONTO STAR

Oaxacan chef Pilar Cabrera prepares a simple but rich Mole Amarillo.

Cabrera, who runs La Olla restaurant and La Casa de Los Sabores bed-and-breakfast and cooking school, says tourism has been plummeting since mid-2006. First a nasty civil strike prompted travel advisories. Then drug wars and killings, in other parts of Mexico, captured headlines. Just as tourism was starting to pick up came the economic crisis and the H1N1 flu virus.

Now Cabrera is devoting September – always a slow month – to her first Canadian trip. On Friday, Cabrera came to the *Star's* test kitchen to tell a tale of two moles. Moles (pronounced MO-lays) are complex sauces simmered with meat and vegetables. A fusion of pre-Hispanic and European ingredients, they're the signature dish of Oaxaca (pronounced wah-HACK-a), one of Mexico's 31 states and the southern city that Cabrera calls home.

First we cook Mole Amarillo, a rich, not too spicy, yellow mole that gets its subtle heat and depth from dried amarillo and guajillo chilies. A simple dish that is routinely made at home, it's popular at Cabrera's restaurant and cooking school. I wonder if, like the Rolling Stones being asked to play "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" yet again, Cabrera gets weary of making it.

"No! No! No!" she replies, incredulous. "At the beginning (of cooking) you don't have anything. At the end you have a delicious mole."

"And then you get your satisfaction," chimes in Mary Luz Mejia, the Toronto food writer/TV producer who helped coordinate Cabrera's trip.

For our Mole Amarillo, we mix the luscious sauce with chicken thighs, potato chunks, green beans and thick chayote slices. I've bought all the Mexican ingredients from Perola, a Latin American grocery store in Kensington Market

Next up is Mole Verde (a green sauce) and Cabrera is excited. She didn't think Toronto would have enough key ingredients, but I have found tomatillos, a fresh herb called epazote, and a dried heart-shaped leaf called hoja santa. This light, fresh mole (also served with chicken thighs, green beans and chayote) comes together more quickly than the Mole Amarillo.

Both moles use freshly roasted cumin seeds. "My grandmum said cumin is good for the stomach," says Cabrera, "and each mole has cumin in the recipe."

Cabrera is a patient cook and teacher. It's easy to see why Chicago chef Rick Bayless, renowned for popularizing regional Mexican cooking, sings her praises. Their relationship dates back a decade, and he routinely brings his staff and culinary trips to her cooking school.

We don't have time for Mole Negro, the well-known black mole made from 30 or more ingredients, including chocolate.

Other moles are rojo (red), coloradito (a lighter red, used for enchiladas), chi chilo (made from black chilies, roasted tortillas and roasted avocado leaves) and mancha manteles (literally "stain the tablecloth").

Cabrera starts her guest chef gigs this week. Look for her at Frida Restaurant & Bar, Frank at the AGO, Veritas Local Fare, Torito Tapas Bar and the Chef's House at George Brown College. She'll also teach at Nella Cucina Cooking School.

The Mexican chef has already joined an Iron Chef competition at Harbourfront's Hot & Spicy Food Festival and helped judge an emerging chef competition – an event she'd love to see duplicated in Oaxaca where "great young chefs need inspiration."

In between all this cooking, Cabrera will get a taste of multicultural Toronto. She has eaten in Greektown and Yorkville, and tried Szechuan and Thai food. Next up: Ethiopian and maybe Korean.

She has come here with Alvin Starkman, a family law litigator from Toronto who retired to Oaxaca almost five years ago and now writes food articles and runs a bed-and-breakfast with his wife.

Starkman's message to Toronto: "In terms of food, Canadians tend to think Mexican food is tacos and enchiladas. I can only speak for the state of Oaxaca, but it's a lot more than tacos and enchiladas."

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