

Nicolasa Chávez on New World Cuisine: The Histories of Chocolate, Mate y Más

WITH SHELLEY THOMPSON

Over the past year, Nicolasa Chávez has taken *El Palacio* staff on several tours of the staging area for her exhibition, *New World Cuisine: The Histories of Chocolate, Mate y Más*. She always cautioned us to leave our cups of mate outside the room and donned white cotton gloves before touching any of the wonderful objects that were grouped on shelves and tables, still tagged with accession numbers and awaiting installation in the exhibition. Chávez's passion for her field, her objects, and her exhibition always came through. In addition to being a curator, she is a talented flamenco singer and dancer, performing regularly in New Mexico, and she brings a glittering stage presence even to the museum's basement staging room when telling the story of a rustic fruit-picking implement or a stately silver pot. Shelley Thompson sat with her in the staging area and asked her about how she developed the exhibition, which opens December 9, 2012.

Thompson: This exhibition arises in part from your personal family history. Haven't there been Chávezes experiencing cultural mestizaje in New Mexico since Oñate?

Chávez: I am a fourteenth-generation New Mexican on my paternal grandfather's side. That's a very unique place in the Spanish-speaking world: we're not quite Mexican; we're not Spanish; we're *New Mexican*. And we look at New Mexican regional cuisine, and it's very different from the food we see in Mexico, and it's certainly different from the food we see in Spain. However, had these cultures and traditions not met and blended together, we would not have our local, regional, New Mexican cuisine.

My paternal grandmother came from Ohio. On my maternal side we have German and Scottish roots. Most of the family moved here, so we all very strongly identify with New Mexican cuisine and with regional favorites like tamales and posole for the holidays, but these were served alongside roast beef or pork loin with a beautiful salad and a fancy red and green Jell-O and whipped cream dessert made by my grandmother.



Nicolasa Chávez, Curator of Spanish Colonial and Contemporary Hispano/Latino Collections at the Museum of International Folk Art, in the staging area for the exhibition, *New World Cuisine: The Histories of Chocolate, Mate y Más*.

Thompson: How did New Mexican cuisine evolve?

Chávez: The earliest settlers that came up with Oñate brought cows, sheep, goats—all sorts of items that they were used to having in their home country. Some items from Spain were also abandoned once they arrived here in New Mexico. For example, Spain is surrounded by ocean, so a lot of the cuisine in Spain would consist of seafood and *pescado*—fish. Upon coming to New Mexico, the goats and the sheep grazed here, did well, multiplied, so they became a regular part of the diet here. Seafood, obviously, was abandoned. Herbs and spices from Spain came over, onions and garlic, certain vegetables, fruit trees. However, the dominant foods that were already native to this area—the corn, the beans, the squash, and chiles that grew really well in our areas—became a major part of the diet and are still staples today. Hence we have dishes like posole that incorporate chile, and sometimes we have the native beans, but we also have the garlic and onions that were brought by the Spanish, and so we have this wonderful blending here in New Mexico.

Another great example of this blending is tamales. Throughout Mexico and Central America, there are tamales. However, they did not originally have pork in them. But with the Spanish, pork arrived. The blending took a long time; it did not happen instantly on either side. The Natives in Mexico and New Mexico did not take to pork right away; it took probably a

hundred or so years before it became a part of the diet. And the same with the Spanish: traditionally in Mesoamerica, rodents were eaten, and the Spanish didn't quite like that—in fact they never really took to them the way they took to chiles! So we had these two different cultures coming together and the foods mixing together, and today the most common New Mexico tamale is the pork tamale with red chile. We have other varieties, but that is one of the staples, and the most traditional, and in it you have New World chile from the Americas and Old World pork from Spain.

Thompson: Tell us about the exhibition planning process. How did you get from concept to reality?

Chávez: I began planning this exhibit almost immediately after coming to the Museum of International Folk Art in November 2007. The Hispanic Heritage Wing was closing for renovations, and the exhibition *Familia y Fé* was coming down after eighteen years. Part of my job was to create exhibitions that would fit into the wing's mission of showing New Mexican culture and heritage while also placing New Mexico within the wider context of the Spanish-speaking world. For this exhibition I was initially inspired by the wonderful collection of silver and gourd *mate* cups that we had in the museum and also by an exquisite silver *mancerina*, which is a special saucer used for serving chocolate. We also have a great collection of Spanish and Mexican ceramics and utilitarian items of copper and iron. An exhibition on cuisine seemed perfect for this museum.

Thompson: How did you locate and select objects for the exhibition?

Chávez: Because I was initially inspired by the objects within our own collection, my first step was assessing what we already had and asking if we had enough items to convey the story I wanted to tell. When I felt we needed to fill in gaps, I began researching where to find other items. The options included borrowing from other museums or from private collections, and also, with a small budget over several years, I was able to purchase a few new items for the museum collections.

I contacted other museums, historians, scholars, and anthropologists. A really fun purchase occurred when Josef Díaz, curator at the New Mexico History Museum, called me from Santa Barbara to say that he'd seen a beautiful *mancerina* in an antique store, and that they would hold it for me. He sent me

pictures, and I thought it was wonderful and needed to be in the exhibit, and with funds from the International Folk Art Foundation I was able to purchase it for the museum.

Thompson: Your research and collecting for this exhibition required significant travel. How did that travel help you develop the exhibition?

Chávez: I traveled to both Spain and Argentina to visit museums, meet with curatorial staff, and begin the process of obtaining pieces on loan. I conducted research in museum archives and libraries, and visited and photographed exhibitions that were related to my subject. I scoured antique shops, galleries, and outdoor *mercados*. I also inquired about locations where I may be able to find certain objects. For example, while the exhibition features items from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I also wanted to portray living traditions. Therefore I asked about contemporary artisans still creating items based on earlier pieces, particularly items that have been used continually until the present day. Sometimes I would even find out about a new piece in a small local restaurant, or I would ask about how to prepare a specific food item and about the vessels and tools needed. A Bartlett Scholarship from the International Folk Art Foundation enabled me to travel to Argentina and specifically research *mate*, which is not so common here as it is in South America.

Thompson: Tell us about how you've organized the exhibition.

Chávez: The exhibition is divided into sections related to geographical areas, artistic traditions, and home scenes. The Spanish kitchen is a nineteenth-century kitchen that has an array of items from all over Spain. We also have a late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century Mexican kitchen. Both the Spanish and the Mexican kitchen will feature ranges covered in tiles, hanging wall shelves called *repisas*, inset cupboards called *alacenas*, and freestanding cupboards called *trasteros*, but the Spanish setting resembles a fine country home. The Mexican setting depicts a very wealthy home during the viceregal period. Thanks to the large amount of ceramics and silver in our permanent collection, I was able to include a luxurious table setting with a silver-framed mirror and wall sconces.

The New Mexican hearth will have the feel of a much humbler single-room home where the hearth and living area are shared. Almost all of the objects in a New Mexican home were either made in New Mexico or were traded up the Camino

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Real, including a few objects from Spain or even Asia. The homes might not have been as fancy as those in the capital city, which was then Mexico City, but there is a serene and simple elegance, and a feel of the natural world. We are including mud-plastered walls to really give the feel of a historic New Mexican home. We also have a South American *estrado*, a formal sitting room, where in the Americas one would drink chocolate or mate.

Thompson: And there is a section on agriculture in New Mexico as well?

Chávez: Yes, there is an agricultural section, although it does not take up as much space as the kitchens. Here we display the types of tools and implements that were brought to the Americas by the Spanish and discuss how those tools affected agriculture in our part of the world. This section also discusses chile, and we have included several examples of chile *ristras* and wreaths, which have become an important artistic tradition in our state. San Ysidro and San Pascual, dedicated to agriculture and the kitchen, respectively, became very popular here, and we include a selection of antique and contemporary *retablos* of these saints to really bring the tale home to New Mexico.

Thompson: Beverages figure prominently in this exhibition, and they each have surprising stories of their own. Chocolate was first a drink, grapes brought to the New World eventually revived Old World viticulture, and mate is as popular throughout South America as coffee is the north. How does the exhibition tell the story of these beverages?

Chávez: Each beverage has a special section in the exhibition. The histories of each will be told through label copy and wall cases filled with objects—more standard art museum settings—but we are also including vignettes. For wine we are showing a grape crusher and wine press from the late-nineteenth century that was used in New Mexico. We are displaying these with a photomural of a vineyard in the background to give the feel of being among the grapevines in the New Mexican countryside, which, by the way, is the earliest wine region in the continental US.

For *yerba mate* we are installing a wonderful *estrado* with colonial-period furniture and silver from South America. Again, this would be a finer home of a well-to-do family. Then we have a great section that I call *mate as arte*, which shows an array of herb jars, kettles, cups, drinking straws, and carry-

ing cases. This includes items of gourd, silver, ceramics, wood, and bark. Each individual piece is a work of art.

For chocolate we have an early Mayan chocolate jar and a ceramic jar from Chaco Canyon, plus a small pottery shard from Chaco that tested positive for cacao residue, showing that chocolate was traded into New Mexico almost 1,000 years ago [see Crown, this issue], again making us the first region in the continental US to have chocolate. I sometimes think it would be fun to title the exhibition “It Started Here.” These early items will also be showcased next to objects from the colonial period and some that are being created by contemporary artists today.

Thompson: Many visitors will leave this exhibition longing for chocolate and curious about tasting mate.

Chávez: At the December 9 opening and throughout the year, we will have wonderful tasting opportunities and programs. Weldon Fulton of Museum Hill Café, right next door, will present a special menu throughout the course of the exhibit with New World–inspired foods and wine of the Americas and from Spain. We are also collaborating with the Santa Fe School of Cooking, and throughout the year they will offer cooking classes with menu items related to the exhibit, to our regional cuisine, and to the foods of the Americas, and 20 percent of the proceeds will come back to the museum to support educational programs. Chocolate historian Mark Sciscenti presents a tasting at the opening and a lecture and tasting February 10. In May, we will present a program related to herbs and traditional herbal healing.

Thompson: When we’ve visited you in your offices, you’ve served us traditionally brewed mate and mate made with teabags. How often do you drink mate, and what are your favorite methods of preparing it?

Chávez: I drink it several times a week, or sometimes daily. My favorite method is the traditional way, as a loose-leaf tea in my mate cup and using my *bombilla* (the special drinking straw). To me this gives the best flavor. When I am out of the loose tea, I do use the tea bags, but somehow that is just not the same.

Thompson: Although the exhibition is titled *New World Cuisine*, it also tells the story of the how New World foods dramatically changed the foodscape of the Old World. What are some of the ways in which New World foods affected Old World food production and preparation?



Nicolasa Chávez displays a silver mate cup and *bombilla* (straw).

Chávez: *Bueno!* Imagine Italian cuisine without tomato sauce, or the world without chocolate, or even the bell pepper. Chiles and peppers have infused food all over the world from the common bell pepper to spices such as sweet paprika and curry powder.

Thompson: I was fascinated to learn that before the arrival in Spain of tomatoes and peppers from the New World, gazpacho existed as a dish, but it was white. Please tell us more about that.

Chávez: The main ingredients of gazpacho once upon a time consisted of leftovers mixed with olive oil, vinegar, and bread crumbs. Some research suggests that the word even comes from an early translation for bread crumbs. The most common ingredients prior to the Columbian Exchange include almonds, grapes, garlic, cucumber. I tend to think of present-day chilled garlic soup as being most similar to the original gazpacho. The tomato forever changed the dish, because today that is the ingredient that is standard throughout Spain and in the many concoctions called “gazpacho” that we see in the US.

Thompson: The exhibition will feature a recipe-exchange area. How do you envision that working?

Chávez: We really want to invite the local and visiting communities to take an active part in this exhibition. We thought a fabulous way to learn and share our various cultures and histories is through food and recipes. Therefore we felt a recipe ex-

change would be quite fun. We will have recipe cards for people to take and also blank cards so that people can leave one of their favorite recipes. These blank cards can then be used by visitors to copy as many recipes as they like to take home. We will also have an online component where we can post recipes.

Thompson: Can you share one of your favorite recipes with us?

Chávez: I'll give you my recipe for gazpacho. ■

Gazpacho

3 to 6 large, vine-ripe tomatoes, roughly chopped
 1 cucumber, roughly chopped
 1 green bell pepper, roughly chopped (or red for a slightly sweeter taste)
 1 medium onion, roughly chopped
 1 to 3 garlic cloves, peeled with the green pith removed
 1/4 cup olive oil
 1 dash vinegar (to taste)
 white pepper and sea salt (to taste)

Blend vegetables, garlic, olive oil, and vinegar in a food processor or blender until smooth. If desired, day-old French baguette or sourdough bread can be added as a thickener. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Serve chilled. Garnish with any combination of the following: chopped green onions, chopped cucumber, chopped hard-boiled egg, or chilled cooked shrimp.

— Nicolasa Chávez

Additional portions of this interview are online at elpalacio.org.

Shelley Thompson is director of marketing and outreach for the Museum Resources Division of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs. Her essay “Dearest Annie: Letters from Fort Selden” appeared in the winter 2008 issue of *El Palacio* and she interviewed Ernesto Ortega in fall 2009.