
HUITLACOCHÉ: FRIEND OR FOE?

BY ANDRA F. STANTON

Who could love a thick, inky-black paste that goes by the name of smut, soot and corn goiter? It turns out, a lot of people – and soon you’ll have a chance to taste it for yourself. Known as huitlacoche (pronounced WEET-la-COACH-eh) to ancient Mesoamericans, it has long been considered a delicacy south of the border. Now it promises to be one of the next big things to hit upscale restaurant menus in our own corner of the world.

Huitlacoche, from the Nahuatl language spoken by pre-Columbian Nahuatl and Aztec Indians, roughly translates into “raven droppings.” To inspire a more enticing mental image, in 1989 a shrewd Mexican chef renamed it the Corn Truffle. Happily, over the years it has been dubbed Aztec Caviar and Maize Mushroom, as well.

So what exactly is huitlacoche? The once regrettably named substance is a fungus that grows on corn. It invades the growing kernels, plumps them and replaces them with soft black flesh covered by a spongy, silvery skin.



Corn farmers in the US, especially those who grow more susceptible sweet corn, have long considered it a pest and fed it to their pigs. In fact, the federal government historically has made a considerable effort to eradicate it, mostly by trying to breed fungus-resistant corn varieties. This so-called blight typically renders two to five percent of corn fields unfit for human consumption, and natural infection rates of up to 80 percent have been noted when conditions favor proliferation of the spores.

If only farmers and government employees would actually taste huitlacoche, they’d be whistling a different tune. They would discover that this flavorful vegetable combines the but-

teriness of corn and the earthiness of mushrooms, creating a rich taste sensation all its own. When asked to describe this sensation, Epi Guzman, chef of the acclaimed Tu Y Yo Restaurant in Somerville MA replied, “It tastes like kissing somebody, like love.”

In contrast to their northern neighbors, Mexican farmers know that because of its uniquely delicious flavor, together with its scarcity, huitlacoche commands big money in the local markets where it’s sold. That’s why they rejoice when it pops up in their fields. As traditional foods – the kind that existed before Spanish Conquistadors overtook Mexican culture – regain popularity, kitchens all over the country are incorporating this unusual ingredient into their Nueva Cocina Mexicana, a cuisine that celebrates the flavors of the past and combines them with contemporary elements.

This renewed interest in ancient cuisine has not only captured the attention of Mexicans, but daring tourists and food connoisseurs all over the world, too. They’re all catching on to the fact that, when picked fresh and properly prepared, huitlacoche makes an ambrosial stuffing for tamales and crepes, for example. Scrambled with eggs and wrapped in a warm tortilla, pita or lavash, it offers an exciting addition to the breakfast table. And combined with stock and vegetables, huitlacoche turns into a full-bodied and smoky haute soup.

Zarela Martínez of the popular New York City restaurant, Zarela, has long been familiar with huitlacoche’s virtues. She serves it up in a layered crepe dish, as a flan, as a stuffing for beef tenderloin, and with scallops. She says, “Everyone loves it. And did you know it’s considered an aphrodisiac?”

More good news: not only delicious (and possibly an amatory aid), huitlacoche has been determined to be high in natural cancer-fighting antioxidants, beta glucans. Interestingly, this immune-system stimulant is usually associated with meat, which may have something to do with the fact that ancient cultures classified huitlacoche as a protein.

Moreover, huitlacoche earns the distinction of being high in umami, meaning a 5th flavor, beyond sweet, sour, salty and bitter. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a Japanese professor noted the distinctive taste of certain foods, such as asparagus, tomatoes, and mushrooms, a taste that didn’t correspond to any of the four existing categories. He came to refer to this “savoriness” or “meatiness” as umami, and Asian cooks have since considered it part of their basic flavor repertoire.

Because farmers have had to rely on good luck for umami-rich huitlacoche to spontaneously appear on their plants, it has commonly been in short supply. Early season drought followed by heavy rains seems to predispose corn to infection

by insect pollinators. One company in Mexico, however, figured out a way to cultivate it and sells a canned version to restaurateurs and purveyors of fine foods around the globe.

More recently, several industrious North Americans decided that canned simply does not compare to flash-frozen, or better yet, fresh huitlacoche, and have embarked on experimental projects to produce the delicacy locally. In Florida, for example, a farmer supplies restaurants with frozen huitlacoche cultivated in his sweet-corn fields. His product tastes sweeter than Mexican huitlacoche because Mexicans use a less sweet, chewier corn for their tortillas. When asked to explain the difference in taste, Zarela Martinez considered this for a moment and offered, "It's like the difference between a Granny Smith and a Red Delicious apple." She added that many North Americans have only tried the sweeter version of huitlacoche.

But an agronomist-turned-nurse practitioner-turned weekend farmer near Amherst, MA is determined to raise the more authentic huitlacoche. Wm Levine, an avid wild mushroom forager, taught mushroom cultivation at The Farm School Apprentice Program in North Orange MA and became their "mushroom guy," noting that "I've always been into smut." Last year he tested 18 varieties of corn and settled on white corn, used in Mexico, and a dent, or field corn, both of which are highly susceptible to fungal infection.

He then obtained huitlacoche cultures from a plant pathologist and grew it in petri dishes in the microbiology lab at UMASS-Amherst. From that stock, Levine created a liquid culture based on boiled potatoes, which keeps the fungus well-fed and ready to procreate. With a seltzer bottle, and a syringe with a 14-gauge hypodermic needle designed for large farm animal vaccination, he has tread up and down the rows of corn on his two-acre farm, injecting the silk of each ear with this mixture. He estimates that by the time the huitlacoche season ends in October he will have handled his 80,000 corn plants at least eighteen times. He also says he's living on ibuprofen.

When his corn is ready, Levine will harvest it, and slice the huitlacoche-laden kernels from the cobs with a circular knife. They will be weighed and packaged and his teenage daughter will stamp each box with Levine's logo, a raven standing on an ear of corn. He already has made arrangements with a variety of wholesalers and retailers who will distribute and sell his unique product across the country. For those chefs and home cooks who have yet to be amazed by the heavenly aroma and flavor of huitlacoche, he plans to include three recipes in every box.

Huitlacoche can be purchased from directly from Wm. He can be contacted at waglevcott@earthlink.net. ❖

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CHICKEN BREASTS STUFFED WITH HUITLACOCHÉ

Recipe from Tu Y Yo Restaurant, Somerville

Serves 8

8 chicken breasts, pounded between wax paper until flat
Salt and pepper
3 garlic cloves, minced, divided
¼ c unsalted butter, softened
1 large onion
1 lb fresh huitlacoche
2 cups fresh corn kernels
10 stems epazote (or Cilantro), finely chopped
4 large Poblano chili peppers
1 cup water
1 low-salt or unsalted chicken bouillon
¼ cup heavy cream
½ cup grated Manchego cheese
Salt and pepper, to taste

Sprinkle the chicken breasts with salt, pepper and ⅓ of the minced garlic. Let rest, about 10 minutes.

In a large sauté pan, heat the butter and onion over medium heat until the onion is translucent, about 3 minutes. Add ⅓ of the garlic, the corn kernels, and huitlacoche and cook, stirring occasionally, over medium heat, until the mixture forms a soft paste, about 5 minutes. Add the epazote and let cool.

Place a tablespoon or more of the huitlacoche mixture along one long edge of each chicken breast, roll the chicken into a cylinder and secure with toothpicks to prevent filling from leaking. Refrigerate.

Place the chilies on a cookie sheet lined with tin foil and broil for 2 or 3 minutes, until the skin wrinkles and blisters. Keep turning the chilies until all sides have been charred. Put chilies into a paper bag and let steam and cool, about 10 minutes. Peel and de-vein the chilies. Remove seeds.

Preheat oven to 300 degrees.

In a blender or Cuisinart, purée chilies, water, remaining garlic, bouillon and cream. Pour this mixture into a saucepan and cook over medium high heat, about five minutes. Correct seasoning to taste.

Place the chicken breasts in a large baking pan and pour the sauce over them. Sprinkle with cheese. Cover the pan with aluminum foil and place in the oven until the chicken is cooked through, about 30 minutes.