

Most cooks stick precisely to recipes handed down from mother to daughter for longer than anyone can remember. But there are also adventurers like Iliana de la Vega, who runs El Naranjo. The name means “orange tree,” and with tables set among potted citruses in a glassed-in courtyard, the restaurant indeed resembles an orangery. Decor, however, is not the draw. That would be Iliana’s highly personal style of Mexican cooking.

“I am Mexican, and I love my country,” Iliana said. “I won’t do anything radical, like putting red wine in *mole*. But I want to do my own thing, which is not everything exactly as my mother did. People here are afraid of evolution. You can improve recipes as long as you are respectful of the basics. If you talk to me about authenticity, I don’t know what you mean. If you say tradition, then I’m with you.”

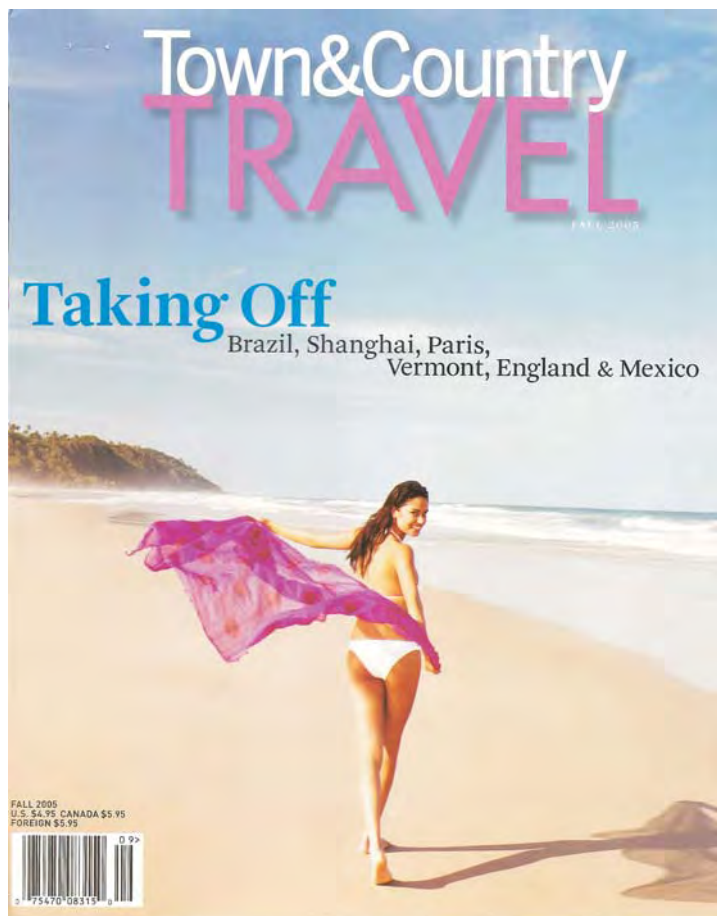
When Iliana makes a *chile relleno*, for instance, she sneaks in hints of sweetness and fire, experimenting with different flavors. Some Oaxacans cry heresy. But you had better reserve a table early if you want to eat at El Naranjo in high season.



Return to Oaxaca

Decades after his first trip to one of Mexico's premier culinary cities, **Mort Rosenblum** finds it as vibrant as his memories: The markets are bustling, the people are welcoming, and the food is as delicious as ever.

TRENDSSETTING CHEF-OWNER
ILIANA DE LA VEGA AT
EL NARANJO RESTAURANT.
OPPOSITE: THE CATHEDRAL
IN TEOTITLÁN DEL VALLE
IS SURE TO INSPIRE.



A Saucy Tale

Nowhere is mole, the distinctive and savory Mexican sauce, more revered than in Oaxaca.

by Tom Passavant

My girlfriend wants to learn how to make my mother's mole," says Juan Manuel Santiago. His voice conveys the seriousness of this announcement. In Oaxaca (pronounced wah-hah-kah), Mexico, initiating your girlfriend into the secrets of your family's mole

(*moe-lay*) is considerably more significant than merely proposing marriage. Not only are your future happiness and familial pride at stake, but you are passing the torch of a Oaxacan culinary tradition that goes back centuries.

My wife and I are driving with Juan Manuel to the ruins at Monte Albán, a 2,500-year-old Zapotec city. He's a handsome young man with jet black hair and a warm smile. When he's not guiding travelers to the sites in and around Oaxaca, he helps run a sleek little espresso bar called Nuevo Mundo Coffee Roaster.

"What about your grandmother?" I ask. "Doesn't she make a good mole too?"

"Yes, my grandmother's version is sweet," he replies. "I like it even better than my mother's, which is more spicy."

My wife and I have come to Oaxaca, a vibrant city of some 255,000 people about 250 miles southeast of Mexico City, in search of the complex concoctions of chilies, nuts,

"In Oaxaca we are proud of our different chilies," says Iliana de la Vega. She is the chef and an owner, with her husband, of El Naranjo, one of the city's best restaurants. Iliana, born in Mexico City but from an old Oaxacan family, offers daylong cooking classes twice a week. In her classroom we listen to her erudite discussion of all aspects of Oaxacan cooking, especially the seven moles.

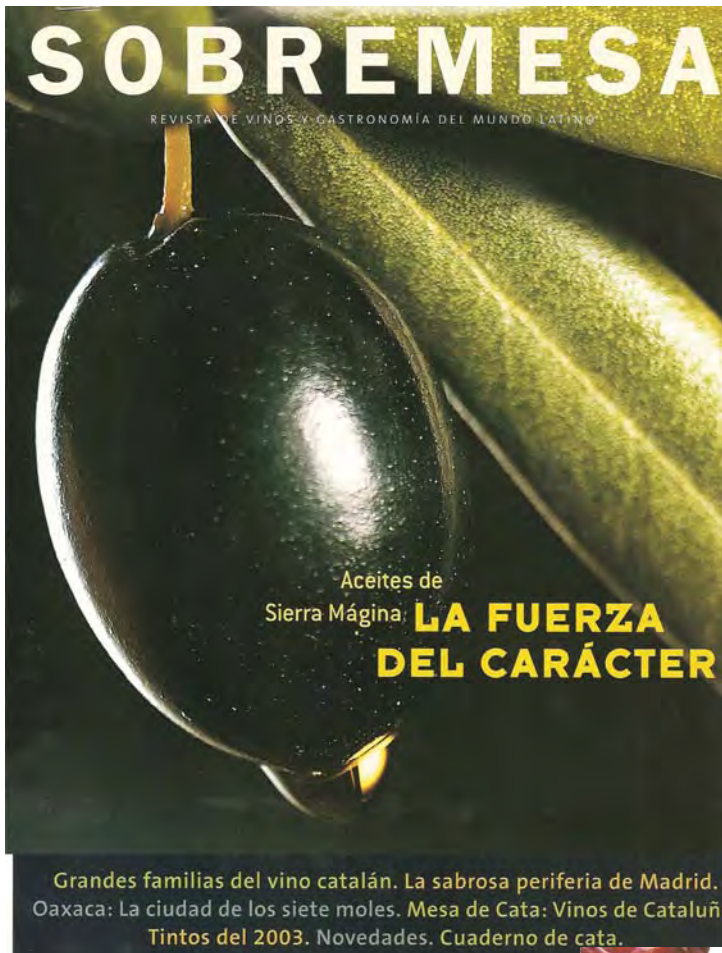
In addition to *mole negro*, *rojo* and *coloradito*, there are *manchamanteles*, or "tablecloth stainers," which incorporate plantains and pineapple to balance the flavors. *Mole verde*, a green sauce made from assorted herbs and tomatillos, is unusual, since the raw ingredients are not roasted before being pureed. *Amarillo* is a burnt orange color, made with four kinds of chilies and served with green beans and chayote squash. And then there's *chichilo*—even blacker than *mole negro*—in which the chili seeds are burned to ash before being mixed in.

"Many moles in Oaxaca are getting too sweet and chocolatey, because that's what tourists ask for," says Iliana. On this day we learn to make her version of *mole rojo*, which gets its ruddy color from dry-roasted ancho and *guajillo* chilies; it also contains tomatoes, pecans, peanuts, sesame seeds, onions, garlic, cinnamon and chocolate, among other ingredients. Iliana has raised a ruckus in Mexican culinary circles by refusing to use the traditional lard in any of her dishes, including her moles. (Rick Bayless, the widely admired chef and owner of two acclaimed Mexican restaurants in Chicago, takes issue with Iliana on this point.) Instead she substitutes canola oil. "Genocide, disease and lard were the three evils we got from the Spanish," she says. "There was little fat in Mexican cooking before the Spanish came. Besides, I think lard is a very strong flavor."

Iliana is a perfectionist, going so far as to have her own blend of chocolate custom-made at the nearby Mayordomo factory. The proof is in the tasting. Good mole is a lesson in harmonious blending, with no single flavor standing out, but *great* mole is mysterious and multi-layered. Iliana's *rojo* is great mole.

A festive evening at El Naranjo.





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El Naranjo

Valerio Trujano 203, Oaxaca
 Tel: (951) 5141878
 Precio promedio: \$185
 Tarjetas de crédito: sí

Vuelta a lo prehispánico: Iliana De La Vega y Ernesto Torrealba, ella en la cocina y él en la sala, inauguraron *El Naranjo* en 1997, a pocos pasos del Zócalo, la plaza principal. Desde entonces este restaurante se ha convertido en un punto de referencia internacional. El mérito es más que nada de Iliana que hace una cocina puente entre la tradición y la modernidad. "Trato de cocinar teniendo presentes las raíces prehispánicas" dice la cocinera. "Nada de grasas o muy pocas, pero nunca de origen animal", agrega. "No es para estar a la moda. Antes de la llegada de los españoles se comía así". Su menú contiene una entera sección dedicada a los moles: cada día uno de los clásicos, comenzando los lunes con el *coloradito* para terminar los sábados con el *chichilo*, servidos con pollo o carne de cerdo. También se sirve todos los días el clásico mole negro.



OAXACA

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5 Chili power Iliana de la Vega, a virtuoso of traditional Mexican cooking and a favorite of American celebrity chefs like Rick Bayless, teaches novices on Tuesdays and Thursdays at her top-rated restaurant, El Naranjo. Each cooking lesson varies, but students may learn to brew a tea flavored with hibiscus flowers, toast chilis and tomatoes on a *comal* (the clay griddle used to dry-roast ingredients and to make tortillas), and then use those chilis to make several salsas and a mole. After an educational walking tour of Mercado Benito Juárez, a daily market, the class indulges in a late lunch of all the dishes created that morning. When the last bite of flan has been eaten, de la Vega sends students home with printed copies of the recipes she's taught them. *Valerio Trujano 203, 011-52/951-514-1878, elnaranjo.com.mx, \$60.*

If one walk through the romantic old streets doesn't leave you infatuated with Mexico's colorful colonial city, a little mescal usually does the trick.

By Laurie Kuntz Photographs by Livia Corona

25 Reasons We Love Oaxaca



2 Courtyards by the dozen Many of the city's old colonial villas have been beautifully restored and turned into boutique hotels. Just two blocks east of the zocalo, Casa de Sierra Azul manages to keep the bustle of street life at bay with an ornate wrought-iron gate and thick adobe walls. As at many of Oaxaca's restaurants, galleries, and hotels, Sierra Azul's exterior hides a shady courtyard. Guests in many of its 14 rooms open their doors directly onto the quiet patio, where potted geraniums and ferns surround a gurgling, hand-carved stone fountain. Corridors around the courtyard are painted a pale yellow and host faded frescoes as old as the 200-year-old house. *Hidalgo 1002, 888/624-3341, mexonline.com/sierrazul.htm, doubles from \$124.*

3 Corny festivals Nearly 40 percent of the state's population is indigenous, and the ancient languages are still heard in markets, especially in outlying villages. The Zapotecs, the most populous of the 16 native tribes in the valleys around Oaxaca city, are credited as the first people to celebrate Guelaguetza, a festival honoring Centeotl, goddess of corn. These days, Oaxaca city welcomes thousands of Indians from several tribes for traditional dancing and music during the festival, which falls on two Mondays in July. Tickets go on sale in May, and hotel rooms should be booked three or more months in advance. *Oaxaca Tourist Office, Murguía 206, 011-52/951-516-0123, aooaxaca.com, \$40.*

4 A new old town The city's zocalo has always been considered one of the prettiest in Mexico, so Oaxacans were understandably shocked last summer when city officials closed it without warning for a five-month renovation. Workers replaced antem stone pavers, replanted flowerbeds, and painted cast-iron benches a shiny black. But not everyone's a fan of "progress."

Protest banners and kids' drawings of 125-year-old laurel trees killed during the renovation covered a corrugated metal fence that enclosed the project site. Reviews of the new zocalo are mixed—critics say it's too perfect—but it hums again with roving balloon vendors, mariachis, and teenagers out for a paseo, or stroll.

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6 Laundry like it's the Middle Ages Originally built as a convent in 1576 by Dominican monks, Camino Real has served as a government office, a jail, and a school over the years. Now it's a five-star hotel where doubles start at just under \$300 a night. But you don't have to stay there to enjoy the two acres of grounds, planted with soft grass and bougainvillea. Check out Los Lavaderos, the 16th-century equivalent of a laundry room, in the northeast corner of the property. In a hexagonal stone gazebo, water flows from a large central fountain to a dozen stone basins that were once used by the nuns for washing. *5 de Mayo 300, 011-52/951-501-6100, caminoreal.com/oaxaca.*

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El Naranja

La familia de la chef Iliana de la Vega es originaria de Oaxaca. Pero ella no. Iliana creció en el Distrito Federal. Aunque desde chica aprendió a preparar moles y chiles rellenos, su familia la vio como una extranjera cuando en 1997 abrió un restaurante, El Naranja, a una cuadra del zócalo oaxaqueño. Y tuvo que aparecer en guías de viajes extranjeras y ser recomendada por turistas para hacerse de un nombre. Comer en El Naranja es una obligación, y aprender a preparar los platillos típicos del estado es una experiencia que no hay que perderse. Siguiendo las recetas de siempre, Iliana ha logrado darles un giro para mantenerlas aún más vigentes, reduciendo los niveles de grasa o introduciendo hortalizas de origen orgánico.

Esta chef sólo ofrece clases de un día, que inician a las 9:30 de la mañana. En ellas se preparan siete platillos —una botana o ensalada, una sopa, un plato fuerte que siempre es mole, dos salsas, un agua fresca y un postre— seguidos por un recorrido por el mercado donde se explica la preparación tradicional del chocolate. Alrededor de las 13 horas, alumnos y maestra regresan al restaurante, donde se sirven los platillos preparados durante la clase y para las 15 horas todo el mundo está fuera. Las clases se llevan a cabo martes y jueves, siempre y cuando haya al menos dos personas interesadas (60 dólares), aunque también realiza talleres especiales para el Día de Muertos (26 y 28 de octubre, 80 dólares) o durante las vacaciones de Navidad (21 y 28 de diciembre, 60 dólares).



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Por Paula Andrade, Jorge Carrión, Adam Critchley y Barbara Kastelein