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A Foamy Drink, and the Future of Food

What the Long, Strange Trip of *Tejate*, a Maize-based Mexican Drink, reveals about a Worldwide Agricultural System at a Crossroads

Michael Pollan's recent bestseller *The Omnivore's Dilemma* revealed to millions of readers the centrality, and dangers, of commodity corn in the modern industrialized agriculture system as developed in the United States. The "modern varieties" of corn, which are low in diversity, are now taking over the very birthplace of the crop, Southern Mexico, where it is known as maize. In their paper for the new issue of *Current Anthropology*, "Food Globalization and Local Diversity: The Case of *Tejate*, a Traditional Maize and Cacao Beverage from Oaxaca, Mexico" authors Daniela Soleri, David Cleveland, and Flavio Aragón-Cuevas trace the unique history of the ancient drink, and show how it could be the harbinger for the future of agriculture and food variety. In this indigenous drink is contained a central irony of globalization, for the very set of forces that threaten to destroy *tejate* may in the end save both the drink and the diverse varieties of maize.

Southern Mexico, *tejate's* birthplace, holds an august position in the history of agriculture. In addition to maize, three species of squash, chile, common bean, and avocado were domesticated here. Traditional "farmers' varieties" of crops have met an enormous challenge in the worldwide "Green Revolution" (launched in Mexico, incidentally) of the twentieth century, which brought down food prices, but at the cost of crop diversity—including among maize varieties. The modern varieties of maize have already won out in the commercial production of tortillas, among other staples. Traditional foods that continue to require the more diverse tastes and qualities of farmers' varieties are the only bulwark against the extinction of those varieties and their globally important genetic diversity. *Tejate*, the drink of work, parties, festivities, and family meals in Oaxaca, remains associated with the maize harvest, and has remained the domain of traditional farmers' varieties of maize. Through field work in two communities in Oaxaca, Soleri and her co-authors found that *tejate* is in its steepest decline in the modern community, where maize diversity and traditional foods are also waning. The more traditional community, on the other hand, makes *tejate* more often and maintains a wider diversity of maize types for this and other traditional foods.

Immigration patterns, however, complicate what might seem yet another sad tale of globalization overwhelming traditional culture. The researchers found that residents of more traditional communities were more likely to immigrate to larger Mexican cities or the United States. As a result, there is now a demand for *tejate* in Los Angeles, and in Mexican cities, where commercial *tejateras* take over the time-consuming task. While some ingredients, such as seeds from the mamey tree, are acquired from Oaxaca, the maize and the ash needed to process it are acquired domestically, often through unique channels. The authors interview a Los Angeles-based *tejatera* and find that she prepares her batches from: fifty pounds of maize bought from the neighborhood pet store as whole grain bird feed! Ashes for making *cuaneastle* are bought from a fast food chain that produces wood-barbequed chicken. Pizle, cacao, and rosita de cacao are sent to her by her family from Oaxaca via a courier service, and she uses a *metate* and *mano* carried to her from Oaxaca by a family member.

As a result of immigration, a nascent and informal international trade has helped preserve *tejate's* more exotic ingredients, but the fate of traditional varieties of maize remains inconclusive. Will *tejate* follow tortillas and become a less flavorful, industrialized version of its former self...or will its arrival in wealthier cities create a wider demand for a gourmet, traditional version? Soleri, Cleveland, and Aragón-Cuevas conclude that *tejate* will serve as a harbinger for the direction of food variety, and that "whether globalization will ultimately support, enhance, or diminish the biological and cultural diversity on which *tejate* is based, and which it reinforces, will depend on the confluence of many different forces, and simple generalizations are inappropriate." Either way, anyone interested in the future of food would be wise to follow the case of the foamy drink from one of the cradles of agriculture.

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Patlaxtlera Dona Rosa Gonzalez in the Zaachila market selling ingredients for *tejate* and other frothy beverages. Photograph D.A. Cleveland, used with permission of subject.

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