Gastronomic Inventions and the Aesthetics of Regional Food

The Naturalization of Yucatecan Taste

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My main goal here is to describe and explain the processes whereby the taste resulting from a particular assemblage of ingredients, recipes, and eating etiquette, has become associated in the local and national imagination with a specific regional culture and territory within the Mexican state. I argue that there is a specific, historically constructed aesthetic configuration of flavors, aromas, textures, and colors that make the food of Yucatán recognizable within and beyond the peninsular territory. I propose that the taste of Yucatecan food is opposed, as a regional identity marker, to a perceived monolithic taste of national Mexican cuisine. Even acknowledging that since 2010 Yucatán's food has become progressively coopted by Mexican national chefs and culture brokers (see Ayora-Diaz in press), I suggest that the process of invention of Yucatecan gastronomy can be understood as the emergence of a food 'tradition' from a historical conjuncture that encompassed the shifting global market of edible commodities and inscribed Yucatán's food within Caribbean rather than Mexican culinary formations, practices and values (Ayora-Diaz 2012).

In short, in this paper I am concerned with the process of *territorialization* (De Landa 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987) of Yucatecan gastronomy; that is, a process that encompasses a complex of historical transformations that explain how a specific set of gustatory preferences has become coextensive with the territory and the culinary culture of a particular region. I have called this set of transformations the 'naturalization of taste' (Ayora-Diaz 2010, 2012) in reference to a process that veils the historical, social, economic, political and cultural sources of this assemblage of culinary preferences, leading to the perception that food predilections

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(in terms of flavors, aromas, colors, and textures) are the result of the 'natural' disposition of the people of and from a place. In the Yucatecan case, I argue here, this 'naturalization' is supported by the articulation of some key elements: the historical development of food cycles that routinize the consumption of a set of ingredients and of a number of recipes tied to specific days of the week or months of the year; the widespread use of *recados* (spice pastes) in Yucatecan homes and restaurants – a practice that repeats and inscribes taste preferences for certain flavors, aromas, colors and textures; and the part played by cookbooks and restaurants in the institutionalization of a culturally meaningful culinary aesthetics. These elements, together, further in the majority of Yucatecans an inclination toward a shared preference for a specific configuration of flavors, aromas, colors and textures in the food they affirm as their own.

Confounding taste

Through history, the term *taste* has served as vehicle for an array of meanings that confound its use in everyday and academic language. Although originally coined to make reference to the perception of flavors, it has become a metaphor for social relations, and a marker of social distance and distinction (Bourdieu 1984; Gronow 1997; Korsmayer 1999; Mennell 1985; Simmel 1997). Through time, philosophers and other scholars have established a hierarchy of the senses that ranks as higher and 'objective' those that act through distance (sight and hearing), while those that depend on proximity (taste and touch) are ranked low because of their subjective, sensual, and primitive nature (Ferguson 2011; Gronow 1997; Korsmeyer 1999; Ong 1991; Sutton 2010). It is this elevation of sight and hearing that has supported the classification of painting, sculpture, and music as high arts, while cooking and food are denied such recognition – or receive it only when they become assimilated within the visual arts (film, sculpture, painting), or to musical references. But even in those instances they are not granted the same value as those 'true' artistic representations that entail distance. This arbitrary hierarchy has set the terms of a philosophical antinomy: should food be considered an art or not? I concur with Korsmeyer (1999: 144) on the need to transcend this deceptive opposition.

Early in the 1990s, Howes (1991: 3) argued that the anthropology of the senses would have to take into account the cultural variability of both the pattern of the senses, and of the cultural modalities of perception. Different cultures rank the senses differently. In that same decade, in characterizing postmodern societies, it was often suggested that in contemporary culture everyday life becomes aestheticized partly because of the changing meanings of consumption (Featherstone 1991; Friedman 1994; Gronow 1997; Lash 1990). This debate contributed to undermine the universal pretensions of high artistic values, and highlighted the culture-boundedness of the definition of art, one that was, originally, meaningful primarily to the leading groups of North Atlantic societies. My position here is not to argue that cooking and food are art, but rather, that the (social) sense of taste that they create inspire a set of aesthetic values and worldviews that are furthered as the ontological property of the hegemonic group of a society, and are used to draw cultural boundaries that separate it from other social groups.

I find some additional concepts important for understanding the importance of taste in the cultural study of culinary practices: to begin with, Howes (2005a) has used the term *hyperesthesia* in reference to the invocation of all (or most) of the senses in the design of commodities for late capitalist consumption. He argues that the sense of vision has become insufficient to incite the consumption of goods. Designers and manufacturers today seek to introduce aromas, surface texture, sound, and even the flavor – though often metaphorically – in the goods they trade. This would seem meaningful and relevant only for the aesthetic analysis of commodities in the center of late capitalist societies. However, the logic of late capitalism can be found, to different degrees and in various forms, in any society. The transformations described by Harvey (1990) and Lash and Urry (1994), are to be found worldwide, even though the location of each group in the global economy and culture is different. Taking into account Comaroff and Comaroff's position in *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009), we can see that in the late capitalist global order, gastronomic 'traditions' need to be packaged in ways that make sure they become recognizable 'brands' (see also Kirshemblatt-Gimblett 1998). That is, the culinary products encompassed under a 'tradition' must correspond with predefined aesthetic values that establish appropriate flavors, aromas, colors and textures in a meal, and consequently require, for their elaboration, an established set of ingredients and culinary techniques and technologies.

Cooks and chefs who claim to cook within a gastronomic 'tradition' must appeal to all the senses, making the sensual experience of consuming a meal necessarily hyperesthesic. For example, a dish of *papadzules* served at a restaurant conveys the bitter-anise like flavor and aroma of epazote, the flavor of fried roasted tomatoes with the aroma of tomatoes and habanero pepper, the pale green color of the sauce of ground squash seeds, and the white and yellow of minced boiled eggs; the texture of slightly fried corn tortillas (if they were not, they would rapidly fall apart because of the sauces), and the softness of the eggs. The introduction or the replacement of ingredients, or the sidestepping of procedures would result in an inferior product that would question the 'authenticity' of the meal. For instance, at a restaurant the cook and restaurant manager decided to alter the recipe and added chicken broth to the squash seed sauce, obtaining an extremely pale color; at another restaurant the cook added a colorant to a probably inferior quality squash seed paste,[1] and obtained a bright green color.

However, the hyperaesthesic sensual experience of the meal is made meaningful because all of the sensations derived from the consumption of the meal evoke previous experiences, and invokes a history of social relations with family members, friends and casual guests. Sutton has used the term *synesthesia* to refer to this union of the senses and the memory of past experiences, events and people. He also contends that all the senses work together in our experience of the world and ought not to be compartmentalized (2005: 305; also, Sutton 2010: 218). Thus, in addition of appealing to all the senses, food can also take a person back to a time (Proust's madeleine being the most often cited example), to a place, or an event (a birthday, a wedding). The aroma and the vision of a meal, the flavors and textures, can bring back the feelings of family or community, and also those of peoplehood and nation

(Bach 2002; Caldwell 2002; Law 2005; Pratt 2007). Sutton (2010: 215) has coined the term *gustemology* to refer to those 'approaches that organize their understanding of a wide spectrum of cultural issues around taste and other sensory aspects of food.' This includes, he argues, the exploration of temporal culinary constructions in relation to 'seemingly natural dispositions, emotions and sensory experiences' (215); the part that the sensory experience of food plays in the construction of place (216); and the focus on the production of taste from the transformation of raw into cooked meals (217). I would argue that the naturalization of taste – that is, the invention and institution of a particular configuration of flavors, aromas, textures, colors and sounds as the natural disposition of a group of people – brings together these three different aspects. This process, I contend, creates a culinary 'tradition' that, at the same time that grounds the sense of identity, locality, and peoplehood, draws the boundaries between group members and outsiders – the meanings and significance of a gastronomic 'tradition' is that it re/creates difference (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003).

Here, I coincide with other scholars who have shown how food is deployed as an instrument to mark the exclusion or inclusion of other people within a family, group, locality, region or nation. Appadurai's (1981) seminal work on *gastro-politics* set the way in exploring how food is used to demarcate gender and family boundaries in India. Other key anthropological examples are found in Stoller's work on the Shongay (1989), Holtzman's work on the Samburu (2009), and Walmsey's work on food and race in Esmeraldas, Ecuador (2005). In a related manner, I have proposed that the preparation and consumption of Yucatecan food demands the embodiment of a set of cooking and consumption practices, and that failure to reproduce them 'correctly' marks and separates between insiders and outsiders within regional culture (Ayora-Diaz 2009). In the context of my distinction between the gastronomic and culinary fields I have argued that they are defined by class differences in Yucatán. The ambition to affirm a regional gastronomy is proper to the elite regional groups of Yucatán. In their majority they are descendants of Europeans and Middle Easterners, but they include individuals from different ethnic, regional and national backgrounds who have become assimilated within hegemonic Yucatecan society. Yucatecan cooks can be of peasant and Maya origin – even so, Maya identity is a contested terrain (see Castillo Cocom and Castañeda 2004). It is often women who are hired to work as cooks at homes or in restaurants. In general, as I discuss extensively elsewhere (Ayora Diaz 2009, 2010), the contribution of subordinate local ethnic and immigrant groups has been veiled during the invention of Yucatecan gastronomy. Finally, with rare exceptions, it is mostly women who have written cookbooks specialized in Yucatecan cuisine. To sum up, in Yucatán we can find a multiplicity of tastes that provide slight variations in the flavor of dishes among different families and among different regions within the state. Still, they correspond to a homogenizing cultural construct recognized as 'Yucatecan Gastronomy'. Here, despite these variations in sensual experience of the food, I am privileging the analysis of the hegemonic representation of Yucatecan Cuisine.

There have been important contributions to the understanding of the emergence and development of

Mexican national cuisine (Bak-Geller 2011; Long-Solis and Vargas 2005; Pilcher 1998). These authors highlight the imagination of a national cuisine that makes the culinary preferences of the people of a place to coincide with the territory of the Mexican nation-state, veiling and silencing the existence of other important regional differences.[2] I have been arguing, however, that in contemporary global postcolonial and post-national societies, regions have a tendency to display centrifugal forces. This is particularly true in the Yucatecan case, where throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there was a transition from strong nationalism to a strong sense of regional peoplehood (see Ayora-Diaz 2010, 2012). Yucatecans have developed, through time, musical, literary, linguistic, and culinary forms that local people do not see as variations on the same of Mexican culture but rather, as part of the 'natural' temperament of Yucatecan society (Shrimpton-Masson 2006; Vargas-Cetina 2007, 2010). It is from this critical perspective that I describe the process through which Yucatecans have imagined and constructed a regionally meaningful culinary aesthetics and the mechanisms for its dissemination throughout the Yucatecan territory, converting historical contingency into the strong 'natural' disposition of regional culinary taste.

The taste of Yucatán

As Korsmeyer has pointed out (1999: 74; see also Howes 2005b; Korsmeyer 2005), in modern society, science has reduced the experience of flavor to the perception of four basic tastes (salty, sweet, sour and bitter). In contrast to this bio-physiological reductionism, anthropologists have shown that taste is the rather complex outcome of perceptions, sensations, social, economic, and political relations that result in a multiplicity of sensorial perceptions. Our everyday perceptions of food's taste take into account nuances introduced by the different ingredients employed manufacturing a meal. Although some may attribute these flavorful notes to the fragrance of the spices (the sense of smell is said to supplement taste), subjects can hardly separate in their experience what comes from the flavor itself, and what the aroma adds; anyone knows that pork and beef, white and red wine taste differently; that is, anyone who has grown within a cultural context in which these are important distinctions. In modern societies we often mistake the effect for the cause: it is because we have historically underprivileged taste that we have a poor vocabulary to describe taste sensations, and not our poor vocabulary the result of a biologically limited sense of taste. Hence, in this paper, I rely on my contemporary readers' greater acquaintance with the spices and different ingredients – made possible by the global market of edible commodities – to convey the complex taste of Yucatecan food. I will be discussing, in general terms, the ingredients, their combinations (especially in recados), and the techniques and technologies for cooking them that contribute to the imagination of a culturally specific Yucatecan taste.

To describe the taste of Yucatecan food I should bring attention to the distinction I have formulated between the culinary and gastronomic fields in Yucatán. I have defined the *culinary field* as the assemblage of ingredients, recipes, culinary techniques and tech-

nology, that is inclusive, ecumenical, open to improvisation, experimentation, and to a ludic approach to food and cooking. Within this field, often at home, domestic cooks cook with the ingredients they have at hand, and respond to the preferences and dislikes of different family members. While this field is often located in the domestic space, some eateries, economic kitchens (see below), and small restaurants strive to reproduce the taste of domestic meals for their patrons. In contrast, the *gastronomic field*, a bifurcation of the culinary field, is made out of a number of selected iconic dishes that are taken, by most Yucatecans, as representative of a Yucatecan-specific culinary aesthetics. Hence it includes ingredients, recipes, techniques and technologies that are *normative* and exclusive. It appears closed to improvisation or experimentation (other than at home and by Yucatecans since when non-Yucatecans improvise or experiment they are taken to be disrespectful of Yucatecan 'tradition'). It is mostly located in the public space of restaurants and eateries, but is also replicated at home when for any reason the home cook decides to prepare a Yucatecan meal for his or her guests – thus making the occasion 'public'. When discussing Yucatecan taste, I refer to this gastronomic field, a field invented by the regional elites that lead to a homogenizing representation of Yucatecan cuisine that veil differences arising from other culinary traditions that exist within the state of Yucatán.

For example, *potaje* is an important dish within the Yucatecan culinary field. It is a local adaptation of a recipe for the French *pot-a-feu*. This soup is normally cooked with meat, vegetables, and a choice of beans, lentils or chickpeas. How can one know if it is Yucatecan and not Mexican? I propose that the Yucatecan taste is the effect of a specific configuration of local ingredients: among the meats used, in Yucatán, we find mainly pork and not beef. In fact, locally, expected ingredients are bacon, chunks of pork, *longaniza* (sausage) from Valladolid, and ham. Among the vegetables added, Yucatecans use a local variety of sweet green pepper, and garnish their meal with limes and habanero pepper. Recently, a friend who openly admitted that she dislikes cooking, claimed that her *potaje* is well-received by her children, husband and friends, and she does not follow any written recipe, but instead, she adds whatever she has in her pantry and fridge. Also, recently, we visited a friend who was recovering from an illness, and she asked us to stay for lunch. Her husband had cooked *potaje*, he called it *potaje express*, something he said he had 'invented'. He had opened cans of red beans and of minced vegetables, added pieces of *longaniza* from Valladolid, and smoked pork meat from Temozón, a small village near Valladolid and, to spice it up, a tomato and chili pepper sauce he had acquired from a roast chicken stand. He was proud that it was the second time in a week he had cooked it, and it had been a success with his children and wife. While I will not be discussing here the changes in cooking brought about by the mass production of processed edibles (see Classen, Howes and Synnott 2005; Haden 2005), I find it important to point out that despite these friends' improvisation, their friends and relatives could recognize the dish because of the flavor imparted by local ingredients: the smoked pork and the *longaniza*. The former is marinated in the juice of Seville oranges before smoking; the latter consists of minced pork marinated in Seville orange juice, oregano, and *achiote* (annatto; in other Mexican regions sausages are

prepared with pimiento), and then smoked. In the end, these domestic cooks were able to cook a well-established meal, improvising in their choice of ingredients and cooking procedures, and still serve a meal that was recognized as *potaje*, because they did not substantially alter the recipe allowing those who ate the meal to classify it as such.

In contrast, meals from the gastronomic field, because of their iconicity, do not leave much room for experimentation or improvisation. There exist variations in the cooking of these dishes, but they must remain within limits that still allow its recognition as a 'faithful' rendition, and local people will only accept these variations if they result from using an alternative local ingredient that will not change the color, flavor, aroma, or texture of the meal. This leaves room to like or dislike the different versions one can purchase at restaurants. It is the introduction of alien ingredients that becomes questionable. For example, *Lomitos de Valladolid* is a simple stew made of diced pork loin, fresh tomatoes, and smoked and dried red chili pepper, commonly served along with minced hard-boiled eggs and a paste of white beans cooked with epazote leaves. Some Yucatecan cooks (domestic and professional) add oregano, some even garlic, and habanero pepper to the sauce. Habanero pepper is added to the simmering sauce and kept whole so that it will release its flavor and aroma, but will not make the sauce spicy hot. When white lima beans of the local variety (*ibes*) are difficult to find, Yucatecans will find it acceptable to accompany *lomitos* with black beans. When cooks serve this food those served can perceive the aroma of the tomato sauce with dried and smoked chili peppers, and the aroma of the epazote in the white or black beans, the red color of the sauce the white or black of the beans and the white and yellow of the eggs, and when they take the meat to the mouth they enjoy the very tender, buttery texture of the small pieces of meat in the meal. However, once, at a restaurant claiming to serve the 'traditional' food of Valladolid (the city where I was born) when I was served *lomitos*, I found that the taste was not 'right'. When I spoke to the chef/owner, he explained that he went to culinary school in Mexico City, and had added to the dish a smoked chili pepper commonly used in central Mexico as his signature ingredient. To me, the food was not unpleasant, but it failed to convey the taste I have learned to expect from this dish.

Recently, partly due to the greater numbers of immigrants into the state, some iconic dishes have been changed to suit non-Yucatecan palates and other needs. For instance, when cooks prepare stuffed cheese, a traditional Yucatecan dish made out with the shell of Dutch Edam cheese, they stuff it with ground pork mixed with achiote, minced onions, garlic, capers, olives, tomatoes, and roasted pine nuts, and add black pepper, allspice, local oregano, thyme and bay leaves as condiments. This recipe has recently undergone some changes. To satisfy the requests of non-strict vegetarians and of practicing Catholics who refuse meat on abstinence days, some restaurant owners and their cooks began using shrimps as an alternative stuffing and (in only one restaurant) *cazón* (baby shark). Friends who have eaten these alternative versions liked them, but they also told me that they tried them out of curiosity, and still prefer the taste and texture of the 'traditional' *picadillo* (stuffing). Vegans may find it extremely difficult to get an experience of Yucatecan gastronomy.

Yucatecan food privileges the use of animal meat and products (eggs, lard, fish and other seafood, and fowl), and salads are not part of Yucatecan cuisine.

It is from a constellation of ingredients and their locally acceptable combinations that we can understand the emergence, constitution and institution of Yucatecan taste. Though I will not dwell here at length on the topic (which I have discussed extensively elsewhere, Ayora-Diaz 2012), suffice it to say that when the peninsula of Yucatán was a separate republic from Mexico, and when Yucatecans were struggling to regain independence, the region was subject to military and commercial blockades enforced by the Mexican army. During these times, Yucatecan elites established commercial ties with other Caribbean nations (mainly Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico), the states of Texas, Louisiana, and New York in the United States, and with England, France and Spain in Europe. This relationship favored the local adoption of Caribbean and European ingredients, cooking techniques and technologies. Although at the turn of the twentieth century regional Yucatecan cookbooks included many European recipes, progressively, throughout the twentieth century, cookbook writers began refining their lists of recipes, excluding those that referenced other culinary traditions, and highlighting what was Yucatecan in conception (Ayora-Diaz 2012). Immigrants enriched the taste of Yucatecan food. Particularly important contributions were those of the Lebanese and Syrians who arrived in Yucatán since the end of the nineteenth century. While it is possible to suspect the culinary contribution of people of African, Korean and Chinese ancestors, their social subordination has also downplayed the perception of their influence on Yucatecan cuisine. In this sense, Yucatecan gastronomy must be seen as a twentieth century creation made possible by the increasing mobility of people and edible goods, regionally and globally, but invented by regional elites to emphasize, not the ethnic sources of their taste, but rather, their cosmopolitan inclination.

In contrast to Mexican cuisine, a culinary tradition made possible by the centralized control of produce from all Mexican regions, Yucatecan cooks relied on trade with Caribbean islands and Europe. Through time, some ingredients became common in Yucatecan cooking. Examining cookbooks and kitchens I have found that, in decreasing order, the preferred meats are pork, fowl (turkey, chicken and quail), seafood, and beef. This contrasts with central Mexican meat preferences centered on beef – although as Pilcher (2006) shows, this is also a relatively recent development. Among the most common vegetables used in cooking, the Yucatecan list includes local, Caribbean and Old World produce: onions (red and white), garlic, radish, beets, turnips, cabbage, plantain, potatoes, sweet potatoes, chayote, red tomatoes, chili peppers (habanero, *max*, *xkat ik*, sweet green and red), squash, and avocados. The list of herbs includes chaya, cilantro, epazote, *mac'ulam* (*yerba santa*), oregano, parsley, and thyme. Among the preferred spices the list includes: achiote, allspice, black pepper, cinnamon, cloves, coriander seeds, cumin, saffron, and white pepper. Although corn tortillas constitute the main staple in everyday food, Yucatecans have already put on their tables, for most of a century, white bread baguette-style (locally called *pan francés*, or French bread). Rice is a common side dish in Yucatecan meals both within the culinary and gastro-

nomic fields, and pastas are consumed either in soups or as 'dry soup' along with the main dish. While in the center of Mexico and other Mexican regions cooks barbeque meats wrapped in maguey leaves or in corn-husks, in Yucatán cooks prefer wrapping meats and tamales in banana leaves. To marinate meats Yucatecan cooks use the juice of Seville oranges or lime, and in some recipes they use Port wines, sherry, red or white wines, and as a cheap less preferred ingredient, white vinegar (when the others are lacking). Finally, even though Yucatecans like both butter and cheese, with the exception of stuffed cheese, cheese is seldom used, and cooks prefer to use olive or other vegetable oils, or pork lard rather than butter to cook Yucatecan recipes. Recipes from Yucatecan gastronomy make no use of cream or yogurt in sauces, and rarely use cheese to garnish meals from the gastronomic field.

Cooks achieve the taste and texture of Yucatecan (or any other) food thanks to the appropriation and development of culinary techniques and technologies. Most Yucatecans cook at home boiling in water, or frying in pork lard or vegetable oils the different ingredients of their meals. They leave baking and grilling, if at all, for celebratory meals (Christmas, or birthdays, for example).[3] There are some meals that are so elaborate or time-consuming that Yucatecans prefer to buy them from specialists rather than attempting to cook them at home. For example, many Yucatecans prefer to eat meals that have been cooked *pibil* (*pib* is an underground oven). For example, specialists cook 'real' *cochinita pibil* in such an oven, rather than in express cookers or domestic ovens. As a chef explained to me at one of the former hacienda plantations, today turned into boutique hotels, to prepare this dish, the specialist takes a small butchered pig, and marinates the pieces with a paste made with the juice of Seville oranges, ground achiote, allspice, local oregano, and black pepper, and along with red onions he (it is mainly men who cook this dish) wraps it all in banana leaves. To cook it, he uses a pit-hole dug for that purpose; he places rocks in the bottom, and wood on top. He fires the wood, and when the stones are 'white-hot', proceeds to place a tray with the food on top, covering it with branches, leaves, and earth to prevent the steam from escaping the oven and cooks the meal for six to eight hours, depending on the weight of the pig. This procedure helps to keep the meat tender, and to blend flavors and aromas. This technique is also used for other meats and meals.

Several dishes from the Yucatecan culinary and gastronomic fields are elaborate and time-consuming. Cooks usually cook them on the stove over a low fire, seeking to release and blend the flavors, and to make the meat tender. They and their relatives or friends expect that the soups include tender meat and firm vegetables (though pasta and rice usually are cooked until soggy). Hence, the cook has to take timing into account to add the different ingredients into the pot. For example, *puchero* is a soup that, in its full deluxe version, calls for three meats: chicken, pork and beef. It includes vegetables according to season (today, supermarkets contribute to bypass this restriction), and a combination of rice and noodles. Normally, cooks will strive to serve a *puchero* in which all ingredients are discernible, and hence they must add the different ingredients at different moments (see Figure 1). When cooking turkey in *escabeche*, to obtain the 'right' texture, the cook must first boil the already marinated turkey.

Figure 1. Sunday's *puchero*. Copyright author

Before it cooks through, she must take it from the broth, reapply the marinade, and roast over fire. It is served reintegrated into the soup along with other ingredients.[4]

Eating a Yucatecan meal engages all of the senses. If as an appetizer we have ordered *panuchos* garnished with turkey, we will be served a corn tortilla which, when placed on the skillet swells with hot air. The cook takes the tortilla at this time, before it sticks back, and makes an incision on its edge to stuff it with black bean paste previously cooked with pork lard, epazote and onion, and proceeds to deep-fry. The cook obtains a crisp yellow disk with black stuffing and places on top shredded turkey in *escabeche* (boiled-roasted-boiled with onion, garlic, oregano, bay leaves, allspice, black pepper, and ground coriander seeds), a slice of red tomato, and slices of pickled red onion – some cooks may add slices of canned jalapeño pepper. When the dish arrives at the table, the patron or relative can see in the panucho yellow, red, purple, brown and black colors; perceives the aroma of oregano, allspice, bay leaves, onion, epazote, and garlic; he or she takes the *panucho* with his or her hands (the correct manner), folding it and feeling its crisp texture, taking it into the mouth where, in combination with the aromas, one can taste the complexity of flavors derived from its multiple ingredients; and when chewing one feels the combination of crisp and tender textures (Figure 2). In the sense already discussed above, eating this simple dish the subject partakes of an experience involving all the senses. Along with this hyperaesthesic experience, it is common to establish synesthetic associations: 'this tastes just like what my mother/aunt/hired cook used to cook'; or, 'these are just like the *panuchos* we had at

the christening of our son/niece/godchild in such town'; or, 'this reminds me of my childhood in …' However, the question remains, how has the preference for these ingredients, their colors, aromas, flavors and textures come to be shared by the inhabitants of the territory of Yucatán? I elaborate a tentative answer to this question in the next two sections of this article.

Repetition and difference: the institution of a regional culinary aesthetics

In this section I introduce one of the mechanisms by which a regional culinary aesthetics has become naturalized in Yucatán: the institution of food cycles that encompass meals specific to the Yucatecan region. It bears to mention here that the peninsula of Yucatán is today divided into three states: Yucatán in the center-north, Campeche in the west and Quintana Roo in the east. In colonial times, and up to the end of the nineteenth century, Yucatán was a single province, and later a republic, before the central Mexican government proceeded to divide the territory and split the regionalist factions three ways (see Ayora Diaz 2010, 2012). Campeche, Mérida, Motul, Ticul, and Valladolid are amongst the main urban centers where Yucatecan gastronomy was invented. During most of the twentieth century, however, Mérida became the largest urban center, and the state of Yucatán claimed the creation of 'Yucatecan food'.

Today, it is a fact that urban Yucatecans, in Mérida and other cities, have instituted a weekly and an annual cycle for the consumption of certain meals. This does not mean that a particular dish cannot be eaten outside

Figure 2. *Panuchos*. Copyright author

the established day or month, but most would agree that it doesn't taste the same, or simply that the food is 'out of place'. This is understandable when we take into account that a food consumed at Christmas evokes past Christmas celebrations, the company of family members and friends, and other feelings that eating, for example, cod Biscay style out of season would not bring about.

To begin with the weekly cycle: On Mondays most Yucatecan families, regardless of their income, consume pork and beans. Walking or driving around the city one can smell this meal being cooked in numerous kitchens. The aroma of onions, epazote, and boiled beans and pork fills the air. Cooks place pork chunks, ribs, sometimes tails and snout, and lard to boil in a pot along with black beans, white onion, salt and epazote. When the family members sit around the table, they are served, along with the pork in its bean broth, white rice (currently it is becoming common to serve rice cooked with the bean broth, and thus black too), a sauce of roasted tomatoes crushed with salt, another sauce (*salpicón*) of minced radish, onion and cilantro; slices of lime and avocado, minced habanero pepper, and corn tortillas or French bread. Normally, the family cook prepares a large quantity of this meal. It is essential to have leftovers, since the beans will be served as side dishes with other meals throughout the week.

On Tuesday the family may choose to have either pork steak Milanese style, or beef casserole, which will again be accompanied by white rice or pasta and, now, by a bowl of mashed black beans left from the previous day. On Wednesday the family will eat chicken or pork steaks, fricassee along with rice, fried plantain, and on this occasion, a paste of refried black beans leftover from Monday and Tuesday. On Thursdays some families may opt for a *potaje*, either of lentils or beans. Friday is normally a day marked in the Catholic calendar for the abstinence of meat. Hence, families may eat fried fish, other types of seafood, or vegetables. If they have already run out of Monday beans, they may cook a pot of beans *kabax*, a Maya word meaning 'simple': beans boiled in water with onion, epazote, and a spoonful of pork lard, or may open a can of refried black beans to heat on a pan. This way they can make sure to accompany their meal with a bowl of black beans. On Saturdays, friends get together, buy six-packs of beer, and get their meal from *chicharroneros* (families specialized in the preparation of deep-fried pork rinds and other pieces of offal, blood sausages, and stuffed sweetbreads), or they buy grilled or roasted chicken, rabbit, or pork ribs. When they buy *chicharra*, they use *salpicón* (minced cilantro, onion, tomato, habanero pepper, radish, and the juice of Seville oranges) to mix it. Cooks usually garnish grilled and roasted meats with roasted tomato sauce with cilantro and salpicón. Finally, Sunday is the family day, when extended families get together to eat *puchero* or paella, usually after a street-vendor breakfast of *lechón al horno* (baked piglet) or *cochinita pibil*.

There is an element of cognitive normativity in the consumption of some of these meals. For example, pork and beans and *puchero* are meals anchored on Mondays and Sundays respectively. In fact, with a couple of exceptions, most restaurants serve these dishes *only* on those days. *Cocinas economicas* (economic kitchens) are take out establishments, usually run by families, in which they prepare the same meals expected for each day of the week, plus one or two alternatives. In many families in which both parents work, they reserve a

number of portions on their way to work, or by phone, and on their way back home they collect the portions in a pot or in tupperware they carry for that purpose. Economic kitchens also have styrofoam containers to serve portions to their customers. In any event, in these establishments, it is only on their appointed days that one can buy pork and beans, or steak Milanese style, or *puchero*. I would like to stress that there are alternatives in each day of the week. I do not want to suggest that *all* Yucatecans *always* consume the same meals. Even if black beans in some form are a favorite side dish, not all Yucatecans consume it every day.

It is possible to understand that some flavors, present in different intensity throughout the week, in different meals, become inscribed in the taste preferences of families and individuals in Yucatán. Epazote, black beans, onion, cilantro, Seville oranges, roasted tomatoes, habanero pepper, *xkat ik* chili peppers, limes, oregano, bay leaves, allspice and cumin become expected aromas and flavors in everyday meals. Pork and fowl are frequent ingredients. Because since the time they are born, Yucatecans are regularly fed these meals, they come to develop and share a preference for their flavors, aromas, colors and textures. These sensual experiences become tightly associated with memories of family, home, friendship, and in some cases, of celebration and merriment. Thus established, in general, the different combinations of ingredients that Yucatecans find acceptable constitute the taste of Yucatecan food; a taste that repeated, even with minor variations, is recognizable and expected within and without the territory of Yucatán.

An additional number of meals appear, ideally, once a year: on November 1 and 2, and the weeks that precede and follow these dates, Yucatecans consume a special tamale: *muchil pollo*. Cooks prepare this tamale mixing the corn dough with lard, achiote paste and salt. In addition, the cook boils chicken in a sauce with pork lard, tomatoes, onions, green pepper, epazote, bay leaves, and achiote. Once the chicken is cooked, the cook adds cornmeal to thicken the sauce, spreads the *masa* (dough) on top of banana leaves, fills it with shredded chicken, slices of boiled eggs, and the thick sauce, and finally, seals the tamale, wraps it in banana leaves, and cooks it *pibil*. The texture of this tamale is of a crisp shell, and the stuffing varies from gravy-like to semi-solid; its color is red, wrapped in green banana leaves; its aroma is of *achiote*, epazote, bay leaves, banana leaves and corn; and its flavor blends the taste of corn, lard, chicken, eggs, epazote, *achiote* and other spices.

During the month of December, super- and hypermarkets in Yucatán and Mexico are flooded with salted cod imported from Norway (and some imitations). Families with enough disposable income buy the cod, desalt and debone it, and proceed to fry, preferably in Spanish olive oil, in successive batches, shredded and cleaned cod. They dice potatoes, and tomatoes, and fry them too, to make a tomato sauce. At the end the cook adds on the simmering tomato sauce the diced potatoes and shredded cod, olives, and pimiento slices. Along with the preparation of cod, cooks also prepare refried black beans to accompany the meal. Middle and upper class families are more inclined to this recipe, while families with a lower income bake a leg of pork, or ham in wine sauce along with slices of fresh or canned pineapple.[5]

Also, during the winter, following the Christmas season, there is a short round of bullfights during local

feasts dedicated to patron saints. For a long time, and despite continuous medical counter-advise, after the bullfight patrons crowd the butcher's place where he is cutting up the carcass, to buy fresh meat, bones with bone marrow, and organs to take back home to make *chocolomo*.[6] To cook this stew, the cook boils the meat, offal and bones along with onion, garlic, habanero and *xkat ik* chili peppers, and serve it garnished with roasted peppers, and a sauce of minced radish, cilantro and onions, and a sauce of roasted tomatoes. Families and street vendors can prepare these different dishes at different months of the year. I have found, for example, salted cod during the summer (one deli establishment announces: 'we have cod Biscay-style all year long'), and the ingredients necessary for preparing *mucbil pollos* or *chocolomo* are available all year long. Nonetheless, however much a person may like the meal, most tend to wait for the 'right' moment of the year to consume the meal.

The dissemination of Yucatecan gastronomic taste

In this section I examine one of a supplementary set of social and cultural mechanisms that serve to establish the Yucatecan taste. Together, these are: the widespread use of *recados*, the production and circulation of cookbooks, and the legitimating part played by restaurants specialized in Yucatecan cuisine. Foremost among these is the elaboration, circulation and consumption of *recados*. Since I have examined elsewhere at length the part played by restaurants and cookbooks (Ayora-Diaz 2012), I privilege here the importance of *recados*.

Recados are spice pastes. They are akin in concept to Indian curries and Mexican moles. There are a large number of them, and when prepared 'correctly' they are not interchangeable; different recipes call for their specific *recado*. An important aspect of their production is that they follow a process of repetition *with* difference that, at the same time that it contributes to disseminate the taste of Yucatecan food all over the Yucatecan territory, allows for the expression of different aesthetic/sensory preferences that are, in turn, tied to the history of a given place's insertion in the local-global market of edible commodities. Oral transmission and cookbooks have played an important part in the dissemination of *recados*. In cities, most families with enough disposable income have hired and hire cooks who come from small peasant villages, and many of them (but not all) speak Yucatec Maya. It is often the housewives who explain these hired cooks the different taste preferences of the members of the family and teach them to cook different recipes from the Yucatecan canon. Then, although it is difficult to ascertain the sequence in this process, they bring into the city homes their own know-how and cooking preferences, and take new recipes and culinary practices back home. The repetition of this exchange in multiple urban and rural homes can explain, at least in part, how a cultural taste is disseminated and becomes coextensive with a large territory.

The early oral and written dissemination, in the prevalent form found in notebooks and cookbooks of the era, allowed for personal and local variation. For example, in the 1940s cookbook published by Concepción Hernández de Fajardo, we find the recipe for the *recado* required to cook *puchero*: 'one small spoon of

black pepper, three corns of allspice, two small oregano leaves, two cloves, one pinch of cumin, some threads of saffron, one spoon of coriander seed' (n.d.: 37). These instructions are even more informative than the ones provided by Lucrecia Ruz vda. de Baqueiro, whose cookbook published roughly at that time of the twentieth century listed in a column: 'PUCHERO[:] Black pepper Cloves Garlic Cinnamon Cumin Oregano Saffron' (n.d.: 73). What is important here is that the unspecified quantities and procedures already make allowances for translocal and personal variation: if an ingredient is missing somewhere or sometime, it is replaced by another or omitted; if someone dislikes, say, the aroma and flavor of cumin, then its proportion can be adjusted to personal memory, taste or family preferences. Ferguson (2011: 373) has suggested that one problematic aspect of taste in food is the impossibility of identical repetitions. However, I have found that this identical repetition is not an important requirement in cooking Yucatecan dishes. What is important is that changes are permitted within limits, that despite their differences, the taster must be able to recognize the meal as one possible *and legitimate* rendition of the recipe, one that is flavorfully meaningful for him and his group. That is, taste is the product of social relations and of the negotiation of culturally meaningful combinations of flavors, aromas, textures, and colors, like in my account of *potaje* and *lomitos* variations I explained above. It is precisely because of their repetition – one that necessarily includes difference – that the inhabitants of the Yucatecan region come to share the taste of Yucatecan food, and that this taste is taken to be a 'natural' disposition. The aesthetics of the meal is made into a desirable sensual structure shared, with minor variations, by Yucatecans in general (even allowing for any individual's dislike of a particular meal, or ingredient).

The majority of today's cookbooks of Yucatecan cuisine omit the section on the preparation of *recados*. The domestic or professional cook can buy her *recados* at local markets where women from villages surrounding the main urban areas go to sell their goods, or in supermarkets where consumers find containers with *recados* in bulk, or in small industrially processed boxes and bags. Because restaurateurs employ women from rural areas, they have access to their expertise in the elaboration of *recados*, and they don not need cookbooks to prepare them, while the domestic cook can always find the ingredients necessary for the replication of Yucatecan food and the repetition of regional taste.

In general, the widespread preparation of *recados* all over the Yucatecan territory has supported the dissemination of a culturally meaningful Yucatecan taste. The mobility of people, values about food, and recipes for the elaboration of recados and meals has contributed to spread a set of culinary taste preferences all over urban and rural areas of the state of Yucatán. Cookbooks, especially in the past, contributed to disseminate the know-how necessary for their elaboration, and supermarkets and markets today still promote the dissemination of regional taste by industrially processing and making them available at lower prices (sometimes with lower quality) and in more 'rational' sizes than those accessible in local markets. Restaurants, in perpetuating their use, contribute to create a continuous demand for them. Without *recados* it would be difficult to recreate the taste of Yucatán.

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that there exists a particular Yucatecan taste that is different and opposed to the taste of central Mexican, national cuisine. This taste is the result of the particular configuration of ingredients, their combination in recipes, and the techniques and technologies necessary for their production and reproduction. The ingredients required to re/produce this regional taste are the product of the local cooks' appropriation of local, Caribbean, and European ingredients in a configuration that makes it unique and different from the other cuisines it relates to. The ingredients are not exclusive to Yucatecan cooking. One can find cumin in Mexican cooking, as well as in Indian, southern Spanish and North African cuisines (to mention just a few), and this is true for all the others ingredients necessary to make Yucatecan food. It is, however, their specific configuration, one that explicitly appears in the recipes for *recados* – a normative instruction even when it allows for small variations – and for meals iconic of Yucatecan cooking, that supports the imagination of a Yucatecan taste.

Yucatecan taste has been naturalized thanks to the bracketing of its historical emergence. Contemporary Yucatecans perceive their taste preferences as a 'natural' disposition that emerges from the climate, the local culture and values, and the cultural temperament of local people. According to this *imagination* Yucatecans were born in a hot and humid land, in small towns and cities, in an environment of inter-ethnic harmony, where they have developed a shared, natural inclination to certain colors, aromas, flavors and textures in their meal. The aesthetics of the meal is isomorphic with the ambivalent aesthetics of their literary and musical creations. In general, Yucatecans assume, on the one hand, that local food is the product of blending Maya and Spanish food; that is, it is a Mestizo food. And as the imagination of Mestizaje has it, it is a condition in which the bloods and cultures of conquerors and conquered were happily married (Basave Benítez 1992). On the other hand, they highlight their cosmopolitan inclination, and thus affirm Yucatecan gastronomy as on a par with other *haute cuisines*, rather than as an 'ethnic' or 'parochial' cooking tradition. This imagination endorses the concealment of the historical process whereby the practices, values and preferences of subordinated people, including immigrants and local indigenous groups, have become integrated into a single and shared Yucatecan taste.

To conclude, in the present, Yucatecans and non-Yucatecans alike can recognize the taste and aesthetics of Yucatecan foods. Immigration into Yucatán and the migration of Yucatecans to other Mexican regions and abroad have fostered the recreation of Yucatecan dishes in other Mexican regions and abroad. Even taking into account the changes introduced in them, they are still required to reproduce this particular configuration of aromas, flavors, colors and textures to be recognized as Yucatecan. What is normally left implicit is that it is a regional taste opposed to Mexican hegemonic taste, and it is one that assimilates and veils the other tastes that make it possible.

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Notes

1 To prepare *papadzules* cooks elaborate or purchase a squash seed paste (or *recado*, see below): they lightly roast the seeds, eliminating their skin proceed to grind them with epazote leaves. Later, they boil the paste in water (not in chicken broth) and epazote, strain it through a piece of cloth to eliminate excess oil, and then heat the sauce in a pan. After lightly frying the tortillas, the cook soaks them in the squash seed sauce and rolls it around shredded boiled eggs. To present the meal, the cook tops the rolled tortillas with some additional green and tomato sauce and minced boiled eggs.

2 Also, the focus on national cuisines has diverted attention from the supra- and trans-national connections among different gastronomic 'traditions'. Elsewhere (Ayora-Diaz, forthcoming) I discuss the lateral translocal and transnational connections between Yucatecan food and other Caribbean and European cuisines.

3 Although in this paper I am not exploring differences by social class, it may suffice to mention that in Merida there are many different vegetable oils available (for example, sesame, peanut, walnut, avocado, grape seed, and a large range of olive oils), most are very expensive and families with a reduced income cook in cheap corn, sunflower or cottonseed oils or pork lard, while in the upper income end cooks may choose to cook exclusively with extra-virgin olive oils. Baking is also a luxury among lower income families: most low-income homes have extremely small kitchens in which baking can be a torment, while middle and upper income families have larger kitchens or hire cooks to prepare their family meals and, for them, baking foods is an option.

4 *Puchero* derives its name from the large pot in which it is cooked (like, for example, paella does too). However, many Yucatecans are certain that it comes from the Maya root *puch*, which means to mash, as before eating it, all the ingredients are mashed, the meat shredded and mixed with its garnishes.

5 As one of my reviewers kindly notes, Jamaican families prepare a similar recipe during Christmas. They seem to be variations on Iberian pork on sherry or wine sauces also found in Cuba and Puerto Rico, though the addition of pineapple seems to be a specifically Caribbean mark on the meal.

6 Although I have not found a reliable medical article on the subject, locally, medical practitioners suggest in newspaper editorial comments that the bull exposed to the stressful experience of the bullfight releases substances into its bloodstream that are toxic to humans.

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