

GTMA 2020 Travel Writer Award

Entry #057

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Article 1

Mexico's Ancient Caviar

It was approaching 17:00, but Mexico City's fierce summer heat wasn't letting up. By the time I arrived at Ayuardo's, a family-owned restaurant in the Iztapalapa neighbourhood, beads of sweat had formed along my hairline, and I was starving.

I checked the menu – damp and crinkled around the edges – and saw Central Mexico's usual fare staring back at me: enchiladas drenched in spicy tomato sauce; cheese-stuffed poblano chillies topped with pomegranate seeds; and chargrilled meats served with fresh guacamole and refried beans.

It wasn't until I turned to the back page in search of my favourite agua fresca (water blended with fruit) that I spotted something unusual. Three platillos ancestrales (ancestral plates) lay hidden among the drinks as if cast out from the main menu: sopes del comal con chapulines (toasted grasshoppers served on a thick, doughy tortilla); conejo (rabbit); and tortitas capeadas de ahuate en salsa verde. I was familiar with the first two; grasshopper snacks and slow-cooked rabbit can be found across the country, particularly in Central and Southern Mexico. But despite having lived in Mexico for six months at the time, I'd never heard of the last one.

Intrigued, I asked the waiter what "ahuate" is.

"Insect eggs, señorita," he replied, explaining that they were mixed into a batter, fried and topped with green salsa. "It's a very special dish that goes back many, many years. Shall I place the order?"

Laid by water flies from the Corixidae and Notonectidae families (though often referred to as “mosquitos” by locals), ahuatele is a delicacy that pre-dates the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico. Loosely translating to “seeds of joy” from Nahuatl, the ancient Aztec language, these precious quinoa-sized eggs were considered by the Aztecs to be the food of the gods. Believing the eggs would give them strength, Aztec emperors – including, most famously, Montezuma – were said to have eaten ahuatele every morning during the summer rainy season, when the eggs were in abundance and at their freshest.

Mexico City locals will tell you that ahuatele also took centre stage at the human sacrifice ceremonies held in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (which now forms part of modern-day Mexico City) for Xiuhtecuhtli, the Aztec god of fire, every 52 years (an Aztec century). According to 16th-Century Spanish chronicles, after the victims’ hearts had been removed, the empty chest cavity would be coated in the insect eggs as an offering to Xiuhtecuhtli. The gold-coloured eggs were considered so sacred that the sixth Aztec emperor of Tenochtitlán (the father of Montezuma) was named Axayácatl after the type of water fly that lays them.

Axayácatl aren’t the only insects revered by Mexico’s ancient civilisations. According to researcher and insect specialist Julieta Ramos Elorduy B, author of *¿Los insectos se comen?* (Can you eat insects?), the Maya referred to grasshoppers as “las divinas flores de dios” (the divine flowers of god), while the Huichol believed wasps carried people’s souls into the afterlife. Among the Teotihuacanos, the Papilio butterfly was a symbol of beauty and youth. It was only when the Spanish conquistadors arrived – repulsed, among other things, at their subjects’ affinity for insects – that Mexico’s love of bugs began to wane.

Perhaps noticing my slight hesitation, the waiter quickly asked: “Would you like to see how they’re prepared?”

Before I could accept, he signalled me to follow him to the kitchen. I shuffled past a sea of lime-green tablecloths and daffodil-yellow chairs, almost every one of which was taken up by the afternoon rush of Mexican families enjoying feasts of grilled meats, vegetable soups and corn tortillas. Inside the cramped, dimly lit kitchen, I was greeted by head chef and restaurant co-owner, Beatriz Ayuardo.

“We don’t get many ahuatele orders these days,” she said, as she showed me a plastic container filled with thousands of sun-dried Axayácatl eggs, each no bigger than a grain of sand. “It’s more expensive than our other dishes, and not many people know about it.”

As I looked on, she mixed the ahuatele with milk, eggs, breadcrumbs, finely chopped onion and coriander to make a runny pancake batter, and then dropped tennis ball-sized portions into a pan of sizzling oil.

“This recipe was passed down to us from my husband’s mother,” Ayluardo explained, as she flipped the insect-egg pancakes at lightning speed. “She was very passionate and knowledgeable about ancestral ingredients like ahuate. She would make them at home and tell us stories about how they were once eaten by emperors and gods.”

While she prepared a sauce from garlic, tomatillos and serrano chillies to accompany the pancakes, she continued: “When we inherited the family business, we wanted to honour the recipe my mother-in-law had taught us, as well as promote the culinary culture we inherited from [the Aztecs]. But it hasn’t been easy.”

Ahuate cultivators use the same insect-farming techniques as the Aztecs employed on the banks of Lake Texcoco hundreds of years ago before the lake was largely drained and Mexico City was built in its place. Farmers place hand-woven reed nets just under the water’s surface and secure them with sticks and rope. They leave the nets floating for up to three weeks, during which time the Axayácatl flies will lay thousands of their eggs atop the tightly woven reed bundles. To extract the eggs from the lake, cultivators simply lift the nets from the water and lay them out in the sun to dry. Once all the moisture is gone, a sand-like pile of eggs remains.

Similar to the harvesting of other edible insects such as grasshoppers, ants and mealworms, ahuate farming requires far less water, land and energy than the rearing of cattle. Yet the tiny eggs fetch a much higher price. According to Ayluardo, a small jar of ahuate starts at 400 Mexican pesos, or around £16.50, compared to around 100 Mexican pesos (£4) you’d pay for a kilo of beef.

Because of its high cost, ahuate has been dubbed by local restaurateurs like Ayluardo as “the caviar of Mexico”. But, unlike the famous wild sturgeon roe found in the Caspian and Black seas, ahuate’s steep price tag isn’t due to its popularity. Rather, it’s because ahuate is extremely hard to get hold of. Due to a drop in cultivators and vendors, ahuate has become increasingly rare (particularly out of rainy season), and often has to be ordered weeks in advance. Mexico City’s water shortage means the region’s Axayácatl population is declining, and could disappear altogether.

“For the last 20 years, we’ve had a reliable source of ahuate thanks to a man called Don Manuel Flores, one of the last ahuate sellers in Mexico City,” Ayluardo said as she plated my pancakes. “He’s in his late 70s and partially blind, but he still made his rounds through Iztapalapa, leaning on his cane, shouting ‘ahuate!’ every weekend. Like us, he felt passionate about not allowing this ancient caviar to die.”

However, Ayluardo told me it’s been several weeks since Don Manuel had last stopped by the restaurant. “He isn’t well,” she said sadly, “and I’m not sure when, or if, he’ll return.”

With none of Don Manuel's children or grandchildren interested in taking up the position, his absence is felt heavily at Ayluardo's restaurant.

"We may be able to find the eggs in the San Juan or La Merced markets during the rainy season," Ayluardo said, "but it will be even more difficult and expensive to source them. The saddest part is that we may never hear 'ahuautle' ring through the streets of Iztalpalapa again, and that's very worrying for the future of an already forgotten ingredient."

Ahuautle isn't the only insect dish at risk of disappearing. According to Elorduy B, despite Mexico having one of the largest entomophagous cultures in the world (Mexicans consume 531 of the planet's 2,111 recorded edible insects), the country is losing its appetite for bugs. In her book, Elorduy B warns that this could threaten a culinary culture that has been practiced here for hundreds – perhaps thousands – of years. Not only that, but a rejection of entomophagy also puts further pressure on water- and land-intensive animal agriculture, which, with a world population set to reach 9.7 billion people by 2050, may not be sustainable forever.

Ayluardo held out the ahuautle pancakes – now lightly browned and bathed in the moss-green sauce – for me to try. I took a bite, first noticing the tangy, spicy hit from the salsa and the slightly gritty texture from the eggs laced through the spongy batter. Then, the distinctive flavour of the ahuautle hit me: a potent, fishy taste similar to that of the tiny dried shrimp popular in East Asian cuisine.

It's certainly an acquired taste, but with a 63.8% protein content (most lean, cooked beef has just 26-27%) and requiring only a fraction of the resources used to cultivate the flame-grilled steak on the neighbouring table, it was a taste I could get behind.

Article 2

Indigenous Women Are Publishing the First Maya Works in Over 400 Years

I'D STUMBLED UPON TALLER LEÑATEROS—the "Woodlanders Workshop"—completely by chance.

I was walking aimlessly through the pastel-hued streets of San Cristobal de las Casas, trying to get a feel for what my guidebook had described as southern Mexico's "most beautiful colonial city." One particular street was quiet, dusty, and less colorful than the rest. But there was something about

it—perhaps the faint sound of a Mexican ballad escaping from a rusted window, or maybe the beat-up aquamarine VW Beetle at the end of the road—that invited me to turn down it.

I hadn't been walking long before I spotted an unusual sign outside a sad-looking, graffitied colonial house: a black-and-white etching of an ancient Maya riding a bicycle, wearing an enormous feathered headdress that fluttered in the wind behind him. Next to it, a handwritten note pleaded "Save our workshop!"

Intrigued, I pushed open the unlocked wooden gate and stepped inside. The walls of the courtyard, though peeling and rotten with damp, popped with floor-to-ceiling splashes of orange, green, and yellow block prints. The dusty adobe brick floor was covered with discarded books, posters, cardboard, and plastic, leaving barely enough room to stand.

Rising proudly from the sea of paper that sprawled across the courtyard, a handmade tree cobbled together from sun-bleached driftwood held three thick, heavy books on its leafless branches. Careful not to trample the paper debris that now covered my feet, I leaned forward to get a closer look. As I did, I heard a low, shy voice behind me.

"Ah," said a woman standing there, wearing a thick wool skirt and a hand-stitched, fuchsia-pink blouse. "You're here to see the books? Come with me."

As she led me from the paper-strewn courtyard into a small gift shop filled with handmade books, posters, and notebooks, I learned where I was.

Taller Leñateros is Mexico's first and only Tzotzil Maya book- and papermaking collective. Founded in 1975 by the Mexican-American poet Ambar Past, the workshop is dedicated to documenting and disseminating the endangered Tzotzil language, culture, and oral history. And it does so environmentally, using only recycled materials (leñateros alludes to those who get their firewood from deadwood, rather than felled trees).

The project began when Past, escaping an unhappy marriage, traveled to the rural highlands of Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. She wound up staying, and for the next 30 years lived among the indigenous women of San Cristobal's surrounding villages. As she learned their language, she noticed that they spoke in couplets similar to those found in the Popul Vuh—the most famous and informative ancient Maya book yet discovered.

But none of these women could actually read or write Tzotzil. They used the historic, metaphor-riddled tongue in everyday conversation, but had never put their own words on paper. Inspired, Past got to work recording and translating their ancient Tzotzil poetry. Her hope was that, one day, they would publish the world's first modern Maya book by the female indigenous community of Chiapas—and, in the process, grant us insight into both an ancient language and an ancient way of looking at the world.

Once 150 women agreed to let her record their poetry, Past bought property in San Cristobal. She set up a modest workshop there so that she and the women could collaborate. Past would transcribe and

translate the recordings, and the women would produce the book using ancient Maya bookbinding techniques.

“It took over [20] years to make,” says Petra, the woman who had welcomed me to the workshop (and the daughter of one of the original 150 women). “Past had to first record hundreds of hours of poetry and then carefully transcribe it, not to mention the work that goes into handmaking a book from natural materials.”

As Petra spoke, she turned the thick, grainy pages of *Incantations: Songs, Spells, and Images by Mayan Women*—the first book in over 400 years to be written, produced, and published by indigenous Mayas.

The book that had caught my eye on the leafless tree featured the face of Kaxail, whom some call the Maya goddess of the wilderness, made from recycled cardboard, corn silk, and coffee. Inside the book, 295 handmade pages and silkscreen illustrations tell Tzotzil women’s stories of love, death, birth, marriage, sex, and survival, deploying an elaborate syntax that’s changed little since the Mayas’ rule here in the year 600. (Various attempts to kill that syntax, first by Spanish conquistadors and then by Mexico’s government, have proved fruitless.)

“We want to show the world that the Spanish conquistadors all those years ago did not destroy our culture,” Petra says as she traces the outline of Kaxail’s somber face. “We may have changed and adapted to modern times, but our language, traditions, and way of life essentially remain the same. Recording our Tzotzil language, and bookbinding itself, is the only way we know how to protect that heritage.”

Before the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the New World, the ancient Tzotzil Maya from the Chiapas region—the Woodlanders’ ancestors—were revered as the empire’s most talented bookmakers. Using plant dyes as ink and tree bark for paper, they created the Maya codices—sacred, hand-painted books that document celestial movements, spells, divinations, and ceremonial sacrifices to gods.

In the 16th century, the Spanish burned every Maya library across Mexico, calling the codices “nothing but superstitions and falsehoods of the Devil.” Today, only four original codices remain (three of them are stored in museum vaults in Europe). That has left this precious bookbinding tradition—not to mention the stories and histories between codice covers—forgotten by much of the Mexican population.

“We want to encourage our people to reconnect with their own culture, and to be proud of it,” Petra says. “That’s why, every time we make a new book, we try to donate some copies to the indigenous communities. This way they can be proud of their heritage, and they can teach their children and grandchildren to be proud of their culture too ... because it is they who now have the responsibility of keeping it alive.”

As Petra finishes her sentence, we step out of the gift shop and into a large, sunny outdoor courtyard, perhaps even more chaotic than the paper-strewn entrance. Here, corn husks, palm leaves, and agave

boil over open wood fires, while a pair of young women, two of the newest Woodlanders, detangle and trim the thick, freshly boiled fibers ready to be spun in a bicycle-powered mill. My mind flashes to the image of the Maya man on the bicycle I'd seen at the entrance—clearly a logo that represents a fusion of ancient traditions and more recent technologies.

“Writing down Tzotzil poems [isn't] enough,” says Petra. “We [also] want to resurrect the dying art of Maya bookbinding—the extraction of natural dyes and fibers and the use of our hands from start to finish. But it hasn't been easy.”

Today, there are far fewer Woodlanders than in years past. Higher prices for materials, such as paintbrushes and glue, and fewer visitors have only compounded the problem.

“When my mother joined the collective, there were 150 women,” Petra says. “Now, we are just seven here full-time. We used to get lots of tourists pass[ing] through to buy our books and posters—we even held bookbinding workshops ... But now we're lucky if one person comes a day.”

The collective faces other challenges as well. When I ask about the sign I'd seen outside, Petra replies, “Some people are trying to take our workshop away from us.”

Taller Leñateros is in the midst of a legal battle to hold on to the property it has owned since the early 1980s. If the Woodcutters lose it, rising property prices in San Cristobal could make it difficult for the collective to get back on its feet.

“We've had to invest many of our profits into legal fees, which is hurting us a lot—as you can see from our leaky roof,” Petra says with a rueful chuckle. “But we are trying to stay positive and carry on as normal. We even have a new book coming out soon!”

That book is Mamá Luna Nene Sol, the third volume produced by the collective. The first was the groundbreaking *Incantations*, published in 1998. After that came the critically acclaimed *Mayan Hearts*, in addition to thousands of handmade posters, notebooks, and postcards. Petra says that *Mamá Luna Nene Sol* will be released just in time for the International Anthropology Book Fair's 30th anniversary, this September.

When Past and her team of 150 Tzotzil women first came together over 40 years ago, their biggest challenge was reviving a lost literary tradition. Today, the few women who remain are striving, against long odds, to maintain their predecessors' legacy. Whether they're fighting legal battles, finding cheaper ways of getting the books to market, or persuading backpackers to stop by for a bookbinding workshop, the women here have made one thing very clear—their fight to keep the ancient Maya culture alive endures.

Article 3

Belize's First Female Drum-Maker

I had traveled over six hours through Belize's bumpy, unmarked jungle roads to meet a man whose name was on everyone's lips. I'd seen his sun-bleached photo plastered on clapboard shopfronts, I'd heard his name as I queued for my daily fry jack fix, I'd even read about him between the pages of my Lonely Planet guide.

This man was Austin Rodriguez, Central America's most famous Garifuna drum maker. With over 50 years of drum-making experience, Austin is known throughout Belize—and the world—for being one of the most skillful drum makers in history. What I found as I approached his thatched, wall-less seafront workshop, however, wasn't what I had been expecting. Swinging in his hammock to the sound of the ocean, the legendary self-taught drum maker was indeed there. But, now at 89-years-old, it wasn't Austin Rodriguez behind the chainsaw, it was his daughter, Daytha Rodriguez.

The Garifuna—today considered one of Belize's predominant cultures—are descendants of Carib, Arawak, and West Africans. This mixed heritage is attributed to the sinking of a slave ship destined for the New World in 1635, where a group of West Africans escaped and swam to the island of St. Vincent. Here, they were met by Arawak and Carib islanders, who, over centuries of cohabitation and interracial marriage, would soon become one people with a very distinct culture: the Garinagu (plural for Garifuna). Escaping further persecution from European slave merchants and colonialists, by 1832 the Garinagu would flee the island of St. Vincent and land on the shores of Belize (as well as Honduras and Guatemala); a white-sand, blue-sea paradise that they would call home for the next 200 years.

It was during this time that many of the Garifuna traditions that we see today, including the important role of drum-making and playing, were formed. Drums—the beating heart of Garifuna culture since West Africans first arrived on the shores of St. Vincent—today act as the strongest connection that modern Garinagu have to their African, Carib, and Arawak ancestry. Steeped in symbolism, the distinct sounds of the *Primero* (lead) and *Segunda* (bass) drums are not only at the heart of every celebration, ritual, and ceremony, but they're also the primary vehicle for Garifuna storytelling, a part of the culture, along with the Garifuna language, that UNESCO warned was in danger of being lost forever back in 2008. The honor of keeping this important facet of Garifuna culture alive has been, for the best part of 400 years, a privilege reserved exclusively for men. Now, in the small, forgotten town of Dangriga, this may—finally—be about to change.

I noticed her presence immediately. Tall and strong, Daytha was sending thousands of wood chippings flying across the workshop as she effortlessly sliced through thick barrels of mahogany and

cedar. No one had noticed that I was standing in the workshop, so I approached Austin in his hammock and asked if I could speak to him about the drum-making process. "I don't make the drums anymore", he replied pointing over to the woman by the chainsaw, "my daughter, Daytha, does." A little disappointed at Austin's short reply (I had, after all, traveled all this way to meet the legend himself), I shuffled over awkwardly to where Daytha was working. Once she saw me, she smiled warmly, wiped the sawdust from her face, and switched off the chainsaw.

Daytha—now in her 40s—grew up in her father's workshop on Dangriga's "Why Not" island in Southern Belize. Every day after class, she would jump off the beat-up yellow school bus and rush to his side to watch him work on his drums. "I wanted to be like my dad," Daytha said as she searched the woodchip-covered floor for a piece of animal hide. "I liked that he didn't have a boss, you know? He could work how and when he wanted; he was free. I wanted a life like that."

Despite her many pleas, Daytha's father would never let her assist him. "Drum-making isn't for little girls, Daytha," her father would say. When Daytha turned 15, however (apparently impressed that she was still so interested in his trade), Austin finally let his daughter help him sand down and stretch the skin over the drums. "Sand that drum until you can smell garlic, my father would tell me," Daytha said in between fits of laughter as the palm trees swayed in the wind behind her. "I would sit there all afternoon sanding that drum, you know. I would sit there sanding that drum until my hands were blistered!" Seeing my confused face, she added with a smile, "of course, I never smelt the garlic. My father just wanted me to sand the drum to perfection."

Fifteen-year-old Daytha may have been an expert in sanding, but—considered too dangerous and too physical a job for a woman—she still wasn't allowed to handle the chainsaw. That all changed, however, when an American tourist arrived at the workshop. Having heard about Austin's talents, he had traveled to Dangriga just to buy one of his famous drums. But when the visitor saw Austin's young daughter expertly sanding a drum in the corner, he said to Daytha: "will you make me one?"

"I was so excited," Daytha told me with a wide smile on her face. "For the first time ever, someone was asking ME to make them a drum! I had to get it done for him the following day before he left Dangriga, but the problem was I wasn't allowed to use the chainsaw, so I had to ask my father." That day, standing in the very same spot we were in right now, Daytha would ask Austin repeatedly to cut the drum out for her. But, without so much as looking up from his drum, he would simply reply, "I'm busy." "I asked him again and again," Daytha chuckled looking over at Austin swinging in his hammock, "but he wouldn't do it! He just kept saying "I'm busy! I'm busy!"

Out of frustration, Daytha picked up the chainsaw and started plowing into the huge piece of mahogany herself, doing what, after years of watching and listening, her hands told her to do. "I don't know how I did it, but I did," recalled Daytha. "I looked down at the drum, and the drum was good!"

When she showed her dad, Austin smiled. "I knew you could do it, Daytha. If I'd said yes, you would have asked me to do it tomorrow, and again the next day. And again the next." Almost three decades later, Daytha—with the help of her sister and son—now produces the vast majority of Belize's,

Honduras and Guatemala's Garifuna drums, and has exported as far as the US, Canada, and even Europe.

While it is her father's name that still remains on every Belizean storefront and international guidebook, the truth is that it is Daytha—Belize's first female master drum maker—who has been quietly keeping the Garifuna drum tradition alive. This is a story of a woman who is striving to maintain a famous family legacy while carving the way for a new Garifuna era; one where strong, courageous, and determined women play a far more central role.