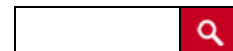




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Chefs are Mexico's new corps of diplomats

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By Johanna Mendelson Forman

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Pati Jinich. (Facebook)

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Mexican food has suffered an image problem. When people say they

want Mexican food they think fajitas, or hard shell tacos, or chile con queso. These "Tex Mex" fast food interpretations discredit a cuisine that has arose from ancient civilizations that pre-date the arrival of the Spaniards.

SEE ALSO: Chef Oscar Herrera returns to Ciudad Juarez

And that is precisely why we need someone like Pati Jinich, the Latin American policy-researcher-turned-chef who is transforming our view of Mexican cuisine.

Her exploration of her own culinary heritage in Mexico is part of a growing field of public diplomacy – gastrodiplomacy.

This is the art of communicating a nation's brand through food, whether in restaurants, through food demonstrations, or through personal stories of how a culture's dietary habits formed a central part of their national experience.

Pati's Mexican Table

Pati Jinich,
star of the
Public



The Mac 'N Cheese Mexicano. (Facebook)

Broadcasting series, Pati's Mexican Table, began her journey in the new field of gastrodiplomacy in Washington, D.C. Seven years ago the Mexican Cultural Institute opened its doors to her to prepare, host, and promote a series of dining adventures that would feature Mexican cooking reflecting the diverse regional and historical cuisines of our neighbor.

Her unique dinner themes were aimed at removing the dining clichés of what most gringos think of as Mexican food. No chips and salsa here.

Over time she has introduced curious Washington foodies to



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#Mexican food is not just tacos & fajitas.

Chefs like [Pati's Mexican Table](#) are transforming the identity of Mexican cuisine by exploring their roots.

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Mexican street food, the dishes of the Mexican Revolution, the distinct tastes of the Yucatan peninsula, the unique taste and history of Mexican vanilla, and even the fusion cuisines arising from the Asia-Mexico trade route that started in the 16th century contact with Asian immigrants integrated into the Mexican melting pot.

Not only has Pati Jinich moved Mexican food and culture to a new level in Washington, D.C. She is serving as Mexico's cultural ambassador of the kitchen. As a gastro-diplomat she is also doing something that the U.S. our State Department has promoted as part of our own cultural outreach to the world.

Just as our government sends American chefs to the far corners of the world to demonstrate the diversity and bounty of our kitchens, Pati is doing the same for Mexico. She is the embodiment of Mexico's cuisine, a purveyor of the Mexican brand, a form of soft power that is often overlooked when it comes to the role of food as a means of messaging.

At a recent event at the Mexican Cultural Institute, Pati's theme was Diego Rivera's table. It was chosen to coincide with an ongoing exhibition of Diego Rivera's sketches for his murals at Rockefeller Center, "Man at the Crossroads."

The world-renown Mexican muralist and his artist wife, Frida

Diego Rivera's daughter, Guadalupe Rivera, author of the cookbook of Frida's recipes. (VOXXI/Johanna Mendelson Forman)

Kahlo, an accomplished cook, used their home to recreate the regional foods of their country. In her Casa Azul kitchen, the home she shared with Diego Rivera in Coyacan, Mexico, the offerings Frida Kahlo served to family and friends become synonymous with the best of Mexican cuisine.

Pati chose a menu, along with Diego Rivera's daughter, Guadalupe Rivera, author of the cookbook of Frida's recipes.

Rivera was the guest of honor. The theme of Frida's kitchen inspired the feast for over 100 guests who enjoyed rich Oaxaca black mole over a crisp and moist chicken, fluffy rice with caramelized sweet plantains, *sopa de tortilla*, and flan with pine nuts. She offered a demonstration of how to prepare each dish.

At a dinner that started with bountiful glasses of aguas frescas, a refreshing fruit-based water made of lime juice and chia seeds, we also tasted tostadas with nopalitos (cactus paddles) with *queso fresco*

Colonia del Sacramento, a World Heritage Site



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and avocado, a series of classic dishes that represented the favorites of famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.

And for many who are phobic about using dried chiles, Pati managed to convince the crowd that it was really fun and easy to transform a dried pod of *guajillo* or *ancho chile* into a tasty garnish or a basic flavor for a stock. In two hours she prepared a feast that included the complex spices of a mole, the stock for a soup, while also explaining the basics of Mexican cooking.

She also distinguished the earthiness of Mexican cooking. In her charming manner, she emphasized to all the aspiring home chefs that it was not necessary to peel tomatoes to have a sauce that was vibrant and full of texture, a sharp contrast to the haute cuisine of France, where tomatoes are always peeled, cored and seeded before being added to a sauce.

Communicating a culture through its foods is not new, but chefs like Pati are part of a new corps of food diplomats who use the cuisine of their homeland to connect their adopted community.

Although Washington does not have a large Mexican

Pati Jinich moved Mexican food and culture to a new level in Washington, D.C. (Facebook)

diaspora, the work that Pati does through the Mexican Cultural Institute, her best-selling cookbook, and her nationally syndicated cooking show connect two cultures throughout the United States and beyond.

This is especially meaningful to Pati, a Mexican whose grandparents, part of the Eastern European Jewish diaspora, immigrated to Mexico in the early part of the 20th century.

Her own experience growing up in Mexico, City was partly formed by a fusion of Mexican and Jewish cooking, a culinary blend that also underscores the importance of diaspora influence on any culture's kitchen.

"Being Mexican and Jewish were one as I grew up eating pan de muerto, sucked on sweet sugar skulls during Day of the Dead, and always enjoyed matzo ball soup on Fridays."


What is unique about Pati's Mexican table is this: unlike other

excellent Mexican chefs who cook magnificent plates of food, and sometimes offer them in restaurants, Pati represents what UNESCO calls the intangible cultural heritage of Mexican Cuisine.

In 2010 traditional Mexican cooking was designated by the UN body to be part of this global heritage that recognizes “the value of intangibles such as tradition, custom, and cultural spaces and the local actors who sustain these forms of cultural expressions.” Pati’s work in the United States demonstrates a commitment to promote and safeguard these dietary treasures she has shared with a wider audience, and this is in essence what gastro-diplomacy is all about.

SEE ALSO: Chef LaLa’s Homemade products, a must-have in Mexican cuisine


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