

Southwest Cuisine Ingredients

The staple ingredients of Southwestern cuisine are **corn, squash and beans**. Called the "three sisters", they have been staples of North-American agriculture since ancient times. Beans are served whole or refried, and both styles can be used as filling for tostadas, tacos, burritos and similar dishes.

For centuries, local indigenous populations in the Southwest have been growing corn, beans, and squash together, dubbing the three plants the "three sisters" — and for good reason! **These plants naturally create their own harmonious ecosystem by virtue of their unique properties. Bean plants reap nitrogen from the air and keep the other two sisters healthy; corn grows tall stalks that the bean plants can climb, like a natural beanpole or trellis. Squash, meanwhile, grows big leaves that cover the ground, keeping it moist, and the vines themselves have a prickly surface that keeps pest and vermin at bay.**

Most of the ingredients for Southwestern cooking are neither exotic nor hard-to-find. The basics are garlic, peppers, and onions, beans of all kinds (particularly, black and pinto), corn kernels, and avocados.

Cornmeal is another important ingredient – especially if you're going to be making your own tortilla chips – and blue cornmeal is a trendy version that is usurping the place of traditional yellow cornmeal. Blue cornmeal is stone ground from whole grain blue corn and it can be used instead of yellow cornmeal for a colorful twist on cornbread or homemade blue corn tortilla chips. Blue cornmeal has a slightly nuttier flavor than its yellow counterpart.

Fresh chili peppers contribute the traditional kick to Southwestern food, though you have to learn to use control and care when incorporating fresh peppers. Jalapeños, also called chipotle chilies, are a very hot chili pepper that can be eaten raw or cooked. Serrano peppers are used the same way but are smaller, thinner and extremely hot. Remove the seeds and ribs to control the heat.

Chiles

If you're going to talk about just one Southwestern staple, it's gotta be the Hatch chile. Grown and harvested in the Hatch Valley region of New Mexico, this green chile is omnipresent in Southwestern cuisine from New Mexico to Arizona and beyond. The mild chile (1,000 to 8,000 Scoville Heat

Units or so, about a third as hot as a jalapeño) is frequently found not only in chile sauces but as a pizza topping, sandwich condiment, and bagel filling.

Southwestern food is distinguished by the use of chile peppers as the primary seasoning, first brought to Santa Fe with the arrival of the Spanish from Mexico.

Chile peppers are used as a topping for virtually every dish from pizza to bagels, or just fried tempura and eaten whole. Most dishes, from burritos to scrambled eggs, are served with plentiful amounts of chile sauce.

Cilantro – also known as coriander – is a love-it-or-hate-it kind of herb that is found in many Southwestern recipes. Many people who have an aversion to cilantro use parsley instead but the results are vastly different (albeit preferred by cilantro-haters). Cilantro is chopped and used in an assortment of dishes, including chili, salsas, soups, and salads.

Three Sisters

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Additionally, the three sisters aren't just grown together — they're often eaten together. Local favorite recipes combining the three veggies may include three sisters soup, three sisters casserole, and three sisters stew, enjoyed both at home and in restaurants

While it might seem like the "three sisters" of beans, corn, and squash are always together in Southwestern cuisine, this actually isn't always the case. And the New Mexico staple of calabacitas is a great example of how two sisters can play well together without the third.

Calabacitas (little squash)

According to New Mexico True, calabacitas is a dish where the starring role is played by summer squash: zucchini, crookneck, or light green-skinned calabacita squash. The squash is usually cooked with onion, tomato, corn, and chile, though every family has a slightly different approach to this side. You can add a bit of half-and-half, cream, or cheese if you like, but it's also delightful served plain: as a filling for tacos or all on its own.

Calabacitas also makes a delightful summertime side dish to your favorite grilled meats like marinated chicken, steak, or fish, or even grilled corn on the cob.

Pinto Beans

While you'll find all sorts of beans in the Southwest, pinto beans (so named for their spots of reddish color) are beloved in the Southwest. In fact, along with chiles, pinto beans are one of New Mexico's two official state vegetables.

It's a high honor, but it's a well-deserved one. After all, pinto beans have long fed the region, even in times of drought. Locals typically enjoy their beans simply: cooked until tender on the stovetop or in a pressure cooker, seasoned with chiles, spices, aromatics, and maybe some cured meat like bacon or ham hock, and served with hot cornbread or tortillas.

Blue Corn

While you might be more familiar with yellow or white corn, Navajo blue corn is the stuff of local legend in the Southwest, cultivated in both northern New Mexico and northern Arizona. Traditionally hand-planted and hand-harvested, blue corn tends to be more expensive than its yellow or white counterparts, explains *The New York Times*, and *Eater* notes that it's prized for its higher protein content and nuttier flavor.

Blue corn also boasts a slightly different texture; blue corn tortillas, coarser, grainier and crumblier than those made of yellow corn. Indeed, blue corn tortillas are often difficult to roll and are thus instead stacked when making dishes like enchiladas.

Tortillas and tortilla chips aren't the only ways this local maize can be enjoyed, either: consider Navajo blue corn mush as a novel and beautiful way to showcase this Southwestern ingredient.

Fry Bread

Given its name, the method for making fry bread is probably no surprise: this simple, delicious bread is made by frying a simple dough in oil or shortening. The resulting bread can be enjoyed on its own, sprinkled with sugar, drizzled with syrup, or topped with typical taco fillings for delicious Navajo tacos. The fry bread base makes them much puffier and chewier than tacos made on corn or flour tortillas. (It also makes them far more difficult to eat out of hand, making a fork and knife almost mandatory for enjoyment.)

While fry bread has (thus far) not enjoyed the widespread renown that tortillas do, it and other Native American dishes are getting their day in the sun.

Fry bread was invented by the Navajo people and is the most popular food at most powwows. To some, it's considered a sacred tradition. It's also used to create Navajo Tacos. To make fry bread, make a dough by mixing flour, baking powder, salt and milk. Form the dough into small balls and push them until they're flat. Fry the dough until golden brown. Add your favorite toppings and enjoy.

Huevos Ranchero

Combine eggs, tortillas, and loads of delicious seasonings, and you have huevos rancheros — literally, ranch-style eggs. Huevos rancheros are similar to but still distinct from chilaquiles. The latter see tortilla chips combined with warm sauce so that they soften before the eggs are added; for huevos rancheros, the eggs are instead served over tortillas and then smothered in warm sauce, so the tortillas retain their texture.

Huevos rancheros are "THE classic southwest breakfast food," pairing corn tortillas with black beans and canned enchilada sauce to make their quick-and-easy version. But, there is "no set recipe" for huevos rancheros. In the Southwest, you'll see them with all sorts of flavorings and sauces, from the super simple to the complex.

Sonoran Hot Dog

You can't visit Tucson, Arizona without sampling a hot dog — a Sonoran hot dog, to be exact. This local invention sees a hot dog first wrapped in bacon and then grilled until crispy. The resulting dog is stuffed into a split-top bolillo roll and topped with pinto beans, tomatoes, onions, mayo, mustard, and chile salsa.

According to NBC, as many as 200 people sell these dogs across Tucson, often peddling them out of trucks.

Tex-Mex Enchiladas

The "Tex" in Tex Mex was originally an insult: a jab taken at the Texan approach to Mexican food, which was deemed inauthentic by English author Diana Kennedy in her 1972 cookbook. Today, however, Tex Mex is a cuisine in and of itself, boasting bold flavors and quite a few nuances as compared to Mexican cuisine from south of the border.

The major differences include bean color (Tex Mex cuisine uses black beans where Mexican uses pinto) and size (everything does indeed appear to be bigger in Texas, with its ultra-packed quesadillas and burritos). **Tex Mex cuisine also tends to use more cheese and a distinctive chile gravy is the essence of the cuisine itself.**

Enchiladas may look like a burrito, but there's one major difference between the two dishes: **enchiladas are made with corn tortillas while burritos are made with flour tortillas.** For most people, though not all, burritos are meant to be eaten with your hands like a sandwich. For enchiladas, that's never the case. They're always smothered in some sort of sauce and a fork is required

Tex Mex enchiladas are a great example of Tex Mex flavors, boasting chile sauce, beef, and loads of gooey melted cheese.

Tacos

Contrary to popular belief, there is a difference between burritos and tacos and it is essentially the size. Burritos are usually much larger than tacos and can be consumed as an entire meal. Tacos are made with warm corn tortillas wrapped around a single filling (fish or pulled beef, for instance) and often garnished with salsa or guacamole. Tacos are an ancient food that has been around for hundreds of years, while burritos are relatively new additions to the Tex-Mex menu. Another difference is that while corn tortillas are used for tacos, flour tortillas are preferred for burritos because corn tortillas tend to split and fall apart due to the large size of the typical burrito.

King Ranch Casserole

According to Southern Living, **king ranch casserole definitely has its roots in Texas: a combo of pulled chicken, green chiles, corn tortillas,**

and that old casserole standby, cream of mushroom soup. The result is one of the best examples of a marriage between the U.S. and Mexico .

Casseroles, after all, are an American stalwart that rose to popularity in the interwar years, when convenience food companies were looking for an alternative way to sell products developed for soldiers; they found their target audience in housewives looking for easily replicable, foolproof recipes: the casserole was born.

King ranch casserole stands out from some others thanks to its local Southwestern flavors and flair. Marrying not just cream of mushroom but also cream of chicken soup with Southwestern staples like corn tortillas, and of course, green chiles, this casserole effortlessly bridges the Rio Grande.

Queso

The first recipe for queso appears in an 1896 cookbook and hails not from Mexico, but from the U.S. Lisa Fain, proprietor of the Homesick Texan food blog and author of "Queso! Regional Recipes for the World's Favorite Chile-Cheese Dip," makes her native state proud with her approach to queso, showing readers just how versatile this combination of cheese and chiles can be.

Queso can range from a Velveeta-based dip that says smooth and dippable even at room temperature to a stretchy queso fundido common across Texas that must be eaten quickly lest it separate. The former is often served with tortilla chips, but the latter is far more frequently enjoyed with warmed tortillas and can be topped with a myriad of extra seasonings from chorizo to crawfish.

However you enjoy it, it's sure to conquer any cheese-lover's heart.

Chimichanga

Who came up with the idea to take a burrito and deep-fry it? Probably Arizonans, that's who. While the legend is contested, the most popular origin story for the chimichanga comes from Tucson; it's said that in the 1920s, Monica Flin of El Charro restaurant accidentally dropped a burrito in the deep fryer and let loose a Mexican curse that gave the dish its name.

A chimichanga can also be compared to a flauta — also known as a taquito north of the border — with two major distinctions: a flauta is made with a corn tortilla, while a chimichanga is made with flour, and a chimichanga's

ends are folded over, like a burrito, where a flauta's are left open, like the flute it's named for. Oh, and as with most things in Texas, a chimichanga is bigger.

However they came to be, chimichangas are now a classic of Tex Mex cuisine — and for that, we are oh-so grateful.

Desserts

New Mexico's Official State Cookie

Bizcochito Cookies are a favorite southwestern Christmas treat. Depending on where you look, it may be referred to as the bizcochito, biscochito or biscocho. These shortbread cookie flavored with anise and topped with cinnamon sugar. The earliest versions of the Bizcochito cookies were not sweet. They were hard biscuits that softened when dunked in coffee or tea. These cookies are served during special celebrations, such as wedding receptions, baptisms, and religious holidays (especially during the Christmas season).

History: Bizcochitos (bees-ko-CHEE-toh), as they are called in Northern New Mexico have a long tradition in New Mexico. These cooking were originally introduced to Mexico by Spanish explorers in the 16th Century. In Spain these cookies are called Mantecados or Mantecosos, meaning buttery.

The bizcochito was declared New Mexico's official State Cookie in 1989. The battle over the state cookie was not about adopting it but how to spell it. Several lawmakers got on the House floor to press for the "s" or "z". Eventually the Senate returned it as "bizcochito". The act made New Mexico the first state to have an official state cookie.

Bunuelos are served for numerous festive occasions and celebrations – from Christmas and Thanksgiving, to birthdays and baptisms. Many people of Hispanic heritage believe Bunuelos bring good luck when eaten during the holiday season. They are extremely popular on Christmas among the Mexican community.

What are Bunuelos? They are kind of like a "fritter" and also are like a hot bread that is sort of like a popover, a Mexican Popover. Over the years they have become often confused with other fried breads of the southwest, such as Indian Fry Bread. It should be made known that they are not Sopapillas, and they are not Fry Bread. Each of these three breads is actually very different. Bunuelos are more akin to a doughnut than to a

Sopapilla since Sopapillas originated from the Indian Fry Bread of New Mexico's Native Population.

Restaurants and cookbooks alike, have confused these three breads.

It is though that Bunuelos originate from Spain. During the Spanish settlement of the Americas, explorers brought the Buñuelo tradition with them. These Bunuelos, or fritters snacks, are consumed throughout Latin America, and are also popular in Colombia, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Although the ingredients vary slightly throughout the different regions, each evolving according to local tastes and customs. Some countries add anise seeds, others put sugar, cinnamon, honey, jam, or cream on them. All Buñuelos have a wheat-based dough.

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“Most countries have their version of Bunuelos, or fritters, either sweet or savory, and they are certainly great favorites throughout Spain and Latin America. In many parts of Mexico bunuelos are made of a stiffer dough, which is rolled out thin anywhere up to 12 inches in diameter and then fried crisp and staked up ready for use. In Uruapan...they are broken into small pieces and heated quickly in a thick syrup of piloncillo, the raw sugar of Mexico. These of Veracruz are very much like the churros of Spain, but f

Flan is the classic quintessential Mexican dessert. Flan may be prepared in a large flan dish or in individual ramekins. In Mexico, flans are usually served in small ramekins (custard cups), flavored with anise seeds, and served with a syrup.

Mexican Bread Pudding is probably like nothing you have ever had before. This dessert is one of the most traditional Lenten dishes in Mexico. It has an interesting combination of fruits, nuts, spices, and cheese! Since meat was forbidden during Lent, the pudding may have grown in popularity as a way to get more protein into a meatless diet. In this dessert the one defining ingredient is the cheese! Remember, most Mexican desserts are not extremely sweet, but a delicious combination of both sweet and savory at the same time.

This dish is similar to a bread pudding. Even if you have had already tasted Capirotada, almost every cook makes theirs just a little different. For many Mexican-American families, the smell of Capirotada in the oven is their comfort food.

Mexican Bread Pudding is a traditional and popular Lenten dessert that is usually served on Good Friday, but it can be served at any time, especially when you have some nice crusty bread that needs to be used.

An empanada is a stuffed bread or pastry filled with a variety of meats, cheeses, vegetables or fruits. The origins of empanadas can trace their roots back to Spain in the 1500's and the Spanish colonizers introduced this dish to many Latin American countries.

Empanadas also have strong similarities to Samosas from India which are meat-filled pies.

In the United States, pumpkin pie is the most popular dessert to serve during the Thanksgiving holiday. However, for most Mexican-American families, pumpkin empanadas are at the top of the dessert list!

As part of a Mexican tradition, pumpkin empanadas are made both on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Often they are served during Noche Buena when those re-enacting the travels of Mary and Joseph have stopped at the chosen home to feast.

Suspiros de Monja

Nun's Sighs (Suspiros de Monja) are a typical Spanish pastry that is golden and crispy on the outside and rich and creamy on the inside. A thick batter is prepared and spoonfuls are fried, then sprinkled with powdered sugar or candied fruit.

These Nun's Sighs could even be considered a cookie.

Nun's Sighs are basically a typical Spanish fritter whose origin goes back a few centuries and is another one of Spain's characteristic desserts that was originally created by nuns. Convents in Spain were famous for this delicate sweets that were produced within its walls. In Spain, legends says that while nuns were preparing some buns using choux pastry dough (a typically French pastry) one of them expelled some wind and the others nuns burst out laughing.

Torta Borracha or Drunken Torte – there is something about the name of this cake that makes it sound very interesting! But as the name implies there is a large amount of alcohol in the sauce! Borracho literally means “drunk” and refers, in the culinary sense, to sauces made with alcohol. Also know as Mexican Rum Cake. Enjoy the taste of the Caribbean with delicious Torta Borracha.

Also called Three-Milk Cake and **Tres Leches Cake**. A dense, moist “three milks” cake topped with a cloud of vanilla whipped cream. What makes it unusual is that after baked, it is perforated and soaked in a mixture of three different milk products: evaporated milk, sweetened condensed milk, and whole milk or heavy cream, hence the name Tres Leches.

The three milks, when combined, create just the right sweetness, density and “mouth feel” for a rich cake, making it moist but not mushy. The cake is like one big giant sponge soaking up the delicious milk syrup.

History: There is dispute over where it was first created. It is thought to have come from native from Nicaragua by most historians. This cake is very popular in Nicaragua, Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guatemala. I can find no proof of this, but the origin of the recipe is reported to come from the back of an evaporated milk or condensed milk can in Latin America to promote the use of the product. Evaporated milk and condensed milk were sold throughout Central and South America and even the Caribbean. By doing this, the company would boost their milk sales, which was probably the original idea.

Condensed milk first came into use in the mid-1850s as a way to preserve milk in cans, without refrigeration. Evaporated milk first became available during the 1870s when milk companies were able to heat the evaporated milk so that it would not spoil in the cans, thereby making the sugar unnecessary. They both became an immediate success in urban areas where fresh milk was difficult to distribute and store.

This cake probably became popular in the early 1900s. Today, the use of condensed and evaporated milk is a part of Latin American culture.