

SAVOR THE TASTES OF MEXICO

TIPS & RECIPES



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Mexican vs. Tex-Mex: What is the Difference?

Have you ever wondered what the difference is between authentic Mexican and Tex-Mex food? If you look around online, you'll find plenty of debate over which style of cooking is better. Some "traditionalists" even question if Tex-Mex is a legitimate form of American cuisine.

No matter where the debate leads, Tex-Mex has earned its place on the American table. Still, that doesn't answer how Tex-Mex differs from authentic Mexican food.

The roots of Tex-Mex cuisine trace back to the Spanish. The Spanish missionaries brought their recipes to Texas, and when they left the area in the 1700s, the natives of the region had already assimilated portions of their cooking culture into their own.

Along with this influence, early colonization of Texas also included other cultures. For example, individuals from the Canary Islands brought a different flavor palate with them, which included cumin, garlic, and chili powder. These flavors now form the foundation for the Tex-Mex favorite, chili con carne.

This blending of outside cultures with Mexican farm food and Texas ranch food is evident in many other modern Tex-Mex dishes.

For instance, you will find a lot more beef in Tex-Mex recipes than in traditional Mexican dishes. Even though beef cattle could be found in Mexico, grasslands were overgrazed and herds were scarce. Pigs, turkeys, wild fowl, chicken, and seafood were more likely available to the average Mexican household. As a result, these ingredients were found in more Mexican dishes.

On the other hand, beef cattle have long been a staple in Texas, so it is only natural that beef plays a more predominate role Tex-Mex recipes.

Before trade and commerce exploded in Mexico, beans, corn, and rice formed the basis for many meals. As Mexican people moved north, these foods found their way onto the plates of many households in Texas. In return, Texans introduced Mexican cooks to more plentiful milk and cheese, in addition to beef. This blending of cultures and cuisine created excitement, especially during the 1940s and 1950s as the borders between the two countries became more open.

During this time, the term 'Tex-Mex' was coined and was proudly used to describe Mexican dishes adapted by Texan cooks. However, as decades passed, the recipes lost much of their heritage. By the 1970s, many wonderful Tex-Mex dishes were almost completely revamped into unrecognizable concoctions introduced at carnivals and fairs. Chimichangas, cheese-laden nachos, and soggy tortillas soon gave Tex-Mex cuisine a bad name.

Along with carnival and fair food, much of what we know as Tex-Mex today can be traced in part to the fast food franchise explosion which introduced "Mexican" food to most Americans. These menus typically featured pre-made taco shells which housed a variety of ingredients buried under piles of cheese and sauces. Although these restaurants gave a general nod to a "south of the border" flavor, their menus had little in common with authentic Mexican or Texan cuisine.

What was once an exciting blending of cultures was given a less-than-honorable spin in order to appeal to the masses. Restaurants were popping up all over America claiming to serve only “authentic” Mexican food, when they were actually making a stab at Tex-Mex.

Often, they missed the mark on both.

This is a shame because it left many believing they don't like either Mexican or Tex-Mex food. If this applies to you, you may want to give both styles of cooking another chance now that you know more about it.

When it comes down to deciding which is best - authentic Mexican fare or Tex-Mex cuisine - there is no right or wrong answer.

All you can do is compare and decide for yourself which you prefer. Dive into the many cookbooks available for both Tex-Mex and Mexican cuisines to see what appeals to you. Then visit authentic local restaurants to try for yourself.

In the end, you don't have to choose, because there's always room for both.

Tasty Tips To Make Mexican Food Lighter And Healthier

Join your friends at a typical Mexican restaurant and look around the table at all the delicious offerings. Aside from making your mouth water, what do all these dishes have in common?

Chances are they are not exactly what you would call "on the lighter side."

You might also notice the servings are huge. (No, you aren't imagining things... that plate of nachos you enjoyed a decade ago has now become an enormous platter). Over time, our appetites have become used to these larger portions of fatty, fried foods swimming in heavy sauces.

Fortunately, you can turn those bad eating habits into healthy ones - while still enjoying all the great Mexican flavors you love. Authentic Mexican food doesn't resemble those loaded plates of fat and calories. By simply returning to the roots of Mexican cooking - lean protein, beans, and fresh produce - you can lighten your plate and stop loosening your belt.

Here are a few healthier choices you can make and still enjoy all that wonderful Mexican food:

Lean Protein

Skip the beef. Red meat was not a staple in the Mexican diet because beef cattle were not readily available to most of the people. Instead, turkey, chicken, and seafood were much more likely to be eaten by the average Mexican family.

Go back to those simple diets and enjoy these leaner and healthier proteins instead of ground or shredded beef. You'll be eating much healthier - and the result will be more authentically Mexican.

Beans

Beans are the ultimate lean protein enjoyed in many classic Mexican dishes. So, how did this super healthy food become so unhealthy?

Fat and sugar are often found in canned beans and most definitely in refried beans. You'll also find some restaurants take the term "refried beans" to mean throw the canned beans into a skillet and fry them twice in fat.

The term "refried beans" is actually a misnomer. The actual English translation from the Spanish term "frijoles refritos" means "beans well fried." You can do this in a healthy manner like authentic Mexican cooks. Just smash some cooked beans and fry them dry, meaning with no oil. Or just smash the beans and add them to your recipe without frying them to enjoy all their healthy goodness.

Guacamole and Salsa Fresca

You can add lots of great flavor to your next Mexican meal with fresh guacamole and salsa. Any Mexican restaurant worth going to has its own freshly made versions of these two classics. These dishes are also super easy to make at home, so there is no reason to succumb to any of the other not-so-healthy toppings that are offered.

Speaking of unhealthy toppings, there is one in particular that you may want to avoid: queso sauce. When you see the words "con queso"- just turn away. Loaded with fat, salt, and lots of calories, any queso sauce (cheese sauce) on the menu can be replaced with a fresh, healthy guacamole or salsa fresca.

Tortillas

And now we come to that very popular vehicle for so many Mexican foods... the tortilla. Used to wrap other ingredients, the tortilla can be healthy - or not.

A basic flour tortilla, fried in a dry skillet until lightly browned, can be just fine. But somewhere along the way, restaurants started churning out tortilla monsters. Super huge chimichangas, burritos, and tacos now reign supreme.

Not only are these offerings huge, they are often deep fried, as well. Yes, that gigantic tortilla-wrapped bundle of cheese-laden ingredients gets lowered into a vat of hot fat and deep fried for your dining pleasure.

For a healthier choice, skip the deep-fried option. Then, choose fillings that feature leaner proteins, healthy vegetables and non-fried beans. .

As you can see, even standard Mexican restaurant fare can be made healthier by making simple substitutions. All the fresh, delicious flavors of Mexico can be enjoyed in new, healthier ways.

All you have to do is look to the past and cook real food in traditional Mexican ways.

3 Mexican Desserts to Satisfy Any Sweet Tooth

If you hear “Mexican food,” your thoughts may instantly turn to enchiladas, burritos, guacamole, pico de gallo and fajitas. But what comes after those savory, spicy delights?

Something sweet, of course!

The best way to wrap up a delicious Mexican meal is with a classic Mexican dessert. Sweet and decadent, the three tasty desserts listed below never go out of style. What’s even better is they are all easy to make once you know how!

Let’s take a look at these desserts and get busy planning your next adventure in Mexican cooking.

Flan

This ancient recipe can be traced all the way back to Rome where chickens were first known to be used just for their eggs. This custard dish was originally a savory meal, but was so versatile that it soon became flavored with other natural ingredients, like honey.

We can see an evolution of flan through the centuries and across borders. Because flan is such a simple dish to make, it became popular with many cultures, each adding their own local special touches. We can see the Spanish influence in the Mexican recipes which are traditionally sweetened with a glaze of caramelized sugar.

When Columbus journeyed to the Americas, he brought with him his love of flan and his recipes. Flan became a classic dessert in Mexican homes. Chickens – and their eggs - were plentiful, making this dessert affordable for all people of any economic status.

This wonderfully elegant, yet simple dessert remains virtually unchanged in Mexican cooking where it is a basic custard, molded, then turned over onto a plate. It may have a caramel coating or caramelized sugar coating, and is served either room temperature or cold.

Tres Leches Cake

Cake is good, but cake soaked in something delicious is better. Like flan, you can trace this type of cake way back to ancient times. There are soaked cakes on every continent with so many variations that it boggles the mind.

For instance, rum or sherry soaked cakes are very British, while fruit juice soaked cakes are a familiar dessert in tropical regions. Cakes soaked in wine are common in Italy and France. It seems that each version has reasons why the ingredients are what they are.

The Mexican version features a sweet spongy cake soaked in three kinds of milk.

This dessert, the Tres Leches Cake, translates to "3 milks" cake. The origin of that term and the recipe itself is still questionable. Some believe the recipe originated with the introduction of condensed and evaporated milk. The three milks included in most recipes for Tres Leches Cake are sweetened condensed milk, evaporated milk, and heavy cream.

No matter what the origin of the recipe is, the combination of these three rich milks makes one delightful dessert.

You can serve your Tres Leches Cake with a layer of whipped cream sprinkled with cinnamon, topped with fruit, or plain. It's a nice treat any way you choose.

Empanadas

When you think of an empanada, you could be thinking of many types of foods. As a matter of fact, the word simply means a pastry. That leaves a lot to the imagination, but the basic design is the same for any recipe.

The pastry itself is simple, much like a pie pastry. You form a circle or a square, spoon in the filling, fold, seal and bake or fry. The filling is what makes the dish. In this case, we are making a Mexican dessert so we are going to stick to a sweet filling.

In Mexico, a dessert empanada could contain many fruits and other fillings, but what comes to mind, of course, is bananas along with another Mexican favorite, chocolate. Nuts would add a lot of flavor and texture to this dessert. As with many authentic Mexican recipes, keeping the empanada pastry plain and simple is traditional. If you want to get a little more creative, try using puff pastry instead.

If you are not a fan of making homemade pastry, go ahead and use pre-made pie crusts, frozen empanada discs or other pastry dough. As long as it's flaky, hot, and sweet, your Mexican empanada dessert will be perfect.

Try your hand at these three desserts the next time you want to treat your family to something deliciously sweet after dinner. These classic Mexican desserts will become family favorites in no time!

Let's Talk Tequila!

When the topic of Mexican food comes up, there may be a vast array of flavors and ingredients discussed. But mention Mexican beverages and all discussion turns to one drink - tequila.

Mexico and tequila are inseparable, both culturally and legally. Just as a bottle of Champagne can only be labeled "Champagne" if it originates from the Champagne region of France, tequila can only be labeled "Tequila" if it is produced in specific Mexican states.

This process starts with the harvesting of 'agave tequilana weber azul' from the region, then is carefully fermented and distilled using the same ancient methods the common Mexican people used.

One of the oldest tequila companies started marketing their product back in the 1750s and by the late 1800s, its appeal had spread across all economic and physical borders.

Harvest and Production

The harvest of the 'blue agave' is simple, but hard work. These large, heavy plants are dug up and trimmed by workers called jimadores. Wielding a big stick with a razor sharp blade, the jimadores slice off the leaves, then they split open the plant exposing the pina, or core.

The pinas are cooked for several days to convert their complex starches into a simple sugar that is then fermented using yeast. The fermented juice is then put through the distillation process, after which it is stored in oak barrels and aged.

But, that's just one tequila-making process. After centuries of perfecting this process, the Mexican tequila producers couldn't stop there. There are now so many varieties of tequila available, it's hard to know where to start.

Here's a quick look at some basic facts:

Beyond the Barrel

There are two categories of tequila: 100% Blue Agave Tequila and Mixed Tequila. Only tequila made from 100% blue agave can be labeled "Tequila 100% de Agave." Any tequilas made with added cane sugar, caramel color, or other syrups and flavorings are labeled simply "Tequila."

If you decide you only want 100% blue agave tequila, you still have some choices within that category. Some of these may include tequila which has been left in the distilling process longer or aged in barrels longer for a smoother finish. Choose a high-quality Tequila Blanco and you will enjoy a very pure product which has a slightly smoky taste with fruity undertones.

The mixed tequila, or tequila mixto, has additives to produce some differences in the taste, color, and finish. Tequila reposado is "rested" and aged in wood barrels for several months. The blend of these woody flavors with the agave makes this type of tequila very desirable for sipping, which is a nice way to enjoy the aftertastes

of vanilla and cherry.

For the highest quality sipping tequila, though, you'll want to try one of the extra aged or ultra aged varieties, or tequila anejo, which gives this tequila its richer, deeper flavor. The tequila anejo products may be aged for one year to ten years, or even longer, which explains the extreme range of finishes.

How to Choose

The easiest way to choose the “right” tequila is to consider the drink or food you’ll pair with it.

If you're making margaritas, for instance, you want to match the flavor intensity of the tequila you choose with the orange liqueur you use. Strong-flavored tequilas will overpower wimpy orange flavors and vice versa. Balance these two flavors properly and suddenly you’ve got nirvana in a glass.

When you start to feel adventurous enough to cook with tequila, just remember the two rules for cooking with wine - only use what you would drink and match the wine palate to the food palate. A little bit of tequila blanco is perfect in a light citrus-based shrimp marinade. Darker tequilas work well in recipes that are a bit heavier and smoky.

When you’re ready to head to your friendly neighborhood liquor store, be sure to write down all your questions and give the proprietor a chance to help you choose the very best tequila your money can buy. Whether you're mixing drinks, cooking or just sipping, a good bottle of tequila is always a pleasure!

Mexican Recipes

Authentic Mexican Rice



The secret to getting making and fluffy Mexican rice that doesn't stick together is to thoroughly rinse the uncooked rice under cold water for a couple minutes to remove the excess starch.

Ingredients:

- 3 or 4 medium ripe tomatoes, seeded and roughly chopped
- 1 medium onion, roughly chopped
- 3 or 4 cloves garlic, peeled
- 2 jalapeno peppers, seeded
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cups long-grain white rice, thoroughly rinsed
- 2 cups chicken broth
- Fresh cilantro, stems removed and finely chopped
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 2 limes, cut into wedges

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Roughly chop tomatoes, onion, garlic and jalapenos and add to blender or food processor. Process thoroughly until mixture is smooth.

In a large oven-safe skillet with a tight-fitting lid, heat olive oil over medium heat. Once hot, add rinsed rice and stir constantly with wooden spoon for 5 or 6 minutes or until it starts to turn brown.



Add broth and pureed tomato mixture to pan. Stir until thoroughly combined with rice. Bring to a boil while stirring occasionally, and then remove from heat.



Cover skillet with lid and place in pre-heated oven on middle shelf.



After 15 minutes, remove lid and carefully stir contents of pan. Cook another 15 minutes or until all excess moisture in pan has been absorbed.

Remove from oven and stir in fresh cilantro. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Serve with wedges of fresh lime to help “brighten” the taste.



Chunky Homemade Guacamole



Ingredients:

2 ripe Haas Avocados
1 ripe fresh tomato, seeded and diced
1 large clove fresh garlic, finely minced
1 fresh lime, juiced
1 tablespoon (+ extra for garnish) fresh cilantro leaves, stems removed and finely chopped
Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

With a sharp knife, slice the avocado from top to bottom, cutting all the way around the fruit. Place the avocado in the palm of your non-dominant hand and gently the top half clockwise until it easily separates into two pieces.

To remove the seed, “whack” the seed with your sharp knife so the blade sticks into it. Gently turn the knife until the seed pops out.

To dice, score the avocado while still in its skin but cutting equally sized slices from top to bottom. Then, rotate 90 degrees and do the same thing going side to side. This combination of horizontal and vertical cuts will give you equal sized chunks of diced avocado.



To remove from skin, take a spoon and gently scrape all on the bottom of the flesh (where it meets the skin) until all your diced chunks are removed.

Place diced avocado in bowl.



Add diced tomato, garlic, lime juice and fresh cilantro to bowl and combine with a fork. Season with salt, pepper and additional lime juice, if desired.



Serve with favorite Mexican entrees or on its own with crunchy tortilla chips.

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