

Harina de mezquite: a forgotten ancestral food

by Sarah Owens



The first time I experienced mezquite as a baking ingredient was in 2015, when a roommate gifted me a small bag she had acquired from a farmer's market in Tucson, Arizona. She plopped it onto the counter and suggested I might know how to make this inert brown powder come to life. Without the faintest clue to what it was, or how to approach using it, the lonely little pouch sat there for days. When I finally opened and timidly dipped my nose into its dusty contents, a gentle whiff revealed a surprisingly complex profile. I eagerly dipped a finger into the bag and grabbed a pinch of the rich and sweet smelling flour. This first taste wasn't unlike biting into a Whopper ball, the ubiquitous candy of my youth, with a crunchy malted center surrounded in milk chocolate. My culinary curiosity was ignited, and I was eager to add a few tablespoons to a batch of sourdough bread loaves. The encouraging result was similar to adding malt syrup to dough, something bakers do to improve the crust quality of bread. The result was a deep reddish-brown and caramelized exterior with a distinctively nutty aroma. I was immediately hooked and impatient to experiment more. Since then, this unique ingredient has found its way into cakes, cookies, crusts, crackers, gravies, muffins, compound butters, frostings and more.

Having grown up in the southeastern United States, where BBQ is as sacred as religion, I never imagined mezquite would be used to make anything other than the coveted charcoal worshipped at the altar of smoked meats.

As many ingredients with regionally-specific terroir, I knew little about its cultural context beyond my carnal upbringing and the mysterious homemade label of the gifted flour. With a little digging however, I discovered mezquite is a powerhouse of nutrition, whose name is derived from the Aztec word *mezquitl*. Its flour is made from leguminous pods that boast a high protein content, a high soluble fiber content, and an impressive portfolio of vitamins and minerals; including calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron, and zinc. Its natural sugar is concentrated in the pulp between the pod's shell and the seeds, and registers low on the glycemic index. When chewed, roasted and ground, or heated with water, it can be enjoyed as a natural sweetener for diabetics or a tasty alternative to refined, processed sweeteners. These redeeming qualities make mezquite a fine candidate for becoming the next health food craze. In a world where traditional foods have been repeatedly removed from their ancestral context, only to benefit a privileged and often remote audience, I yearned to know more about mezquite's ancestral origins. But even within one of its native habitats in Mexico, where it was once a prized indigenous ingredient, it has had a relatively obscure presence over the last 75 years due to cultural colonization.

Not only is the mezquite bean of great culinary value when processed into flour, it also functions as a water-wise crop, with great ethnobotanical heritage. The sweet, nutritionally dense pods of this ancient tree have

historically been one of the most important staple foods of the Native Peoples in the Americas. The oldest archeological evidence of the use of mezquite as food, dates from 6,500 BCE from the Tehuacan Valley in Oaxaca, Mexico. Despite being celebrated for thousands of years before corn was domesticated, few Native populations continue to use or even recognize mezquite as a food source today. The introduction of alternative Euro-centric foods like wheat, oats, and barley contributed to cultural erasure, that, with time, uprooted the use of mezquite as food. I have been told by the parents and grandparents of my contemporaries, who still remember using mezquite, that it fell to the shameful ranks of 'peasant food' or animal fodder, and was mostly relegated to the donkeys. The subsequent widespread deforestation of mezquite savannas and woodlands for agriculture, industrialization and mining has since meant that natural populations of the plant have slowly been disappearing over time. Fortunately, the tree's resilient nature has been rediscovered for its ability to withstand an impressive array of harsh environments—a quality that is becoming increasingly appreciated in the context of climate change weather extremes.

There are 44 species of mezquite in the widely distributed genus *Prosopis*, mostly in the Americas, but with a few native to Africa and the Middle East as well. With roots reaching as deep as 50 meters (164 feet), it is a remarkably adaptable tree that can alleviate soil erosion and withstand high temperatures and drought; conditions that are occurring with increasing frequency across the globe. Its nitrogen-fixing root nodules, leaf litter, and nutritious pods can—when left to self-compost—contribute to improved soil conditions, in regions where the earth has been depleted by overuse or synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Ironically, the hotter and drier the climate, the sweeter and more complex the flavor of the beans. When the pods are ready for collecting, they rattle

when shook, although one must be careful of the branch thorns protecting them. Native Peoples of the southwestern United States, the Sonoran Desert region of Mexico, and the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, would traditionally roast, grind, and use the flour with cornmeal to make griddle cakes or in atole, a hearty gruel-like beverage, consumed warm in the morning hours. An indispensable cookbook for Sonoran Desert cuisine was published in 2018 by Desert Harvesters in Tucson, Arizona called *Eat Mesquite and More*. It has since become a benchmark resource for the abundant indigenous plants of the American southwest, revealing a vast array of both traditional, and creative uses for a contemporary audience. The tree's fast-growing and compliant nature has meant that a large swathe of the southwestern United States from Texas to New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California, is beginning to embrace mezquite both as an agricultural crop, and as a renewed ingredient in local cuisine.

After spending several years in Latin America as a traditional foods student and educator, I discovered *harina de mezquite* (mesquite flour) is a versatile ingredient, gaining renewed reverence in its native lands of Mexico as well. Several economic projects are working to revive mezquite's cultural and environmental significance—an agricultural and culinary renaissance is gaining momentum as a result. Community-driven organizations include *Vía Organica* in central Mexico and *Xuchil Natural Foods*, a cooperative enterprise in the Santiago Suchilquitongo community of Oaxaca, Mexico. The express mission of these grassroots initiatives is to repopulate the region with this resilient crop, whose cultivation benefits both the land on which it is grown and the Indigenous or local communities that cultivate and process mezquite. Small pueblos are beginning to use it again in traditional foods like tortillas and neighborhood

bakeries and upscale restaurants of larger cities like Puebla, Mexico City, and Guadalajara are celebrating mezquite's unique flavor and heritage in their menus. The challenge is now, how to advance mezquite into the global culinary conversation, while continuing to honor the communities and their cultures who nurture it. Production costs remain high due to the lack of equipment and understanding of the ingredient's many uses, though introduction of this modernization would likely result in larger scale, more 'efficient,' processing methods. Without acknowledgment of its history however, mezquite risks falling into the category of other globalized products, such as mānuka honey, a culturally appropriated ingredient belonging to the Māori People. When a dominant culture decides to profit off of the fetishization of another culture's foods—that culture is robbed of the right to empower themselves and their history. Although some would argue capitalism has always been extractive, we are entering into a new world consciousness—where we have the opportunity to do better with mezquite.

Among those who have been the most eager to embrace mezquite into their menus are bakers who amplify its distinct character in rustic as well as more refined breads, pastries, and desserts alike. Breana Bauman, of Breana's Toast in Guadalajara, grew up on both sides of the Mexican-United States border, and admits to only recently becoming aware of mezquite's "magic uses in baking." A large mezquite tree flanked the entryway to her residence, but she, like many others, never knew that it could be a food source. Now that she is working with the Xuchil cooperative however, she has grown proud of its heritage, and her customers have become increasingly hungry for mezquite in her naturally-leavened breads and cookies. Boulenc, a popular Mexican-owned European-style bakery in Oaxaca, features mezquite in their pastry crusts, laden with silky custards and fresh, local fruit. It has even been used in

microbreweries like Cibolo Creek Brewery to create special beers that, otherwise, rely upon European brewing traditions and ingredients. The Texas Mesquite Movement was created as an extension of these ideas—re-establishing culinary use of the state's local mezquite trees that have otherwise been reviled by ranchers. Originally a collaboration, organized between these ranchers and refugees, to harvest the pods, the organization was able to purchase a small hammer-mill through an innovation-grant from the Austin Food and Wine Alliance. As more communities realize the benefits of investing in this regenerative resource, mezquite stands to become an increasingly sought-after ingredient with limitless culinary potential.

The following is a recipe that strives to follow this same vein of creativity, while calling attention to the bread's other ingredients. I adapted a classic recipe with a strong European tradition called Pain d'epices, but use what would otherwise be more traditional or localized ingredients to the regions where mezquite originates. South and Central American native *Rubus glaucus* (moras or blackberries) and northern Mexico and southern United States native *Carya illinoensis* (nueces pacanas or pecans), a plant-based milk, and heirloom Sonoran wheat are the backbone of this heavily spiced, honey-sweetened bread—that marries well with the earthy aroma of mezquite. If you cannot source Sonora whole wheat, you may substitute it with any low-protein white whole wheat pastry flour. Cow's milk, while a European-introduced ingredient to the Americas, works just fine here in its whole, full-fat form; alternately, a rich and fatty pecan milk would also be an appropriate substitute. Serve a slice of this bread with a cow butter or nut cream, that has been whipped with a few pinches of harina de mezquite and a sprinkle of salt—and you will be transported to a very different time and place, rich with history.

Illustrations by Katherine Shapiro

Pan de Especias



Ingredients

- 135 ml full-fat coconut milk (or whole milk)
- 210 ml mezquite, blackberry, or otherwise robust honey
- 1 ½ tsp ground turmeric
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- ¾ tsp ground ginger
- ½ tsp ground black pepper
- ½ tsp ground green cardamom
- 1/8 tsp grated nutmeg
- 113 g unsalted butter (or coconut oil)
- 2 large eggs
- Zest of one lemon
- 200 g Sonora whole wheat flour (or white whole wheat pastry flour)
- 40 g harina de mezquite (mesquite flour)
- 1 ¼ tsp kosher salt
- 6 g baking powder
- 150 g fresh or frozen moras (blackberries)
- 25 g raw pecans or almonds, coarsely chopped (optional)
- ½ tbsp raw white sesame seeds (optional)

Method

1. Preheat your oven to 165°C.
2. *Prepare the liquid ingredients.* In a small saucepan, whisk together the milk, honey, and spices. Heat over a medium-low flame until the milk begins to bubble around the edges. Do not let boil. Stir in the butter until melted and turn off the heat. Let stand for 10-15 minutes while you continue to work. In a large bowl, gently beat the eggs. When the milk has cooled to the touch, whisk in a slow and steady stream while adding it to the eggs. Stir in the lemon zest and set aside.
3. *Prepare the dry ingredients.* In a small bowl, whisk together the flours, salt, and baking powder.
4. *Mix the batter and prepare the baking tin.* Add the dry ingredients into the wet, a third at a time, folding and gently stirring with a spatula, until no lumps remain. Gently stir in 100 g of the blackberries and set the batter aside for 10 minutes to allow the whole grains to absorb the liquids. Prepare the baking tin by lining with a parchment paper sling so that the sides overlap lengthwise. Grease with butter or a nonstick spray and transfer the rested batter to the tin. Gently tap the batter to release trapped air and add the remaining blackberries on top. Sprinkle the batter with the nuts and sesame seeds and transfer to the oven.
5. *Bake the loaf.* Bake the loaf for 70-75 minutes without fan assist, rotating halfway. (If you are baking with convection, lower the temperature accordingly). The loaf will be done when the sides pull away from the pan and a toothpick tests moist, but clean, when inserted into the center of the loaf. Remove from the oven, and allow to cool in the pan for 10-15 minutes. Run a butter knife around the perimeter of the pan and gently lift it onto a cooling rack using the parchment paper sling. Remove the paper and allow to cool for at least 2 hours before slicing. Store wrapped or in a covered container for up to 5 days at room temperature.

