



The anthropologist of food

When Mark Miller talks about his favorite subject, food, the word “complexity” or variations of it frequently come up in the conversation. To demonstrate how complex food is, he likes to point out that there are 400 varieties of corn, 289 wild herbs, 8000 varieties of beans, and in Japan alone, 16 varieties of rice.

In my neck of the woods, Santa Fe, Mark Miller is well known as the owner of the famous Coyote Café, which he’s in the process of selling because in about 15 months he’s going to open a new restaurant in a Native American resort north of Santa Fe. My interview with him took place in April with three other travel writers in San Antonio, Texas, at The Westin La Cantera Resort, where Miller is a consultant to Francesca’s at Sunset, one of the resort’s restaurants.

Miller, who has a master’s degree in cultural anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley, says he decided to become an anthropologist after he visited an exhibit of Aboriginal bark paintings from Australia in an art museum in his native Boston. But he was sidetracked into the culinary world while working on his PhD and good food became his calling.

His career may have changed, but certain behaviors remain consistent. He describes his teaching days at Berkeley by telling reporters he would warn his students: “I will lecture for 70 minutes and you have five to ask questions.” He still loves to talk, but his impromptu lessons are educational, not self-centered, and by the end of the interview the travel writers, his willing students, had heard a

combination of Anthropology 101 and Nutrition 101. Our blue books were full.

Besides talking, Miller also loves to write. His biography lists 10 cookbooks, including his first, *Coyote Café* (1989, and revised and republished in 2001). Other publications include: *The Great Chile Book*, *The Great Salsa Book*, *Squash Poster*, *Tamales* and *Red Sage*.

Given those titles, one should not be surprised to hear him say: “I flavor-engineer things.” He travels all over the world, and among his ventures is a restaurant in Sydney. Because he studies other cultures the way an anthropologist might, he says that his cooking aims to give his clientele a complete cultural experience.

At Francesca’s, he urged the *chef de cuisine*, Ernesto M. Estrada—always referred to as “Ernie”—to research his family’s background before creating a new menu.

“That’s when I found out,” Estrada says, “that my great-grandparents were full Apaches.” His great-grandmother is still alive at 103. He even has some Mayan in his background. “My great-grandmother told me that the Apaches traveled everywhere—from Wyoming to Central America.”

Knowing his family history, Estrada created a menu with such items as Three Sisters, an appetizer that includes beans, squash and corn, three basic foods eaten by Native Americans. Another appetizer, chicken fried quail breasts, is topped with a Mayan-style sour orange-roma tomato salsa. He’s named the ribeye entrée after the Lipan, a local Apache tribe. Of course, his Hispanic roots are stamped all over the menu, as is Miller’s injunction that “a restaurant should always fit in its region and be a natural outgrowth of its culture, its topography, its food, its food ways, its farming.”

“You can have lobster rolls in Boston,” Miller quips, “but not in San Antonio.”

Because we are in the Southwest and in the land of Tex-Mex cooking, one of my fellow travel writers asks about “heat,” meaning chiles.

“Chiles make food more interesting,” Miller says. “People want to eat something interesting. People want their food to be lively.”

Miller says that chiles are more complex than pepper and that they integrate with other flavors rather than overwhelming them. Pepper, although less complex, can be overbearing, he says.

Without being asked, Miller launches into a lecture on healthy eating. He condemns pepper, sugar, salt and ketchup—the big four, he mockingly calls them—being used in some way over and over without any variety.

“Has chile ever been proven to be bad for you?” he asks. It lowers blood pressure and cholesterol. It has more vitamin C than citrus fruits. It’s one of the healthiest things you can eat in your diet. “Why not eat more chile?” he asks rhetorically.

Yes, chiles have a certain temperature that may be too high for some people's palates, but Miller argues that salt and sugar, rather than flavoring food, hide taste instead of complementing it.

"You won't see people in Mexico adding sugar and salt to recipes," he says, "because they know how to use spices." (My wife, Paulette, made the same observation about local food when we lived in China in 1994.)

Nor does one need to rely on sugar or sugar substitutes for sweetening. Miller advocates the nectar of the agave cactus, which he says has a glycemic index that is 5 percent of sugar—and it holds eight times the moisture for baking. "It tastes sweeter than sugar," Miller says, and "it's a lot healthier." (Miller does not mention that there are 22 genera and at least 720 species of agave, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.)

Estrada's menu includes one appetizer with an agave nectar chipotle sauce and he tells the travel writers that he uses the agave nectar at home on pancakes he makes for his children. We are given samples to taste.

Miller says that agave is not as well known as it should be and claims that typical health bars have 10 times the amount of sugar that an agave-sweetened health bar would have.

Miller is more than a chef. He's also a big believer in healthy eating and his trim physique testifies to his beliefs. He says that the healthy way to eat is to consume small amounts of a variety of food four to seven times a day. He cites the Asian diet as a good example of how to eat.

His maximum amount of meat a day is three ounces. "We usually eat eight to 12," he says, claiming that such amounts over time wear out the kidneys. He cites the high incidence of diabetes and obesity in the United States as evidence that Americans aren't eating right.

Miller would argue for having more rice (as long as it's fresh) and beans in a diet and less meat. "We need to slow down a little bit and go back to these things," he argues.

He needs to get back to the kitchen and ends with this observation: "Young chefs today aren't even interested in Southwest food. Doesn't have foam, doesn't have fusion, doesn't use a lot of ingredients. They don't want to learn the complexities."

There's that word again.

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