

MEXICO

on your plate

22 popular foods • how to eat them
and how to order with less heat



CDMX / OAXACA CITY / PUERTO ESCONDIDO

Prepared for Anthony & Cecilia
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Food pictures are AI-generated illustrations, not restaurant photographs. They show representative preparations; actual dishes vary.

Find your next meal

Ordered from broadly popular classics to more regional or specialist foods. This is an approximate editorial order based on recognition and availability, not a measured national sales ranking. A lower number is not a quality score.

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 01 Tacos | 12 Tostadas |
| 02 Quesadillas | 13 Sopas |
| 03 Tamales | 14 Birria |
| 04 Enchiladas | 15 Chiles rellenos |
| 05 Pozole | 16 Churros |
| 06 Chilaquiles | 17 Tlayudas |
| 07 Tortas | 18 Memelas |
| 08 Elote & esquites | 19 Ceviche |
| 09 Guacamole | 20 Pescado a la talla |
| 10 Mole | 21 Enfrijoladas |
| 11 Burritos | 22 Chapulines |

YOUR ROUTE

CDMX: tacos, quesadillas, tamales, tortas and churros.

Oaxaca City: mole, tlayudas, memelas and enfrijoladas.

Puerto Escondido: grilled fish, seafood and Oaxacan classics.

Tacos

Soft tortillas with a filling

CDMX • also everywhere



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Small corn tortillas folded around meat, fish or vegetables. Try al pastor (marinated spit-roasted pork), carnitas (slow-cooked pork), bistec (beef) or coastal fish tacos. Tacos dorados are rolled or folded and fried crisp.

HOW TO EAT IT

Use your hands. Fold gently, support underneath and lean over the plate. Add a little salsa only after tasting it. Two tortillas often support a juicy filling; eat them together.

FILLING DEPENDENT

Plain carnitas or grilled meat can be mild. Al pastor, chorizo, tinga and stewed fillings may contain chile already. Ask for unseasoned-with-chile meat and salsa separately; removing salsa will not remove marinade heat.

SAY IT

Dos tacos de carnitas, sin salsa, por favor.

Two carnitas tacos, without salsa, please.

Quesadillas

Folded tortillas, often with cheese

CDMX • Oaxaca City



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

A griddled or fried tortilla with cheese and/or a savoury filling, such as mushrooms, squash blossoms or meat. In CDMX, some vendors sell quesadillas without cheese unless you specify it.

HOW TO EAT IT

Hold a dry quesadilla in your hands; use a fork and knife if covered in sauce. Let the hot cheese cool briefly. Fried versions can drip oil.

USUALLY MILD IF PLAIN

Cheese alone is normally mild. Rajas are chile strips; tinga and other fillings may be spicy. Request cheese, no chile and no salsa. Ask whether vegetables were cooked with chile.

SAY IT

Una quesadilla con queso, sin chile ni salsa.

A quesadilla with cheese, without chile or salsa.

Tamales

Steamed corn dough parcels

All three stops • especially breakfast



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Soft masa (corn dough), usually with a filling, steamed inside a corn husk or banana leaf. Oaxaca is known for banana-leaf tamales, including chicken with mole. Sweet tamales may contain raisins or fruit.

HOW TO EAT IT

Open the wrapper and use it as a little plate. Eat the dough and filling with a fork or spoon. Do not eat the husk or banana leaf; watch for ties.

FILLING DEPENDENT

Green salsa, red salsa, rajas and mole versions contain chile that cannot be removed. Sweet tamales are usually not spicy. Ask which savoury fillings contain no chile; the wrapper gives no clue.

SAY IT

¿Tiene algún tamal sin chile?

Do you have any tamale without chile?

Enchiladas

Tortillas dressed in chile sauce

All three stops



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Corn tortillas folded or rolled around chicken, cheese or another filling, coated with red or green sauce. Crema, cheese and onion often finish the plate. Enmoladas use mole instead.

HOW TO EAT IT

Use a fork and knife. Cut a piece that includes filling and sauce. They are soft and saucy, so are not normally picked up like tacos.

CHILE IS USUALLY BUILT IN

Both red and green sauces can be hot; colour is not a heat guide. Ask to taste the sauce or request the mildest available. 'No extra salsa' does not remove the chile in the main sauce.

SAY IT

¿La salsa pica? ¿Puedo probar un poquito?

Is the sauce spicy? May I taste a little?

Pozole

Hominy and meat soup

CDMX • restaurants across your route



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

A hearty soup with large hominy kernels, usually pork or chicken. Blanco has a pale broth; rojo uses red chiles; verde uses a green sauce. Radish, cabbage or lettuce, oregano and lime are common extras.

HOW TO EAT IT

Eat with a spoon; use a fork for larger meat pieces. Add garnishes gradually. Eat accompanying tostadas on the side, plain or spread with crema if provided.

VERSION DEPENDENT

Blanco is generally the mildest, but confirm the broth has no chile. Red and green versions have chile cooked in and vary in heat. Keep dried chile and salsa off your bowl.

SAY IT

¿Tiene pozole blanco sin chile?

Do you have white pozole without chile?

Chilaquiles

Saucy tortilla-chip breakfast

All three stops • breakfast menus



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Fried tortilla pieces mixed with red or green salsa, topped with crema, cheese and onion. Eggs, chicken or meat may be added. Some versions stay crisp; others are deliberately softened.

HOW TO EAT IT

Use a fork, combining chips, toppings and egg in each bite. Eat soon after serving if you prefer some crunch.

CHILE IS USUALLY BUILT IN

The chips soak up the sauce, so you cannot simply remove the heat. Request a mild sauce and taste it first. Green is not automatically milder than red. A plain egg breakfast is easier to make chile-free.

SAY IT

¿Puede hacerlos con una salsa que no pique?

Can you make them with a sauce that is not spicy?

Tortas

Mexican sandwiches

Especially CDMX



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

A bolillo or telera roll with a generous filling: breaded meat (milanesa), ham, eggs, pork or other options. Beans, avocado, tomato and mayonnaise are common additions.

HOW TO EAT IT

Pick it up with both hands. Ask for it cut in half if large. Keep the paper around the bottom when eating on the move.

OFTEN MILD WHEN CUSTOMIZED

Pickled jalapeños, chipotle mayonnaise and spicy meat can add heat. Request no chiles or salsa and check the spread. A torta ahogada is sauce-drenched and needs a separate heat check.

SAY IT

Una torta de pollo, sin chiles ni salsa picante.

A chicken sandwich, without chiles or hot sauce.

Elote & esquites

Corn on the cob or in a cup

Street stalls in all three stops



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Elote is cooked corn on the cob; esquites are cooked kernels served in a cup. Typical toppings include mayonnaise, cheese, lime and chile powder. Some esquites have a seasoned broth.

HOW TO EAT IT

Hold elote by its stick or handle and bite kernels off the cob. Eat esquites with a spoon, mixing the toppings through. Neither requires eating the cob.

USUALLY OPTIONAL HEAT

Plain corn is not spicy. Say no chile powder or hot sauce before it is dressed. For esquites, also ask whether chile is already in the cooking liquid.

SAY IT

Sin chile en polvo ni salsa; ¿el caldo lleva chile?

No chile powder or sauce; does the broth contain chile?

Guacamole

Avocado dip or accompaniment

All three stops



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Mashed or chopped avocado, often with onion, cilantro, lime and tomato. Recipes differ, and fresh serrano or jalapeño may already be mixed in. Usually served with totopos (tortilla chips).

HOW TO EAT IT

Scoop with a chip or spoon a little onto a taco. Use a serving spoon when sharing and avoid dipping a bitten chip back into the shared bowl.

CHECK BEFORE ORDERING

Avocado itself is mild, but guacamole often contains chile. Ask for a fresh batch without chile; a prepared batch cannot be made chile-free by removing visible pieces.

SAY IT

¿Puede preparar el guacamole sin chile?

Can you prepare the guacamole without chile?

Mole

Complex sauce, often over chicken

A priority in Oaxaca City



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

A family of sauces made with combinations of chiles, spices, seeds, nuts and other ingredients. Oaxaca's mole negro is dark and complex; coloradito is reddish-brown. Not every mole contains chocolate or tastes sweet.

HOW TO EAT IT

Use a fork and knife for the meat and a little tortilla to scoop sauce. Try a tasting portion or small sample before committing to a whole plate.

CHILE IS USUALLY BUILT IN

Heat ranges from gentle to strong. Mole negro is not automatically mild, and chocolate does not cancel chile heat. The sauce is prepared in advance; request a taste rather than expecting a chile-free version.

SAY IT

¿Cuál mole pica menos? ¿Puedo probarlo?

Which mole is least spicy? May I taste it?

Burritos

Rolled flour-tortilla parcels

Available, but not a regional focus here



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

A flour tortilla wrapped around fillings such as beans, meat or a stew. Closely associated with northern Mexico. Traditional versions can be smaller and simpler than the large rice-filled burritos familiar in Canada.

HOW TO EAT IT

Hold with both hands and peel back foil or paper as you eat. Start at an open end. A sauce-covered restaurant burrito is easier with a fork and knife.

FILLING DEPENDENT

Tortilla, plain beans and cheese are usually mild. Stewed meat, chorizo, chipotle sauces and jalapeños can be spicy. Ask about the filling and request all spicy sauces separately.

SAY IT

¿El relleno lleva chile? La salsa aparte, por favor.

Does the filling contain chile? Sauce on the side, please.

Tostadas

Crisp tortillas with toppings

CDMX • seafood versions on the coast



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Flat, crunchy corn tortillas topped with beans, chicken, seafood or other ingredients, plus vegetables and sometimes crema and cheese. A tostada is the base and also the name of the finished dish.

HOW TO EAT IT

Lift carefully and take small bites over the plate. They crack easily; use a fork to collect fallen toppings. Do not try to fold the crunchy tortilla.

TOPPING DEPENDENT

Plain chicken and beans can be mild; tinga contains chipotle and seafood toppings may contain chopped chile. Ask about the mixture as well as the salsa added on top.

SAY IT

Una tostada de pollo sin chile ni salsa.

A chicken tostada without chile or salsa.

Sopes

Thick corn bases with pinched rims

Especially CDMX



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Small, thick masa rounds with raised edges, topped with beans, meat, lettuce, cheese, crema and salsa. Similar snacks vary by region; gorditas are thicker pockets that are split and stuffed.

HOW TO EAT IT

Pick up a small, firm sope with your hands. Use a fork and knife if it is large, very soft or heavily topped. Keep it level so the toppings stay put.

USUALLY OPTIONAL HEAT

The masa itself is mild. Salsa, chorizo or a chile-based stew may add heat. Plain beans, cheese or unspiced chicken are easier choices, but confirm the beans and filling.

SAY IT

Con frijoles y queso, sin salsa ni chile.

With beans and cheese, without salsa or chile.

Birria

Slow-cooked meat in a rich broth

Taquerías and restaurants along the route



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

A chile-seasoned meat dish associated with Jalisco, traditionally often goat, with beef now common. Served as a stew or in tacos. Quesabirria adds cheese; tacos may come with broth for dipping.

HOW TO EAT IT

For the stew, use a spoon and make little meat tacos with the tortillas. Dip birria tacos into the broth, then bite over the bowl; they can drip.

CHILE IS BUILT IN

The marinade or broth normally contains dried chiles. It may be mild or quite hot, but asking for no table salsa cannot make the cooked meat chile-free. Ask to taste the broth.

SAY IT

¿Qué tan picante está la birria?

How spicy is the birria?

Chiles rellenos

Stuffed peppers

Restaurants in all three stops



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Usually roasted poblano chiles stuffed with cheese or meat, often coated in airy egg batter and served with tomato sauce. The pepper is part of the dish, not merely a garnish.

HOW TO EAT IT

Use a fork and knife. Cut across the pepper to get filling and pepper together. Leave the stem; any remaining seeds can be set aside.

PEPPER HEAT IS INHERENT

Poblanos are often mild but can surprise you. Removing seeds does not guarantee no heat. Ask whether the tomato sauce contains additional chile. Choose another dish if you want reliably no chile.

SAY IT

¿El poblano y la salsa pican?

Are the poblano and the sauce spicy?

Churros

Crisp fried dough with sugar

Especially CDMX • cafés elsewhere



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Ridged lengths of fried dough, usually rolled in sugar or cinnamon sugar. They may be plain, filled with caramel or chocolate, or served with a dipping drink or sauce.

HOW TO EAT IT

Eat with your fingers, holding a napkin. Dip a bite-sized end into chocolate if provided. Fresh churros and fillings can be very hot inside.

NORMALLY NOT SPICY

Standard churros contain no chile. Cinnamon is aromatic rather than chile-hot. Only unusual chile-chocolate toppings need a heat check.

SAY IT

Churros sencillos con azúcar y canela.

Plain churros with sugar and cinnamon.

Tlayudas

Oaxaca's large, crisp tortilla dish

A priority in Oaxaca City • also the coast



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

A large toasted corn tortilla with black beans, often asiento (rendered pork fat), cabbage or lettuce, quesillo and meat. It may arrive open or folded. Tasajo is thin salted beef; cecina enchilada is chile-marinated pork.

HOW TO EAT IT

Share a large one. Break or cut an open tlayuda into manageable pieces; hold a folded one with both hands. Use cutlery for meat served alongside and build bites as you go.

OFTEN MILD IF CUSTOMIZED

Ask for no salsa and choose plain tasajo or cheese after checking seasoning. Chorizo and cecina enchilada have chile already. Beans may also be seasoned with chile.

SAY IT

Con quesillo, sin salsa; ¿los frijoles llevan chile?

With quesillo, no salsa; do the beans contain chile?

Memelas

Small griddled masa cakes

A priority in Oaxaca City • breakfast



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Thick oval corn cakes, usually griddled and spread with asiento, beans, salsa and crumbled cheese. Additional meat or eggs may be offered. They are smaller and thicker than tlayudas.

HOW TO EAT IT

Eat by hand if firm enough; use a fork if heavily topped. Take small bites while warm. Two or three can make a light breakfast, depending on their size.

USUALLY OPTIONAL HEAT

Request no salsa before the cook assembles them. Ask whether the bean spread contains chile. Beans and cheese without salsa are usually a useful mild option.

SAY IT

Memelas de frijol con queso, sin salsa ni chile.

Bean memelas with cheese, without salsa or chile.

Ceviche

Citrus-marinated fish or seafood

Puerto Escondido



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Fish or seafood mixed with citrus, onion, cilantro and often tomato or cucumber. Chile may be chopped into the mixture. Fish ceviche is generally not heat-cooked; shrimp preparations vary.

HOW TO EAT IT

Eat with a spoon or fork, or spoon a little onto a tostada. Add toppings sparingly so the crisp base does not collapse. Ask what seafood is included.

OFTEN MIXED WITH CHILE

Request no chile before preparation; a premixed bowl cannot be reliably de-spiced. Aguachile is a related dish with chile central to its dressing and is usually a poor no-heat choice.

SAY IT

¿Lo pueden preparar sin chile, desde el principio?

Can you prepare it without chile from the start?

Pescado a la talla

Butterflied, grilled fish

Puerto Escondido • coastal restaurants



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

A whole fish opened flat, coated with an adobo and grilled. The seasoning often includes dried red chiles. It may be sold by weight and is frequently large enough to share.

HOW TO EAT IT

Use a fork and knife to lift flesh off the bones; check each bite for small bones. Skin can be eaten if you enjoy it. Ask the price, weight and portion size before ordering.

ADOBO OFTEN CONTAINS CHILE

Heat varies, but chile is usually in the coating before grilling. For a simpler mild alternative, ask for *pescado a la plancha, sin chile ni adobo*, and confirm how it will be seasoned.

SAY IT

Pescado a la plancha, sin chile ni adobo.

Griddle-cooked fish, without chile or adobo.

Enfrijoladas

Tortillas in smooth bean sauce

Especially Oaxaca City



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Soft tortillas dipped in or covered with a blended bean sauce, sometimes filled with cheese or chicken and topped with cheese, onion and crema. Oaxaca commonly uses black beans.

HOW TO EAT IT

Use a fork and knife, cutting through the soft tortillas. Take a little sauce with each bite. They may be served for breakfast or as a light meal.

OFTEN MILD, BUT CHECK

Beans are naturally mild, but cooks may blend chile into the sauce or add spicy sausage. Ask specifically about the bean sauce; removing a salsa garnish is not enough.

SAY IT

¿La salsa de frijol lleva chile?

Does the bean sauce contain chile?

Chapulines

Toasted, seasoned grasshoppers

Oaxaca City • markets and snacks



ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE

WHAT IT IS

Edible grasshoppers, toasted and seasoned, often with garlic, salt, lime and chile. They can be eaten as a snack or sprinkled over guacamole, tacos or tlayudas. Sizes range from tiny to quite large.

HOW TO EAT IT

Start with a small pinch or a few on a tortilla. They are eaten whole, although larger legs can feel scratchy. A small tasting portion is enough to discover whether you like the crunch.

SEASONING OFTEN HAS CHILE

They are not inherently chile-hot, but market batches are usually already seasoned. Ask for a sample and a batch without chile; heat cannot be removed from a prepared batch.

SAY IT

¿Tiene chapulines sin chile?

Do you have grasshoppers without chile?

Ask before the first bite

THE MOST USEFUL QUESTION

¿Lleva chile o sólo se le agrega salsa?

Does it contain chile, or is salsa only added afterward?

TO REQUEST NO HEAT

Sin chile y sin salsa picante, por favor.

Without chile and without hot sauce, please.

KEEP CONTROL AT THE TABLE

La salsa aparte, por favor.

Sauce on the side, please.

CHECK A PREPARED DISH

¿Ya lleva chile? No quiero nada picante.

Does it already contain chile? I do not want anything spicy.

TASTE FIRST

¿Puedo probar un poquito de la salsa?

May I taste a little of the sauce?

THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER

Red, green and dark brown do not reliably predict heat. “Poco picante” means a little spicy, not no spice. “Sin salsa” only removes sauce that has not already been mixed in.

EASIER MILD STARTING POINTS

Plain cheese quesadillas, corn without chile, sweet tamales, and fish grilled without adobo are useful starting points. Always check the filling and seasonings. A dish can contain chile yet taste mild; chile-free and mild are different requests.

A guide, not a fixed recipe

Preparations differ between regions, vendors and cooks. Heat assessments describe common versions; the person preparing your meal is the best source for the actual batch. Eating instructions are practical suggestions rather than strict etiquette rules.

Food descriptions and regional context were checked against the sources below in September 2026. The popularity order and route priorities are editorial judgements. Links are clickable.

Mexican government: internationally recognised dishes

Popularity context: tacos, mole, pozole and tortilla dishes.

Visit México: Mexican gastronomy

General background: tacos, enchiladas, pozole and tamales.

Oaxaca Tourism: La Noria Market

Local availability of Oaxacan dishes and market classics.

CONACULTA: Oaxaca regional dishes

Regional mole, tasajo, tlayuda, tamal and chapulín context.

Lonely Planet: what to eat in Oaxaca

Oaxacan specialities and regional variations.

Eater: a street food guide to Oaxaca City

Tlayuda ingredients and street-food context.

Ingredients & heat

México in My Kitchen: red pozole

Chile in the broth; red, white and green versions.

Mexican Food Journal: red enchilada sauce

Dried chiles form the sauce base.

México in My Kitchen: corn dough quesadillas

Masa, cheese and preparation variations.

México in My Kitchen: enfrijoladas

Bean sauce can contain árbol or chipotle chile.

México in My Kitchen: chile relleno

Poblano peppers, cheese and preparation.

México in My Kitchen: Mexican ceviche

Citrus, seafood, vegetables and serrano chile.

Rick Bayless: fish a la talla

Butterflied grilled fish and adobo.

México in My Kitchen: esquites

Chile can be cooked into the corn, not only sprinkled on top.

The World: CDMX quesadillas

Why to specify con queso when ordering in Mexico City.

ILLUSTRATION NOTE

Original AI-generated watercolor-style illustrations made for this guide. They depict representative dishes, not verified restaurant servings; toppings and portion sizes may differ.