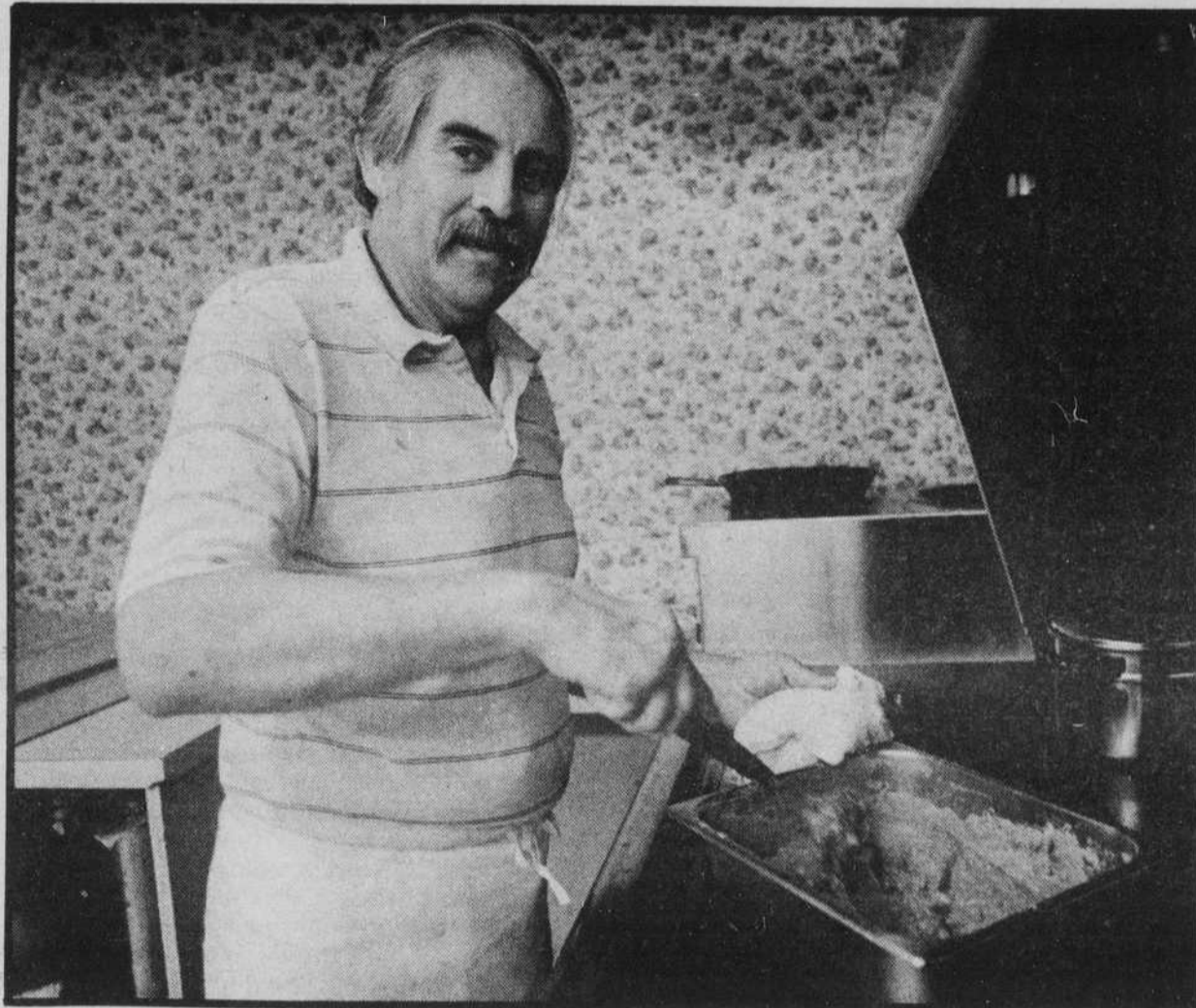


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Full of Beans: Eating Mexican in Eugene

If hot chiles are the naked nerve endings of Mexican cooking, the janglings of the tropical sun, and corn is the hearty backbone of this earthy cuisine, then beans are its supple flesh, the embodiment of a lush humid land. Beans — and rice; beans — and tortillas. Always beans. They are the protein base for the many of the world's peoples, Mexicans included.

Conquistadore Bernal Diaz recounts in his eyewitness *Conquest of New Spain* his astonishment at how lavishly Montezuma dined. "He had such a variety of dishes, made of so many different ingredients," Diaz writes. "Every day they cooked fowls, turkey, pheasants, local partridges, quail, tame and wild duck, venison, wild boar, marsh birds, pigeons, hares and rabbits, also many other kinds of birds and beasts native to their country, so numerous that I cannot quickly name them all."

Down below Montezuma's palace in the market place, Aztec women prepared bean dishes, which the invading Spaniards had learned to survive on as well. One senses that Diaz finds a virtue in this difference. Montezuma, however grand, is an effete king; the vigorous people, the conquistadores, are full of beans.

Beans are a key nutritional building block, but as all of us weaned on *Diet for a Small Planet* know, the protein structure of most beans is incomplete. Some of the eight amino acids that the body needs but cannot synthesize never made it up the bean pole either. Kidney beans, for example, are missing methionine.

However, not to worry. Just eat your beans with rice, please, and you get snow white methionine and other seven formerly dwarfed amino acids, too.

I got to thinking about such things

as I went out eating Mexican food in Eugene. A quick nose count tells me that there are more places in the area serving "Mexican" food of various kinds — Tex Mex, fastfood Califoregon Mex, even "authentic" Mexican — than any other style of cooking. The reasons for this aren't too hard to find, I think.

From an owner's point of view the food is relatively easy to prepare, relatively inexpensive to keep in inventory, and the gringos love it. I went to quite a few places and could give you a dissertation on funky Bandito decor or on the occupational hazards of hot sauces, but I'll skip the detail. The most interesting thing about these half-dozen places was the variation in their beans.

I kid you not. A tortilla is a tortilla, and a cheese enchilada is often not much more. But a bean burrito, or huevos rancheros, or spicy refried beans with cinnamon or what's that burning sensation in my mouth?, now that's where the "cognoscenti" get to exercise their powers of discrimination. Harumph.

Some crude distinctions first. Generally the beans one eats refried are pinto beans, medium-sized, probably not too far different tasting from high-quality cardboard in their natural state. There are, however, differences. Two of our restaurants appear to use lard, the others use vegetable oil for frying the beans. And one particular cafe uses not medium size pinto beans, but instead the more intensely flavored tiny red bean.

Of **Nacho's** (1190 City View) we will not say much, out of deference to good taste. The beans are turned into a gelatinous mass by the addition of rather too much lard and the application of brown colored gravy which ringed the dinner plate like a

moat. Narrowly saved from drowning was a chicken enchilada that had long before spent the days of its youth and a chile relleno that easily won this week's authenticity with a vengeance prize. The chile was indeed a fresh chile, with stem to prove it, but why the hot seeds had not been removed from the pepper's insides, my insides wondered until the morning after.

El Sombrero (146 E. 11th) offered a somewhat less stimulating experience. I've had better meals here not too long ago, but this time my old favorite, the La Favorita combination dinner, was not a big hit. The beans, however, certainly did call attention to themselves by the addition of enough cumin to pucker my eyelids. Otherwise the food was again overwhelmed by a ubiquitous sauce and "underwhelmed" by re-heated preparations. The consistency of the beans would suggest that they may have also been larded, for those of you keeping track of such things.

The good news is that you can still get a dependable, reasonably-priced dinner at **Casa Tol-tec** (389 W. 6th). Beginning with the hot tortilla chips that are brought to your table as you order, the food here is cooked fresh and tastes it. Now, unless you're a particular connoisseur of contemporary Mexican day-glow art, the freshness of the food may be the most memorable thing about dining at **Casa Tol-tec**. Mexican beer is available too, at reasonable prices.

But let's talk about the King of Beans. To my taste, the best-prepared Mexican-style bean dishes in town can be found at the eclectic **Keystone Cafe** (395 W. 5th). My particular favorite is the huevos rancheros breakfast, which delivers two corn tortillas, topped by little red beans, covered by two fried eggs and dressed in the sweetest most

zestiest sauce your po' Saturday mornin' head ever imagined, all for \$3.50. Apart from being made with vegetable oil and sour cream, the secret of the beans is the spicing — onion, garlic, salsa piccante and cayenne. Don't tell a soul.

Luminaries is another new place over The Gut, where The Italian Place used to be (2710 Willamette Street). There was only time for a bean tostada before deadline, but suffice it to say that while the restaurant has quite a name to live up to, it's moving in the right direction. The bean tostada was constructed nicely from a solid foundation of warm and tasty pintos, layered with chopped lettuce and tomato and crowned with a dollop of guacamole.

If you're cruising farther afield, let us recommend **Papagayo's** in Corvallis (550 N.W. Harrison, near the center of town). Papagayo's certainly has the most varied and interesting menu of any Mexican restaurant I've seen recently. So good were my Enchiladas de Jaiba (dungeness crab enchilada topped with two cheeses and sauce) that I almost forgot to notice the beans. They were peppery and solid, the earthy anchor to this Mexican seafood fantasy.

After all this talk of beans let us end with a little poem, by way of a gentle reminder. "Beans, beans, the musical fruit; the more you eat, the more you t-t." Perhaps you recall the ditty from your summer camp days; in any case, it distills an important warning. Watch out for the sneaky trisaccharides, the indigestible escape artists of the bean's complex carbohydrate make-up. They'll get you when you're not looking. Remember Montezuma.

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