

Las Botanas y Antojitos Mexicanos

“La botana” is a Mexican word equivalent to el bocadillo, el pasa palo from Venezuela, or Spanish tapas. They are certainly a tradition from Spanish colonial times that were mixed with Indian meals and local ingredients. The botanas in Mexico are a daily culinary tradition.

Before eating the regular meal, in Mexico it is customary to enjoy delicious botanas, in order to whet the appetite. Almost any excuse will do for everyone, from politicians to co-workers, classmates, close friends or family. What is most important is the opportunity to socialize, comment on current politics, economics, society and family. The hour of botanas is a friendly opportunity to break the routine with antojitos, another name for these snacks.

Botanas are the ideal companion for beer or a mid-day drink with the understanding that spicier and saltier is better to encourage thirst, to keep the drinks flowing and to quench the fire in the mouth and throat. This fact the bartenders knew well as there were few botanas that were not picante or salty.

The almuerzo hour, or mid-day snack, is also a chance to eat botanas or antojitos, such as fresh fruit, tacos, tortas and beverages from the street vendors. Spicy botanas are a solution and a cure for hangovers.

When family or friends get together, we spend at least an hour enjoying a variety of delicious botanas, beginning always with fresh ingredients, various fruits and vegetables such as cucumber, jicama, orange, pineapple, tunas (cactus fruit), camote del cerro, always prepared with lime, salt and chile, sometimes also using onion and spicy serrano chile.

The different climates in Mexico are a factor that has favored this custom, they are a relief from climate conditions and a pause from long journeys—joining with agua frescas from seasonal fruit or regional specialties such as pulque, tepache, tejuino, cerveza or tequila.

Antojitos are foods of the street, the foods of the marketplace and a centuries old tradition.

Antojitos are usually based on maíz flour and deep fry, while botanas in general are based on fresh products, though these differences, they share a common feature and that is the visual attraction of their presentation in order to attract the view and weaken up the appetite.

Where antojitos are eaten, close by are giant jars of aguas frescas, cooling beverages of blended fruit pulp. Vivid green from tart limes, pink and orange from sweet melons, they sit in colorful rows ready to quench the heat of a plate of tacos and salsa.

From time immemorial, botanas and antojitos have been one of the main attractions of, first the pulquerias and later the cantinas and bars. In the past according to Manuel Payno in a novela *Los Bandidos de Rio Frio* (The bandits of Cold River), he talks about the spicy gorditas and quesadillas that were available to the customers in the pulquerias. Today these pulquerias have almost disappeared in Mexico.

Even in the 1960's the neighborhood cantinas were places that denied entrance to dogs, women, beggars and people in uniform (in that order). These cantinas competed against each other with their botanas to attract customers, and they didn't skimp on costs, so that some cantinas during happy hour served up to 18 different dishes among which there wouldn't fail to be a shrimp soup, steak tartare, quesadillas, fried mojarritas with salsa verde, smoked pork chops, and mariscos. There were cantineros that one day a week would serve dishes as complex and costly as pork leg with prunes, bacalao a la vizcaina, goat, pozole or fish fillets.

This proliferation of succulent food did not appear to be financially logical and without a doubt if a financial analyst had studied the business, he would have had a heart attack, since it was unexplainable how, for the price of 3 or 4 drinks, someone could receive a complete meal. In hindsight, this was the factor that caused one cantina after another to close their doors and be replaced by restaurant-bars or centros botaneros that had been planned as businesses to make money and not for the convenience and pleasure of the neighborhood customers as were the cantinas.

In modern areas the neighborhood cantinas have little by little been replaced by restaurant-bars, botaneros and others that try to fill the same role, but they don't have the same ambiance as a cantina, with their peculiar smells of cigarettes mingled with dirt and cleaning solutions, the sound in the background of an out of tune piano, an accordion, or a jukebox that gave atmosphere to the mid-day gathering, sometimes stretching into the afternoon and evening.

Recently on the internet, I read a survey about the main botaneros centers, by region, state or town, in which people had to write their three favorites in order to create a guide of the most famous cantinas and botaneros. The guide would include locations and directions, the typical drinks and customs of the establishments.

El Parián in San Pedro Tlaquepaque or Los Portales in Comala near Colima are one of those places that perhaps some of you already know, that has maintained the custom where, for the cost of a drink or two, you get multiple botanas.

In Nayarit state, the botaneros exist with the same style of operation but specially with seafood dishes, that were originated in la Isla de Mexcaltitán, an ancient precolonial settlement, that is regionally famous for its cooking recipes, ex; pescado zarandeado , ceviches and aguachile.

In general we can say, that the botanas along both coasts of México, are mainly based on sea products or based in agricultural products on the high plates of central México, giving them special character and flavours depending on local traditions and ingredients, therefore mariscos and fish recipes have marked differences in Sinaloa or Veracruz, Oaxaca or Tamaulipas, and tacos or sopes have differences in Durango, Tlaxcala, Puebla or Coahuila, resulting on a vast variety and richness of Mexican botanas.

In the last decade in Mexico, as in the world, there has been a renaissance in cooking and gastronomy. Young people and chefs have revolutionized the diet of different parts of the world. This has resulted in a style generically known as “fusion”.

Its spread has been magnified by modern communication which has exposed fusion cuisine to a larger audience and at the same time enhanced it. We see this, in the increasing sophistication which has affected the regional styles of cooking, and of course, the botana has been influenced as well. An example of this is the introduction of exotic elements and ingredients to the mariscos on the Pacific coast, in these we find oriental spices like ginger, curry and Thai chiles, or conversely local ingredients added to foreign dishes such as sushi which is becoming increasingly tropicalized, with avocado, chile verde and so on.

It is surprising to see how the tradition of eating snacks, tapas or botanas is becoming fashionable and today you can find restaurants or bars that specialize on them in London, Paris or New York.

Mexican botanas are natural flavored, colorful and fresh. They always are based on seasonal produce. Once you taste one, you will want to continue tasting more delicious recipes. If you plan to have a party, Mexican botanas can be a good choice.

The following are my favorite botanas. I’m sure on the internet you can find lots of different ways of preparing them, and they are:

Jalisco’s pico de gallo

Melted cheese with mushrooms, chile poblano strips, chorizo, etc.

Guacamole with pomegranate in season

Baked panela cheese with oregano

Cilantro mousse

Requesón with tomatillos and chipotle chile

Fish or shrimp ceviche