

Maize

a Staple of the *Americas*



Holidays like Cinco de Mayo whet the appetite for flavors south of the border. Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisines are typically known for bold and blood-pumping ingredients. And while other cultures may use rice, potatoes or pasta as the base for meal making, Mexican cuisine is based in corn, or maize, and features a wide range of corn products (tamales, tortillas, tacos).

Maize is native to the Americas. It is a cereal grain that has been part of American culture for centuries. Maize varieties were grown throughout the pre-Columbian Americas, domesticated in Mesoamerica and eventually spread to the rest of the world after European contact with the Americas in the late 15th century and early 16th century.

Some of the oldest examples of maize, including a primitive type of pod-popcorn, were found in the Bat Caves of west central New Mexico and in the Tehuacan Valley of central

Mexico. Pods at various sites were found to be some 4,000 to 7,000 years old.

In South America people valued their popcorn enough to be buried with it. Bowls or bags filled with popcorn were often found in burial grounds of ancient people of the coastal deserts of North Chile. The kernels were so well preserved they still popped even though they were 1,000 years old. Talk about shelf life!

Apart from food, sixteenth century Aztec Indians used popcorn as decoration for ceremonial headdresses, necklaces and ornamentation. Young women danced a “popcorn dance” and wore garlands of popcorn in their hair.

If you’re looking for an indigenous taste of the old, *old* “South” try this recipe for Chili Lime Popcorn. Popcorn pays homage to its birthplace with this simple recipe that combines a splash of lime juice with a dash of chili powder for a snack that shouts Viva Mexico!

Chili Lime Popcorn

1 quart popped popcorn
 1 teaspoon brewer’s yeast powder
 (or nutritional yeast; available in health food stores)
 1 teaspoon lime juice
 1/2 teaspoon chili powder
 1/4 teaspoon salt

Preheat oven to 300° F. Spread popcorn on a baking sheet. Sprinkle yeast powder, lime juice, chili powder and salt over popcorn. Heat about 7 minutes and toss just before serving. Serve warm.

Makes: 1 quart

