

Foodorama

Letter # 15: Mexico Chinampas

By Foodorama, February 04, 2019



Hi everyone !!!! We are writing to you from Mexico City, the capital of Mexico. We arrived in this huge city (9 million inhabitants) a week ago, to film our second subject in Mexico: the Chinampas! We took the opportunity to make a small presentation of our project in the French Institute Alliance to Mexican students who learn French.



Chinampa is an agricultural technique used by the Aztecs (pre-Hispanic people), which provided more than half of the food that was needed in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the time, which later became Mexico. In France too, the capital had a different name before Paris: do you know which one? The major challenge of the Aztecs was to cultivate on a huge lake to feed the entire town of Tenochtitlan. They had to build artificial islands in network to create arable surface.



Channels were first dug to facilitate the flow of water. This nutrient-rich mud was then disposed of on the island, maintained by a network of cane branches and foliage. Seedlings (do you know what the seedlings are?) were then made in a mixture of mud and foliage, which were finally deposited on the island. Trees were also planted to limit the erosion of the island by water. The result is a mesh of small rectangular islands where you can move from island to island by boat. An exceptional place and a great beauty! The main crops were maize and beans, but potatoes, avocados, tomatoes, guavas, amaranths, peppers, and flowers were also grown, which were used extensively in ceremonies. Of course at the time, everything was grown in "organic", chemical fertilizers and pesticides did not exist.



The decline of the chinampas occurred during the arrival, in the sixteenth century, of Spanish conquistadors who brought new farming techniques and domesticated animals, then unknown to Aztecs such as horse and beef. They facilitated the transportation and trade of food that no longer needed to be produced locally. They then dried up the lake to build the city of Mexico. Today this type of culture has practically disappeared. Some plots have been preserved in Xochimilco in South of Mexico City and are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



In our time, not all farmers in Chinampas in Xochimilco use Aztec methods, and many grow in a conformist and conventional way (monoculture, pesticides and fertilizers). We had the chance to meet 2 farmers who mixed old and modern techniques but always organic!



We went to Yolcan's chinampas where we meet Lucio (who speaks perfect French) and who tells us how they rehabilitated old abandoned chinampas. The land of Chinampas is almost black because it is extremely rich in nutrients. It allows up to 4 harvests a year, which is much more than average.



Yolcan delivers baskets of vegetables in the center of Mexico City to individuals (as the AMAP system in France) and also to chic restaurants in the city. We met Joaquin Cardoso, a great Mexican chef who studied cooking in France and who buys from Yolcan. He tells us that chinampas beets have a unique taste, much sweeter than standard beets. We took the opportunity to taste his exceptional dessert of roasted bananas accompanied by an ice cream of cocoa flowers. A delight !



The second person we met is Claudia, one of the few women farmers in Chinampas. She is from Xochimilco, and her grandparents themselves had Chinampas, but her parents did not continue the cultivation of Chinampas. After spending 10 years in southern Mexico in Chiapas, she decides to return and restart an abandoned chinampa. While taking us on a boat on her Chinampa, she tells us the pleasure she has to work in this magical place and why it is important for her to preserve this heritage by cultivating organic good vegetables. We are always admiring the work of farmers. It is a noble and courageous profession that responds to the essential need of everyone to feed on a daily basis.



We'll leave tomorrow Mexico City rested and motivated by these meetings. We can't wait to discover the South of Mexico which everyone praises the beauty (and the heat)! The meter displays 3,100 miles by bike, we are very proud of the road traveled and we realize that it is still the beginning!



See you soon for new adventures! Sylvain and Kalima