

Introduction



The native tribes of Mexico held many beliefs when it came to their food. The Mayans, Aztecs and the other peoples believed that certain food was sacred and were gifts from the gods. These were a representation of the affection that the gods had for them as a people. These foods were revered and were used in many religious aspects of daily life and in special ceremonies. This poster looks at a few of the most important crops in the Mexican culture and the beliefs that were associated with these crops. These myths and stories have been passed down through centuries.



Maize

Maize is a vegetable that was cultivated by the Mesoamerican cultures. It is considered to be one of the most important foods that was introduced to the world. Maize is said to be a gift from the gods that was bestowed on man by Quetzalcoatl. When the vegetable is ripe it is referred to as Chicomecoatl, meaning, "Seven serpents". Maize is the staple of the Mexican diet, and is used to make tortillas, tamales and many other foods.

The Mesoamericans held maize in such reverence that three months of the Mayan calendar were dedicated to worshipping maize. The three months, Tozontontli, Hueytozotzli and Ochpaniztli were sacred and the sacred food was made entirely of maize during these months. Maize is considered to be the divine food of man due to its godly origins. The Mayans were able to grow maize practically at the gates to their city, Tenochtitlan.



Vanilla

The origin of vanilla is tied to a legend that originated with the Totonac kingdom. An incredibly beautiful princess named Tzacopontziza (Morning Star), was born to king Teniztle and his wife. They dedicated her life as a pious offering to the goddess of crops and sustenance because they could not bear the thought of her marrying a mortal. The princess devoted her life to the temple offering food and flowers to the goddess. One day a young prince, Zkatan-Oxya (Young Deer) saw her collecting flowers in the forest and fell under her spell. He became obsessed with her to make her his wife even though he could be beheaded for looking at her.

One beautiful misty morning Zkatan was so overwhelmed that he decided to capture the princess and run away with her. As they ran through the forest they encountered a terrifying monster that spewed fire at them. They were forced to retreat and return to the road where they were met by the priests. Before a word could be uttered Zkatan was beheaded and so was the princess. Their beating hearts were removed from their bodies and offered to the goddess. Then their bodies were discarded into a deep ravine.

A few months later a bush sprang up where the grass had shriveled and dried from their spilt blood. The bush grew with great exuberance and speed, and within a few days it was several feet high with dense foliage. An emerald green vine sprouted from the earth shortly after. The vine intertwined with the trunk and branches of the bush in a delicate and strong manner, resembling an embrace.

Yellow-green orchids covered the vine one morning and as the vine died it produced slender green pods that released a scent more splendid than the finest incense that was offered to the goddess. The priests and the devotees realized that the strong bush and delicate orchid were the transformed blood of the prince and the princess. The orchid, called Xanat or vanilla, which means 'the nectar of the gods' was given birth by the blood of the young princess.



Cacao

The cacao tree only grows in tropical areas, 20 degrees north and south of the equator. The cacao tree was considered to be a gift from the gods by the Mayans. And is referred to in their text as god's food. Their palaces and temples were covered with carvings of the cacao pods. The celebration of the Mayan new year included a ceremony with the Possum god carrying the Rain god on its back with an offering of cacao beans [1,4].

The cacao was exclusively for kings and male elites. Cacao pods were a symbol of life and fertility, and used for sacred occasions and rituals. The dried seeds were used to make a frothy drink that was bitter in taste and was flavored with chili and combined with maize. The frothy drink was used in ceremonies such as worship and marriage [1,4]. The cacao was culturally important and the beans were used as currency. The beans could be used to buy items; a rabbit would cost a mere four beans [1,4].



Summary

The stories of the origin of maize, vanilla and cacao are more than myths. These tales represent life, beliefs and culture. These foods were the cornerstone of civilization and today maize is the backbone for survival for many in Mexico.

These three foods held sacred and religious meanings in the lives of the mesoamerican people and were treated with reverence. They were gifts that the gods graciously bestowed upon them as a people. The ancient people believed that maize provided nourishment for the body. Cacao was considered a special ceremonial drink and vanilla, nectar of the gods, was used as an intoxicating incense for temple rituals.

References

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