

# BOILING WATER . . . and other Oaxacan delights

## NATURAL WONDERS AND DELIGHTFUL CUISINE HIGHLIGHT THE TREK OUTSIDE THE CITY

By **MARIE PERUGCA-RAMIREZ** and **JULIO RAMIREZ**  
*Herald Correspondents*

**D**usting off a rock, we sat down under a shady tree growing beside the turquoise pool at the mountain's edge. Sunlight reflected from the crystals lining the mineral spring as its waters spilled over Herve el Agua to the valley below.

Two miles high in the Sierra Madres, we looked out over the Oaxacan highlands as a hawk slowly wheeled in the distance. Herve el Agua means "the water is boiling;" through the millennia, the overflow from the mineral-rich spring has trickled over the side of the mountain, slowly forming a mineral "waterfall" on its way down — much in the same way stalactites are formed by water dripping from the roofs of limestone caves. On the road approaching the petrified falls, the "water" appears to be boiling over the mountainside.

Herve el Agua has traditionally been a popular weekend getaway for Oaxacans, but at the time we were visiting, it had become the flashpoint of contention between two neighboring villages. The dirt road passing through San Lorenzo Albarradas to the pools and "falls" is owned by that village, but the actual site is owned by the next village, San Isidro Aroaquia. The dispute over who has the right to charge visitors to Herve el Agua had erupted again. The village of San Lorenzo put a chain across the road, manned by four men standing in the hot sun; they charged 10 pesos per person to pass.

After collecting the fee, they

would lower the chain, allowing the travelers to drive a kilometer down the road before being stopped again — this time by a gaping trench dug with a back hoe delineating the end of San Isidro's stretch of the road. To reach the pools, visitors had to leave their cars and continue on foot. Eventually, they would come to a second chain across the road — this one set up by the villagers of San Isidro; here they would be charged 10

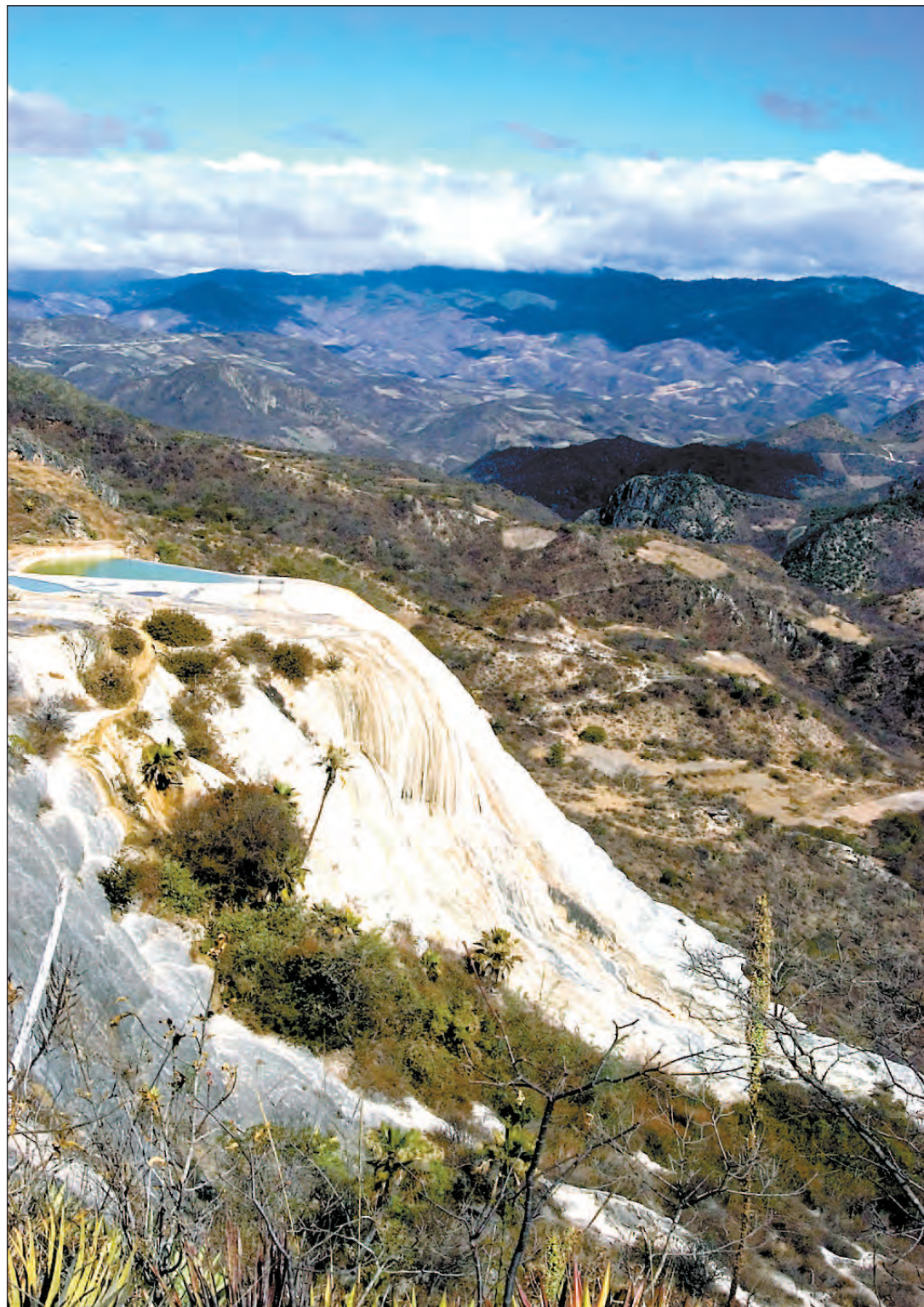
pesos a person to visit the pools which lay another kilometer or so up the mountain road.

Both San Lorenzo and San Isidro are relatively isolated villages — their fortunes lie in the natural wonder that is

Herve el Agua and the visitors it attracts when it is accessible. While we were there, the locals and tourists who used to drive up to picnic and enjoy the pools — and buy handicrafts and refreshments from the villagers — were practically nonexistent. It seemed that the villages would rather fight for the whole pie than share the prosperity that would benefit both. We thought about that stubborn streak that runs through human nature; apparently no one group has the monopoly on shortsightedness.

So here we were with the whole mountaintop to ourselves.

Julio opened his backpack and pulled out the squash blossom quesadillas we'd bought earlier that morning in Santa Maria el Tule. On the road to Herve el Agua, we'd stopped to see what was being called the largest tree in Latin America. It was big — but not the best find in Tule. Near the plaza, a woman in a colorful embroidered apron was patting



**Herve el Agua, the "petrified" falls, was created by mineral-rich spring waters spilling over a mountainside in the Sierra Madres of Oaxaca.**

MARIE PERUGCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

masa into tortillas and roasting them on a charcoal-heated comal. The scent of roasting corn filled the air.

As each tortilla became ready, she would fill it with quesillo, that wonderful Oaxacan string cheese, and a handful of bright yellow squash blossoms, fold it over and continue cooking it until the

cheese melted and the tortilla was toasty.

Julio, who could never resist a tortilla-making woman, was soon making quesadillas with her. His efforts wound up in our backpacks carefully wrapped in paper, along with a side of her smoky ancho chile salsa. Our quesadillas were cold now, but they seemed the

perfect complement to the view spread out before us: a succession of mountains and valleys that create Oaxaca's diverse microclimates and growing zones.

Up here in the highlands, at almost every turn of the road, a

*Please see Oaxaca page 7*

### Food Wranglers Back Roads, Good Food



# Oaxaca

From page 6

small hut will advertise itself as a mezcal distillery. Agaves, or magueys, are grown in almost all of the villages across the state of Oaxaca. The juice of this succulent has been fermented for thousands of years to make the mildly alcoholic pulque; but when Old-World distillation technology was introduced after the conquest, Oaxacans began to produce mezcal.

During the process, 10-year-old agave hearts are fire-roasted in pits (unlike tequila agaves, which are steamed) — giving mezcal its smoky, earthy flavor. Traditionally served in small earthenware cups, with lime wedges and sal de gusanito (a mixture of salt and ground smoked worms), mezcal is an integral part of Oaxacan celebrations and festivities.

Poured in boutiques and restaurants in town and incorporated into recipes by innovative chefs, mezcal is also being marketed abroad, especially in the United States and Asia, now that standards for its production have been established.

In remote areas of the mountains, between 3,000 and 5,000 feet of elevation, farmers grow high-quality coffee under the tropical shade canopy, and many indigenous communities are now producing Fair Trade, organic-certified coffee. Most of these small coffee farms are organic by default — they have no money for pesticides. And many workers, impelled by economic necessity, have emigrated from Oaxaca, consequently affecting the production of this labor-intensive crop.

In the fertile valleys at lower elevations, farmers grow beans, corn, squash, chiles, vegetables and a cornucopia of herbs and tropical fruits — and raise dairy cows for Oaxaca's distinctive cheeses — such as the quesillo in our quesadillas.

Beyond the mountains to the south, the sea laps the coast where the local fishery provides the abundance of fresh shellfish and finfish found in Oaxaca's markets and restaurants; this pristine coast is now being eyed for resort developments.

Packing the remains of our picnic, I discovered a chunk of chocolate I'd bought at Thursday's market in Zaachila. While Oaxacan chocolate is



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

## Julio Ramirez makes squash-blossom quesadillas with a street vendor in Tule.

better served hot in a frothy drink — or in a rich mole — it's still chocolate, a flavor that speaks a universal language.

Oaxacans prize chocolate as an important ingredient in both their sweet and savory cooking. On market days, the seductive aroma of chocolate permeates the air as chocolate mills roast and grind cacao seeds, and women bring in

almonds, cinnamon and sugar — in proportions specific to their own family recipes — to be ground and blended with the cacao.

Walking back to the car, we considered the rugged mountains that have kept Oaxacans relatively isolated until recently, and helped preserve the strong cultural identification that still exists in

its many languages, customs, costumes and cuisine. But passing the two contentious villages, we agreed that, isolated or not, no one seems exempt from the foibles of humanity.

### Sopa de flores de calabasa Squash blossom soup (Serves 4)

This is a really delicious soup — delicate but flavorful at the same time. The perfect soup to celebrate the coming of summer

- 25 squash blossoms (zucchini flowers), available in season at Whole Foods, farmers markets and Latin markets such as Mi Tierra in Seaside and Mi Pueblo in Salinas
- 2 ounces butter
- ½ cup diced onions
- 2 tsp. minced garlic
- 1½ cups diced peeled zucchini (use young squash)

4 cups homemade chicken stock, seasoned to taste with salt (or use a good quality, boxed stock, such as Pacific Organic from Costco)

5 leaves of fresh epazote, a distinctive herb available in Latin markets (or substitute cilantro)

4 ears of corn, cut into ½-inch wheels

1½ tsp. kosher salt (or ¾ tsp. table salt)

Dash freshly ground black pepper

**Steps:** Holding the stem end of the blossom, start at the petal end and slice across the petals towards your hand until you reach halfway. Set the sliced petals aside in a small bowl. Split the remaining section (with the stem attached) in half lengthwise through the stem; set aside in a separate bowl. Repeat until all of the blossoms have been cut.

Melt the butter in an 8-quart pot over medium heat; add the onions and the garlic and cook for 3 minutes, stirring, until they become translucent. Add the zucchini, stir, and cook for another 3 minutes. Add the chicken stock and epazote, bring to simmer and cook for 5 minutes. Add the corn wheels and the stem ends of the squash blooms, and simmer for 5 minutes. Add the sliced

### About the authors

Julio Ramirez and Marie Perucca-Ramirez, creators of the Fishwife Seafood Restaurants and Turtle Bay taquerias on the Peninsula, sold their restaurants to start The Food Wranglers Inc., a restaurant consultant group.

Julio is certified as an executive chef by the American Culinary Federation and in 1999 was inducted into the prestigious American Academy of Chefs. Marie is a writer with a degree in history and sociology and a master's in applied linguistics.

The couple have always enjoyed traveling the back roads of the world; they are interested in seeing what other ethnic groups grow, what they eat, how they prepare their food — what their various cultures “taste like.”

During their travels they have met many remarkable individuals, had a number of unusual experiences, eaten a variety of unfamiliar foods — and collected some great recipes they have adapted for home use.

Once a month they will share their experiences — through words and photos — with Herald readers. Write to them at [marie@foodwranglers.com](mailto:marie@foodwranglers.com).

blossoms; cook for 3 minutes; then add the salt and pepper and season to taste.

Serve hot, garnish if desired with crumbled cotija cheese.

### Squash blossom quesadillas (Makes 8)

Squash blossom quesadillas are easy to make, and they can be served as either an appetizer or as an entrée. The toasted ancho chile dipping sauce (recipe follows) can be made ahead of time. Serve the quesadillas with dipping sauce, guacamole and a tossed green salad, and you've got dinner. Best eaten hot, with the cheese all melting. These quesadillas can even be done on a grill at a picnic as well as on the stove.

They are traditionally made with corn tortillas — they're more flavorful — but you can use flour. Quesillo, Oaxacan string cheese, and cotija, a crumbly cheese, are readily available at Latin markets — but mozzarella and Monterey Jack make fine substitutes.

8 oz. quesillo cheese (Oaxacan string cheese) minced; or mozzarella, shredded

4 oz. cotija cheese, crumbled; or Monterey Jack, shredded



### An innovative Oaxacan restaurant served this coconut flan on a “mirror” of cajeta with mezcal.

Please see Oaxaca page 12

# COASTAL DINING

"Best Ethnic" Herald's 2005 Tasters' Choice Award

Rosa's Family Favorite Food

Passed Down through Generations • Breakfast • Lunch • Dinner

LIVE MUSIC SATURDAY NIGHTS!

Rosa's La Villa Restaurant

Open Daily M-F 10am-9pm • Sat 8am-10pm • Sun 8am-9pm  
766 Broadway, Seaside (Between Alhambra & Calaveras) 899-7710

**Max's** GRILL 209 Forest Avenue  
Pacific Grove, CA 93950  
831.375.7997  
California-French Cuisine  
5PM to 9PM TUESDAY • SUNDAY • WWW.MAXGRILL.COM

YOU KNOW YOU WANT SOME

The Area's Newest Pasta House • Italian Old World Flair  
Serving Brunch Monday-Saturday • 10am-2pm

Ristorante  
Salt & Pepper

42 West Gabilan • Salinas (across from City Hall)



**Bistro 211** Great European Food  
at recession-friendly prices.  
View Live Performance Calendar at  
www.montereyherald.com/coastaldining  
211 Crossroads Blvd., Carmel • 625-3030  
www.Bistro211.com

Lunch 11am to 3pm Daily  
and from 5pm Mon-Sat  
for Dinner

**Golden Tee Restaurant & Cocktail Lounge** FREE Validated Parking  
Located Upstairs in the Monterey Airport Terminal  
BREAKFAST • LUNCH • DINNER  
EVERY DAY 9 AM - 9 PM • RESERVATIONS: (831) 373-1232

**GRILL @ Ryan Ranch**  
Come Join Us for Dinner!  
4:00 to 9:00 PM  
Monday ~ Saturday  
1/2 Price Bottled Wines every Tuesday  
RECEPTIONS & EVENTS SPECIAL OCCASIONS  
www.grillatryanranch.com  
831-647-0390

Visit  
www.montereyherald.com/coastaldining



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

Fresh squash (zucchini) blossoms are used in soups and quesadillas throughout Oaxaca.

## Oaxaca

From page 7

1½ tsp. kosher salt (¾ tsp. table salt)

8, 8-inch tortillas (for the best, get fresh corn tortillas from a tortilleria such as La Morenita on Fremont in Seaside)

24 fresh squash (zucchini) blossoms, rinsed and patted dry  
Olive oil or butter to brush on the tortillas.

**Steps:** Put the queso and cotija cheeses in a medium bowl, add the salt, toss together well to blend; set aside. Note: If using Jack cheese instead of cotija, add a bit more salt.

To make a quesadilla: Heat a griddle or a large frying pan to 350 degrees. Place a tortilla on the heated surface; when it is lightly toasted on one side (about 1 minute), brush the "up" side with a little olive oil or butter and turn it over.

Distribute 1½ oz. of the cheese mixture evenly over the tortilla and place three squash blossoms on one half of the tortilla face. When the cheese starts melting (about 2 minutes) fold the tortilla in half, cook 2 minutes, then turn over; when the cheese starts leaking (about 2 minutes), remove from heat. Cut into wedges; serve immediately.

Note: Some Oaxacans deep-fry their quesadillas — but you would need to use uncooked tortillas in order to seal the ends (like a turnover) before deep-frying.

**Toasted ancho chile sauce**  
(Makes 3 cups)

This lightly smoky tasting sauce really complements the corn and cheese flavors in the squash

blossom quesadillas without overwhelming the delicate squash blossoms. Traditionally poured over the quesadilla, it can also be used as a dipping sauce. Try it with other quesadillas such as cheese or chorizo — or use it to top an omelet or scrambled eggs.

2 oz. ancho chiles (dried chiles sold in cellophane bags in Latin markets)

2 cups boiling water  
1 T. olive oil  
1½ cups diced onion  
2 T. minced garlic  
2 cups diced tomatoes  
1 T. kosher salt (or 1½ tsp. table salt)

½ cup water  
**Steps:** Heat a 10-inch sauté pan over medium-high heat and add the chiles in one layer; toast for five minutes, turn twice while toasting to release the aroma. Set aside to cool. When cool, break off the stem end and discard; discard the seeds.

Put the chiles in a bowl and cover them with boiling water; place something heavy on them (such as two forks or a cup), to keep them submerged.

Put the oil in the sauté pan, heat over medium heat; add the onions and garlic and cook, stirring, until they are translucent, about 3 minutes. Add the tomatoes, stir and cook for 1 minute; remove the pan from the heat and set aside.

Drain the chiles; discard the water. Place the chiles into a blender; add the tomato mixture. Purée at low speed and gradually increase the speed until the mixture is very smooth and getting thick. Add the ½ cup of water, a little at a time, to adjust the consistency. Add the salt and pepper; continue to blend at full speed for 1 minute more.

Store, refrigerated, in covered,

plastic or glass container.

**Chocolate Oaxacan style**  
(Serves 4)

Roasting, grinding and blending chocolate is an art in Oaxaca; it's served at home and at little cafes, at feasts and at weddings, and given as gifts. Chocolate is enjoyed both *con leche* (with milk) or *con agua* (with water). Chocolate made with water is surprisingly rich and refreshing — and has a lot fewer calories.

1 stick (4 inches) fresh cinnamon, broken into pieces  
1 vanilla bean, minced  
20 whole unpeeled almonds  
4 oz. dark semisweet chocolate (Guittard or Ghirardelli), shaved  
1 qt. milk (or 1 qt. water)

**Steps:** Put the cinnamon, vanilla and almonds into a spice mill or coffee grinder; mill until pulverized. Add the chocolate and continue to mill until well mixed — but be careful not to process too long or the blade will heat up and melt the chocolate.

Heat the milk (or water) over medium heat to just below a boil; remove from heat. Add the ground chocolate spice mixture and mix well using a molinillo (a wooden Mexican whisk rubbed between the palms of the hands) or a wire whisk; whisk until the liquid has a nice head of froth (if you are using water, there will be less froth). Serve hot, or refrigerate and serve cold (remember to whisk it again before serving as the spices will settle to the bottom).

Optional: Enjoy your chocolate Aztec style, with a little kick: Grind two dry chile pequins or ½ tsp. cayenne pepper along with the spice mix. (Chocolate con agua with vanilla, spices and chile was Montezuma's royal beverage.)

Another option: Add a shot of Kalhua for an adult dessert drink!