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## Huitlacoche, a real hidden culinary jewel...

In this article, I would like to talk to you about a food that is considered a luxury, a jewel of the Mexican gastronomy, which at first looks like something ugly or even spoiled. Its name is huitlacoche. It is a mushroom that grows by itself in the rainy season and is considered as a disease of the plant, growing on top of the corn. It is soft, spreadable and purely black, and it resembles rocks at first glance. When it is used in the culinary world, it turns into a delicacy without limits that is used in many dishes, such as soups, enchiladas, quesadillas, an array of dishes. It is called the Mexican truffle.

Its name comes from the Nahuatl language, which is spoken by more than a million people in Central Mexico. We know that the main diet of the Mexicans, since pre-Columbian times, was based on corn, and huitlacoche was used very frequently. The meaning of its name is very intriguing and difficult to digest.

The word huitlacoche comes from Cuitlacoche, which comes from two words, “Cuitlatl” meaning excrement and “Cochi” meaning sleep. However, cuitlacoche refers to the characteristic of the mushroom, which grows between the kernels of the corn, which does not allow the kernels to develop and seemingly looking like they were “sleeping.”

Huitlacoche spreads to all the parts of the plant but occurs more frequently in the young tender corn. It spreads through spores blown by wind, rain or contact. In the rest of the world, it is considered to be a plague that attacks the corn that produces kernels.

In the United States, farmers call it “smut” and “devil’s corn,” and they consider it a disease

that must be eradicated. In pre-Columbian times, the people of Mexico, as well as the Hopi Indians of this country, considered it was a real jewel of food. According to the historian Betty Fussel in her book, *The History of Corn*, the Hopi named the corn mushroom Nanha and harvested it when it was young and tender. The Zuni Indians considered it of utmost importance and said that it symbolized the “creation or generation of life.”

I find it intriguing that for some Native-American cultures, such as the Nahuatl in Mexico as well as the Zuni and Hopi, they considered it sacred and a generator of life. These cultures were right because this food has a very high level of nutrition, much higher than the corn without the mushroom. These cultures knew that it was good for the body and the soul, without all of the technology that we now have. I feel, and this is just a reflexion, that the more civilized and removed we are from our origins, the more we forget the importance of those foods, which were so important for our body. At the present time, there exists a resurgence of those foods, which are called “super foods.” For example, we have quinoa in South America, which was the sacred food of the Inca culture. It was rejected by the Spanish until its importance was rediscovered. The same case is that of the amaranth, which is considered as a deity in Mexico. Quinoa has a very high nutritional value, and its protein was equivalent to meat. It was also eradicated and prohibited with the coming of the Spanish

but was able to survive, and its value has been recognized once again.

In Mexico, huitlacoche is cultivated on a voluntary basis because of its enormous culinary value and is 10 times more healthy than corn by weight.

The mushroom is prepared with garlic, epazote and used in cooked dishes, like tacos, quesadillas, soups, etc. When huitlacoche is cooked, the white and gray parts change to a pure black color.

The best way to eat it is fresh, of course, but in the United States you can sometimes find it frozen or more commonly in cans. ♦

### Recipe for huitlacoche filling for quesadilla, crepes, egg omelette

1 lb. of huitlacoche  
2 pieces of crushed garlic  
½ diced onion  
1 tbsp. of corn oil  
2 pieces of fresh or dried epazote (can be found dried in Mexican stores)

Fry the onion and garlic in oil, add the huitlacoche in a can, frozen or fresh, and cook without stirring very much in order not to turn the mixture into a total purée. Add the epazote and season with salt to taste.

You can make quesadillas with or without cheese, or use for filling crepes. You can also use the same preparation to which a little bit of bullion and cream is added and blended to make cream of huitlacoche.

