

FOOD AND CULTURE

In this article, I would like to talk about a spice that is widely used in various Latin American cultures since pre-Colombian times – Achiote, which is utilized as a condiment for color and medicinal purposes. It comes from the seeds of a plant called Bixa Orellana, of which the fruit is dried, and the seeds are ground to form the Achiote paste that is used for cooking.

Achiote has been utilized in different ways, long before the Spanish colonization in America, and it was already being used by many indigenous groups. In the Nahuatl language, it was called “achiote,” and they ground it, then boiled it and then used it to obtain its color – with this color, they painted their faces and bodies. Also, it was used for medicinal purposes, such as a diuretic and for burns, among other things. It was believed that it also had aphrodisiac powers. There is a legend that exists that the fertility gods, Xipe Totec and Xochipilli, were painted in codices and murals with this pigment.

The men of the Tsachilas, an indigenous group in Ecuador, used the fruit and the color of this plant in their hair. According to their history or legend, there was an outbreak of smallpox and yellow fever that began to deeply affect the first inhabitants of the Tsachilas, and either by accident or by the revelation of one of their gods, they discovered that by painting the body with the achiote pigment, it could protect the tribal members against diseases. Since that time, their members began using achiote on their heads, and this element is characteristic of this group.

This plant was considered sacred in pre-Colombian Mexico, and because of its status, it was not to be used for cooking because its red color was related to blood. In spite of that, the Mayans used it with coco to make a frothy drink that was used in their rituals and ceremonies. They also prepared colored dishes and sauces with this condiment.

After America was discovered, achiote was introduced to Europe and Asia by the Spanish and Portuguese. It was utilized to dye leather, materials, silk, bones and dairy products, such as cheeses and butters.

In Mexico, it is most consumed in Tabasco, Quintana Roo and Chiapas, but also it was used in other Latin American countries, such as Bolivia, Colombia and Brazil.

There are many names for Achiote or Annatto – “Achiote,” as already mentioned, by the Nahuatl and “urucul” by the Tupi Guarani group in the region of the Amazon. In the Caribbean, it is called “annatto”; in the Philippines it is called “achieve”; and in Trinidad and Tobago, Martinique and Guadalupe, it is called “raucous.”

The achiote of Yucatan is the most well known throughout the world, and the one that is most eaten in Mexico. This ingredient is very important in preparing cochinita pibil, chorizos and longanizas. The achiote paste gives a smokey flavor to meat, fish and chicken.

When used in small portions as a coloring for foods, it does not have a lot of flavor. By using it in larger portions in order to bring in more flavor, it takes on a gritty flavor, such as pepper, and a bit of acidity. This condiment is always mixed with orange juice and vinegar, which complements these flavors perfectly. 🇲🇽

Fish with Achiote

3 1/2 ounces of achiote paste
2 pieces of garlic
3/4 of chopped onion
1 Tbs. of dried oregano
1 cup of orange juice
Juice of 1 lime
1/2 cup of white vinegar
1/4 tsp. cinnamon
1/2 tsp. of cumin
Pinch of nutmeg
3 lbs. of Tilapia in filet
1/4 of a fresh finely chopped pineapple
1/2 cup of water

Salsa of habaneros and purple onions. Put the achiote, garlic, onion, oregano, orange juice, vinegar, lime juice, cinnamon, cumin, nutmeg and water in the blender. Mix until there is a homogenous paste. Put the fish in a pyrex and cover with this mixture and marinate for 1 hour. Add the chopped pineapple and marinated purple onions before baking. Bake at 375 F for 5 to 30 minutes. Serve with more fresh chopped pineapple and habanero and purple onion salsa.

Habanero and Purple Onion Salsa

1 or 2 finely sliced habanero chiles without the seeds
4 finely sliced purple onions
1/3 cup vinegar
1/3 cup of lime juice
1 cup orange juice
Salt and pepper to taste

Mix all of the ingredients the night before and leave in the refrigerator. Serve at room temperature to bring out the maximum flavor.

