



Nopales (Cactus) with onions

The Symbol of a Nation

During the month of June, we will be celebrating Father's Day. I began to reflect on the word "padre" (father) and how it relates to the word "patria" (homeland), which comes from the same origin in Spanish. "Patria" in Spanish comes from Latin, which means family or clan, the nation of our fathers, the native or adopted land for which the human being feels close to by attachments of different kinds such as cultural, historical or affection. Also, "patria" can be the country where your parents were born, that which one feels attached to without having necessarily been born there. "Patria" is made up of sentiments, history, traditions, roots, ideologies, principles, values and experiences that we have for our country.

In this case, I would like to talk to you about my patria/country, which is Mexico, and its main symbol, which is found in the middle of its flag, an eagle standing on a cactus devouring a snake.

What is the cactus, and why is it so important?

Nopal is a cactus that grows in the center of Mexico in states such as Tlaxcala, Morelos, State of Mexico and the Federal District. The use of nopal had its beginnings in the pre-Hispanic times. Nopal grows very easily in Mexico; it doesn't need a lot of care or water. There are more than 60 varieties, of which 13 are edible. Not only is it used for food, but it also has medicinal qualities. The principal medicinal use for nopales is for diabetes. Raw nopal is blended with water in the blender or eaten raw or cooked for salads. It is said that nopal is also good in helping gastritis or intestinal cramping.

Its fruit is called "tuna" (prickly pear) and has sharp thorns on the outside and a lot of seeds inside. It looks like it is very difficult to eat, but it is really delicious. The nopal is used in juices, candy, salads, different cooked dishes and is also found dehydrated in powder in many natural products in combination with linseed, cereals and fruits.

Nopal is a dish that is very characteristic of Mexico and is difficult to export, which makes it difficult to find fresh. You can find it bottled in salty water, but it does not have the same flavor as if it was cooked fresh.

It is difficult to explain to someone who is not from Mexico how delicious nopal is, that you can eat it boiled in a salad with onion, tomato and cilantro; cooked with onions; in quesadillas; or just cooked and rolled up in a tortilla with salsa. When I tell people that we eat cactus in Mexico, no one can believe it.

At the same time that nopal is a national symbol of Mexico; it is also an emblem of our country and is found in the middle of the Mexican flag, the symbol is an eagle standing over a cactus (nopal) devouring a serpent. In the Nahuatl language, there is a myth in which the goddess Huitzilopochtli convinces her country, the Mexicas (Aztecas) to go to Aztlan to look for a new land to begin their kingdom. They would recognize the perfect place when they would find a special sign: an eagle standing on a nopal devouring a snake. It is said that they travelled for 165 years, and then they observed this sign in Lake Texcoco. In 1325, they founded the city of Mexico Tenochtitlan, which comes from "tetl" (stone) and "nochtli" (tuna/nopal), which when put together means "the place where tunas (prickly pears) grow in the stones."

In all of my research, food is of fundamental cultural importance, and I find it incredible that the origin of the symbol of Mexico has a gastronomical element of such relevance to its people. There isn't a Mexican who has not tasted cactus, and all Mexicans know that it is our country's and homeland's patria symbol. 🇲🇽

Preparation:

Fry the onions in the oil until they begin to soften. Add the nopales, oregano and salt. Cover the frying pan and lower the flame, cook for 20 minutes. The nopales will produce a thick liquid that is somewhat gooey, but this will disappear at the end of the cooking and take on the flavor of the salt and oregano. Serve hot on fresh tortillas, with avocado and salsa.

Ingredients:

1 sliced onion
2 tbs. olive oil
10 fresh nopales, without the thorns, cut in strips (can be found in most Mexican grocery stores)
1 tsp. dried oregano
Salt to taste

Served on:

Fresh tortillas with avocado and salsa of your liking