

Bizcochitos

One of the pleasures at Christmas in New Mexico can be found in the serving of a special holiday cookie called the bizcochito. The word is usually translated as sugar cookie. The New Mexican version, however, bears only scant resemblance to sugar cookies sold in mainstream bakeries or even in *panaderias*, the bakeries of Mexico.

Our traditional bizcochito has its own distinctive taste, determined by ingredients and method of preparation, and it comes in a variety of shapes. It also has an interesting history, which is not fully understood.

As near as I can tell, the bizcochito as we know it evolved in the second half of the 19th century. It probably grew out of the common breadstuffs long prepared in the outdoor ovens, or dome shaped *hornos*. In these, bakers prepared leavened wheat bread (*pan de horno*) and bizcochitos. The latter probably assumed its modern form when granulated sugar and spices were imported over the Santa Fe Trail in quantity and became affordable.

A possible early clue to the origin of our cookies comes from Pedro B. Pino, writing in 1812. In describing the food supplies carried by caravan over the Camino Real, he says: "Over 600 bushels of wheat flour made into toasted bread called bizcochito is included."

Next we jump forward 32 years to a comment made by Missouri merchant Josiah Gregg in 1844. Coming across the plains, he had met New Mexican buffalo hunters who offered to sell his caravan jerky and bags of hard bread much used by Mexican travelers.

Gregg described the bread as leavened rolls, cut open and browned in an oven. "Though very hard and insipid while dry, they become soft and palatable when soaked in water or hot coffee," he said.

Add Gregg added that the rolls were coarse, having been expressly made for barter with the Comanches. In fact, we know that the Indians sometimes broke up this rock-like bread with their steel tomahawks.

We thus have Pino's statement that hard-toasted bread called bizcocho was a standard travel ration and Gregg's reference to hard rolls of inferior quality being dispersed in the Indian trade.

So how could this hard and rather tasteless breadstuff been transformed into today's bizcochito? My guess is that when flavorings like anise, cinnamon and vanilla became available, along with refined sugar, New Mexican cooks, both Hispanic and Indian, improved upon the old basic bizcocho recipe and came up with a tasty little cookie we know as the bizcochito.

The Pueblo people still bake in their *hornos* what is sometimes labeled "Indian cookies." The Tewa north of Santa Fe call this pastry "butsie."

These cookies are cut and pinched in all sorts of exotic shapes and tend to be larger and heavier than familiar Hispanic bizcochito. It might be that the Indian cookie, often resembling a roll, is fairly close to the trade bread that Gregg wrote about in 1844. It's worth noting that this modern cookie, when a month or two old, becomes hard as a stone.

The true bizcochito we enjoy at Christmas and on other festive occasions has become a thin, flaky treat, flavored with anise seed and dusted with sugar and perhaps cinnamon.

Many traditional bizcochito makers will tell you they learned how to bake them from their grandmothers, all of whom seem to have had their individual secret recipes.

Some cooks of old, for instance, added wine or brandy to their dough, claiming that it made a subtle improvement in the cookie. Others contended that for full flavor, a genuine bizcochito had to be baked in an outdoor horno – or at the very least in a wood-burning kitchen stove.

Purists emphatically declare that in mixing and kneading of the dough, no modern mechanical aids should be used. Everything should be done by hand. The belief is that sweat from the hands contributes extra zest to the cookie.

Culinary adventurers will want to try authentic Indian cookies, which can be purchased at many of the Rio Grande pueblos and occasionally from vendors on Albuquerque and Santa Fe plazas. During summer festivals at the Rancho de las Golondrinas Museum in La Cienega, visitors can watch bizcochito baking in old-style *hornos* and eat one while it is still warm.

The New Mexico Legislature in 1989 adopted the bizcochito as the state's official cookie. The aim was to encourage preservation of our New Mexican culinary customs.

By Marc Simmons

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