



DON NICOLÁS' MILL

Ericka Anel Sagastume García

POPULAR TRADITION

2017 No. 221

DON NICOLÁS' MILL

Ericka Anel Sagastume García
Center for Folkloric Studies
University of San Carlos of Guatemala
ericka_anel@hotmail.com

Resumen

Los trapiches y el proceso de la molienda son pequeñas industrias que se instalaron en Guatemala a raíz del proceso de colonización. La introducción de la caña de azúcar se debe, de igual manera, a la invasión de los colonos españoles al territorio mesoamericano. Actualmente el consumo de los productos de la caña se mantienen vigentes en la población guatemalteca, si bien los trapiches se caracterizan por ser poco rentables, han significado una actividad que atrae espectadores y coadyuva a la cultura popular guatemalteca al mantener activo un trabajo que refleja tradición, emplea la mano del artesano y conserva elementos de la gastronomía tradicional.

La Molienda Don Nicolás, es un centro de comercio y subsistencia familiar inmerso en una comunidad que refleja la vida cotidiana del campo, se dedica a la producción de jugo y miel de caña, elaboración de *batidos*, dulce de panela y caramelos conocidos como leche burra, todo lo anterior como resultado final del proceso de la molienda. Este lugar resulta ser un paraje que atrae al turismo local y extranjero empleando elementos de la gastronomía guatemalteca como anzuelo para captar espectadores que serán quienes contribuyan a mantener viva la arraigada tradición del trabajo de los trapiches.

Palabras clave: Trapiche, molienda, panela, gastronomía, tradición, Esquipulas.

Abstract

The mills and milling process are small industries that settled in Guatemala following the process of colonization. The introduction of sugarcane is due, likewise, to the invasion of the colonists to the Mesoamerican territory. Nowadays, the consumption of cane products remains in force in the Guatemalan population, although the mills are characterized by being unprofitable, they have meant an activity that attracts spectators and collaborates with Guatemalan folklore by keeping active a work that reflects tradition. Employs the artisan's hand and preserves elements of traditional gastronomy.

The Don Nicolás milling is a center of commerce and family subsistence, immersed in a community that reflects the daily life of the countryside, is dedicated to the production of cane juice, cane honey, milkshake, panela candy and candies known as *leche burra*, all of the above as a final result of the grinding process. This place proves to be a place that attracts local and foreign tourism using elements of Guatemalan gastronomy as a hook to attract viewers who will be those who contribute to keep alive the entrenched tradition of the work of the mills.

Keywords: Trapiche, grinding, panela, gastronomy, tradition, Esquipulas.

Introduction

Traditional popular culture is constituted by those manifestations that develop in the heart of the people of a determined place, which has its own characteristics and expresses the conception of the world and life of these social groups, sheltering in them the most outstanding and fundamental elements of their culture; as well as establishing the general lines of their identity.

Milling is an artisanal process that dates back to colonial times. The Spaniards, both private and religious, introduced the first sugar mills to the territory, installing them on their plantations to process sugarcane. It is a deep-rooted tradition that endures in both the northeastern and eastern parts of Guatemala and has been part of a tourist and gastronomic attraction that enriches Guatemalan culture.

Don Nicolás' Mill is an admirable spot located in the village of La Cumbre, in the municipality of Esquipulas, in the department of Chiquimula. Every Sunday of the year a mill is held and gastronomic products derived from it are also manufactured, which has served as a hook for tourists to visit the place and enjoy the facilities and other services offered.

The main objective of this research was to observe and recognize the different gastronomic products derived from a milling process that still uses the traditional artisanal method. For this purpose, the qualitative research method was used, particularly the techniques of participant and non-participant observation, structured interview and bibliographic reviews, which after systematization and analysis, made it possible to structure this article that highlights part of the Guatemalan traditions and popular culture.

Sweeteners in Mesoamerica and the colonial era

The presence of the sweet was already present before the arrival of the Spaniards. Wild honey was the main pre-Hispanic sweetening source, and among them, honey from *doncellitas* is considered the primary one (Villar Anleu, 2012, p. 274). Even the mythical and historical Maya K'iche' book, the *Popol Wuj*, mentions the abundance of honey when Tepew and Q'ukumatz (the creator and the shaper) "arrived in that excellent country... in that town of Pan Paxil, of Pan K'ayala" (Sam Colop, 2012, p. 112 and 113).

Likewise, *La Recordación Florida* references the existence of "bees, the diversity of species, and the production of different qualities of honey" (De Fuentes y Guzmán, 2013, p. 433). Therefore, there is no doubt that the taste for the sweet flavors of honey collected from the hives by primitive man led to the acceptance of other sources equally pleasing to the palate, such as sugarcane products and honeys by the conquerors.

Since ancient times, sugarcane has spread from Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean, where it arrived thanks to Arab expansion in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. The Crusaders encountered sugar plantations in the Middle East and brought and introduced sugar to the European courts. The Portuguese and Spaniards found that the plant acclimated easily in the Atlantic islands, where they used African slave labor for its cultivation and work, thus setting a significant precedent for the colonization of the New World (Wagner, 2005 p. 1). In 1524, the Spaniards arrived in Mesoamerican territory and invaded it militarily. They carried their food supplies, which allowed them to subsist during the voyage. They had what they needed to satisfy their appetite and put the European culinary tradition into practice. The eating habits of the Europeans were established in the New World as an imposition, which allowed them to satisfy their tastes and with the unavoidable

combination of native ingredients, culminated in a fusion. However, the clash of cultures did not erase the pre-Hispanic cuisine but also consolidated the European cuisine as it was practiced in the Peninsula. First the Creoles and then the mestizos produced hybrid cuisine, a mixture of ancestral Mayan and Hispano-Arabic origins (Villar Anleu, 2012, p. 24 and 25).

Spain had just emerged from the Moorish occupation, which began in 711 and culminated in 1492. About eight centuries of Arab presence in the Iberian Peninsula influenced the cuisine. Some customs and foods were brought to Mesoamerica with the invasion, among them sugarcane, which exemplifies the Moorish contribution to Peninsular cuisine and, later, to Guatemalan cuisine.

Indigenous honeys were relegated to a lower category when the conquerors took control of Mesoamerican territory. However, it did not cease to be consumed by the same Iberians who enjoyed it, as well as other products native to the region. White honey has been one of the pre-Hispanic ingredients that is still preserved today.

Four years after the beginning of the colonial era, the Kingdom of Guatemala was surrounded by cornfields that belonged to Spanish settlers. The plots were ceded for the cultivation of sugar cane and wheat. At the same time, the first sugar mills and mills appeared, giving rise to the incorporation of sugar and panel-a (Villar Anleu, 2012, p. 8).

Sugarcane has been grown in Guatemala since the 16th century, but in a modest way, since it was an agro-industry that required sufficient capital to install sugarcane mills and obtain slave labor. Another problem was the difficulty of transportation to the ports and the lack of adequate port facilities, which meant that sugar and cinnamon were only products for domestic consumption during the colonial period (Wagner, 2005, p. 31).

Sugar mills in Guatemala, the specific case of Chiquimula

It is important to mention the difference between the term "*trapiche*" and "*ingenio*"; according to Molina Calderón in his interview with the company Luis González Bauer, the term "*ingenio*" refers to the set of machinery used in the processing of sugar cane and the manufacture of sugar, "because the men worked on it, trying to find out how to improve techniques to produce sugar. The term "*ingenio*" refers to the set of machinery used in the processing of sugar cane and the manufacture of sugar, "because the men worked on it, investigating how to improve the techniques to produce sugar". The first method consisted of grinding the cane with stones to extract the juice, then it was done with stronger pieces of iron, then the sugar mill was formed, which was turned by the action of men or oxen, until finally the water wheel was invented to move the sugar mills (2005, p. 31). However, Regina Wagner mentions that the term "*trapiche*" was understood to mean a small amount of sugar cane that was ground using animal traction. On the other hand, an industrial mill was one that had large milling facilities, made use of hydraulic power and produced a larger quantity of refined sugar (2005, p. 33). Similar to Wagner's description, Beatriz Scharrer Tamm in her work "*Azúcar y trabajo: tecnología de los siglos XVII y XVIII en el actual estado de Morelos*", the word *tra- piche* has two meanings. On one hand, it refers to the rustic establishment where sugarcane is milled, and on the other, to the milling machinery of the sugar mill. Small production units have the sugar mill as the main and only machine, the type of motive power used is animal traction. The sugar mill as a domestic rural unit coexisted with the mills, since the production goals were different. The sugar mill produced *panela* for the lower classes, while the industrial mill, where *panela* was also produced, had as their main purpose the production of refined white sugar for export and/or consumption by the upper classes of New Spain (1997, p. 97).

According to Wagner, in his work *Historia del azúcar en Guatemala*, by 1587 there were already a considerable number of sugar mills in the Valley of Guatemala. In a census of neighbors taken in 1604 in the city of Santiago, out of a total of 476 neighbors registered per block and neighborhood, there were 10 owners of sugar mills, which, compared to seven millers, gives an indication of the relative importance of panela and sugar production around 1600. "With population growth and the gradual development of the economy, the number of industrial mills and sugar mills increased in the 17th century and proliferated even more in the 18th century due to the high local consumption of panela and strong liquor, which were derived from the cooking and fermentation of sugarcane juice (2005, p. 32).

Cortes y Larraz states that the towns of Jocotán, Camotán, and San Juan Ermita have been known since the 17th century as excellent producers of sugarcane. Regarding Chiquimula, he notes that it has been a sugarcane producer "not only in the river valley but also in the highlands of the mountains, where sugarcane plantations can be seen" (275, p. 1958). Regarding the sugar mills, each hacienda could have up to three of them. Their proliferation was so significant that by the year 1882, there were 150 sugar mills in the Jocotán region and 121 in Quetzaltepeque, although most belonged to the Chortí people (Dary, 1996, p. 55).

Currently, the production of honeys derived from sugarcane juice and the milling activity are family activities, especially to continue the tradition of the ancestors. However, in the village of La Cumbre, Esquipulas, Don Nicolás' Mill arose with the purpose of keeping the tradition alive, but also to create a tourist environment that would make milling a more profitable activity.

Don Nicolás' Mill

Located in the hamlet of La Cumbre, Don Nicolás mill is a valuable landmark. Along the road that leads to the place it is possible to observe adobe and tile constructions, as well as clay ovens for the construction of

wood-fired cooking, coffee plantations, and abundant vegetation immersed in a temperate and very pleasant climate.



Figure 1. Don Nicolás' Mill. Photo: Sagastume Díaz, April 2014.

This tourist and gastronomic attraction was created in 2007 by Don César Antonio Rodríguez Morales, originally from Esquipulas and a coffee grower by profession. The name is in honor of his father, Don Nicolás Rodríguez, since he was dedicated to milling and his family grew up in that environment. Additionally, the activity was revived, for Don Antonio, as a means of family subsistence, due to the crises that the coffee harvest has suffered.



Figure 2. Facilities of Don Nicolás' Mill Photo: Sagastume García, December 2016.



Figure 3. Facilities of Don Nicolás' Mill Photo: Sagastume García, December 2016.

As a final product of the milling process, sugarcane juice, sugarcane honey, *leche burra* candies, and *batido* (a sweet obtained by manually agitating the sugarcane honey in a circular motion, and then drying it at room temperature) are produced. Rodríguez says that in the village, and in the municipality in general, panela candy is not in as much demand as *batido*, and for this reason it is only produced about eight times a year.

Sugarcane processing consists of a series of basic steps: obtaining the sugarcane juice by milling, cooking and concentrating the juice, crystallizing, beating or making panela candy. Every Sunday, the routine begins at 6:30 a.m., with a pair of oxen yoked together, working as the driving force for the operation of the trapiche. It is worth mentioning that this refers to a pair of animals attached to a yoke, which is a wooden instrument shaped like two joined arches, to which the oxen are attached. The sugar mill consists of a machine with three rollers placed vertically on a wooden structure fixed to the floor. The axis of the central hub extends upwards to a cross or star, from which rods act as levers (Scharrer, 1997, p. 97), known as 'volante' in the milling process of the village of La Cumbre,



Figure 4. Yoke of oxen. Photo: Sagastume Díaz, April 2014.

and are moved by draft animals (oxen) that rotate in a circle.

The direction of the work of the pair of oxen was led by the young Marvin Gómez, while the young Marcos Ramírez was in charge of introducing the sugarcane into the sugar mill for the collection of the sugarcane juice. The approximate amount of sugarcane to be milled is 20 quintals, which they acquire in Quetzaltepeque and in the villages of Esquipulas where sugarcane fields are found; from this amount, approximately 200 liters of sugarcane juice are obtained.



Figure 5. Introduction of the cane into the sugar mill to obtain the juice. Photo: Sagastume García, December 2016.

The bagasse from the sugarcane that results from its crushing is often used as feed for the oxen, firewood to light the fire that heats the thick metal pot (with an approximate capacity of 200 liters, according to the informant) in which the sugarcane juice is boiled, or as fertilizer in coffee plantations.



Figure 6. Sugarcane bagasse used as fertilizer, feed for the oxen, or firewood. Photo: Sagastume García, December 2016.

After obtaining the cane juice, the utensils are prepared to cook it. The sugarcane juice boiling pot is cleaned and washed, and the fire is prepared using *ocote* as fuel to light the firewood, which consists of coffee trunks, sugarcane bagasse, and pine that is not suitable for timber. The sugarcane juice is poured into the pot, which is then placed over a type of stove. The juice is boiled for four and a half hours until it reaches a honey-like consistency. When the juice reaches its first boil, the *cachaza* is obtained and immediately discarded.



Figure 7. Preparation of the bonfire to begin the cooking of the sugarcane juice. Photo: Sagastume García, December 2016.



Figure 8. Pouring the sugarcane juice into the thick sugarcane juice boiling pot. Photograph Sagastume García, December 2016.

During the boiling of the sugarcane juice, the utensils known as *pichacha* and *ramillón* are used. The constant stirring of the liquid in the pot, using a *pichacha* (a type of large ladle with a long handle and a wide diameter, featuring holes that allow the liquid to flow through), results in a layer of foam on the surface, which is edible and highly sought after by visitors, who enjoy it with a lime leaf or a small piece of sugarcane.



Figure 9. Boiling of the sugarcane juice. Photo: Sagastume Díaz, April 2014.



Figure 10. Use of the pichacha during the boiling of the sugarcane juice. Photograph Sagastume Díaz, April 2014.



Figure 11. The boiling of the sugarcane juice is completed by placing the pot on a yagual made from sugarcane bagasse. Photo: Sagastume Díaz, April 2014.

To test the point of the honey, a little of the product is extracted and dropped into a container containing cold water, the traditional "*punto de bolita*" is carried out. The honey should not dissolve; instead, it should leave a sticky residue that, when taken with the fingers, can easily be shaped into a small ball. (Muñoz, 2003, p. 23). The sugarcane juice boiling pot is removed from the fire by inserting a log through the handles at each end and is placed on a yagual made from the same sugarcane bagasse (a round structure used to support weight, provide firmness, and insulate temperatures). It is also used by women to carry baskets on their heads.

Subsequently, a small amount of honey is separated to be packaged and sold as an edible product derived from the milling process, as well as for the production of the candies known as *leche burras*. These candies are prepared by adding cow's milk to a certain amount of sugarcane honey, then it is cooked again until it reaches the right consistency, allowing the candies to be shaped. Don Nicolás' Mill offers them in three varieties: lemon, coconut and coconut flavored and sesame seeds.



Figure 12. Cane honey. Photo: Sagastume Díaz, April 2014.



Figure 13. Leche Burra candies Photo: Sagastume García, December 2016.

The remaining honey is served in round containers using the *ramillón* (a utensil similar to a ladle but with a large diameter and a long handle, which is inserted into the pot containing the sugarcane honey) to proceed with the whipping of the honey. According to the informant, when the *panelas* are made, the honey still in the pot must be whipped a little and then served into the wooden molds, where it remains for the rest of the afternoon and night so that it can be unmolded the next day. Each *batido* and each *panela* weighs one pound.



Figure 14. *Batido* preparation. Photograph Sagastume Díaz, April 2014.



Figure 15. Sweet known as "*batido*". Photo credit: Sagastume García, December 2016.

Among the other services offered by Don Nicolás' Mill is the store, but it also functions as a restaurant, known as "La Casita" where they sell: sugarcane juice, sugarcane honey, leche burra candies, *batidos*, and sweet bread (which is also produced on-site). The restaurant offers traditional Creole cuisine, cooked in the traditional way over a wood fire, using clay, aluminum, and enameled utensils. The menu includes traditional breakfasts, hen soup, grilled meats, roasted plantains drizzled with sugarcane honey, *torrejas* soaked in sugarcane honey, *chuchitos*, and beverages such as sugarcane juice, chocolate, natural fruit drinks, coffee, and sweet bread.

The bakery began operating in October 2016. One of the people in charge is Mrs. Angélica Leiva. She states that bread is made and baked every day; it is sold on-site but also transported to the café called "*Café Molienda*", which is also owned by Mr. César Antonio Rodríguez Morales. They bake *champurradas*, lard bread, cinnamon-filled bread, coffee-flavored bread, *cubiletes*, French bread, whole wheat bread, and "*barco*" yeast cake (a sour-tasting cake due to the action of the yeast, as it must rest for three days before baking).



Figure 16. Bread made at Don Nicolás' Mill Sagastume García Photography, December 2016.



Figure 17. Artisan kiln at the Don Nicolás' Mill facilities. Photo: Sagastume García, December 2016.



Figure 18. Chapel in honor of the Virgin of Schoenstatt. Photo: Sagastume García, December 2016.

Among its many attractions, Don Nicolás' Mill also features playgrounds for children, guided tours through the coffee plantations, and a chapel dedicated to the Virgin of Schoenstatt, placed by a group of Esquipulas locals who are members of the International Schoenstatt Apostolic Movement. The owner built the chapel using machine-made adobe bricks instead of handcrafted ones.

Final Comment

Traditions endure because each generation passes them down through communication. The processing of sugarcane products has been a popular activity in rural Guatemala. However, there are currently few sugar mills that still maintain constant activity, since the use of refined sugar has surpassed its consumption compared to panela. Today, it continues to be practiced as a family tradition. However, it is a

dynamic procedure that attracts spectators. The latter is the case of the Don Nicolás Mill, where the milling process has become the lure for visitors to delight in and enjoy all the activities and attractions that this site offers.

It is important to mention that milling, although it is an activity that is part of gastronomy, and that it is generally the woman who is the protagonist in everything related to the matter, it is the men who are in charge of developing it. The reason is understandable, it involves the handling of machinery as well as animals, which traditionally refers to male work.

Don Nicolás's Mill is a gastronomic attraction since many of the activities carried out there are closely linked to Guatemalan cuisine, maintaining the flavors and knowledge of the countryside by employing purely artisanal techniques that put culinary skills into practice.

In relation to the treatment and consumption of sugar cane, it is another reflection that the Hispanic-Arabic heritage is rooted in the traditions of Guatemalans and that it continues its legacy by reactivating those traditional processes that are attractive to future generations.

References

- Cortés, P. (1958). *Descripción Geográfico-Moral de la Diócesis de Goathemala*. Guatemala: Biblioteca Goathemala, Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala. Tomo I. Tipografía Nacional.
- Dary, C. (1996). Ladinos y su caracterización. Bases socioeconómicas de la región oriental durante la colonia. *Tradiciones de Guatemala*, 46. Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Folklóricos. Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala. Pp. 45-68
- De Fuentes y Guzmán, F. (2012) *Recordación Florida. Discurso historial y demostración natural, material, militar y política del Reyno de Guatemala*. Tomo I y II. Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Editorial Universitaria.
- Molina Calderón, J. (2005). *De trapiche a ingenio. La aventura de una empresa familiar. Ingenio la Unión*. Guatemala. Editorial Galería Guatemala de Fundación G&T Continental.
- Muñoz, L. (2003). *Pastelería Artesanal*. Primera Edición. Buenos Aires: Editorial Albatros Saci.
- Sam, L. (2012). (traductor). *Popol Wuj (edición popular)*. Guatemala: Primera edición. Universidad de Carlos de Guatemala. Editorial Universitaria.
- Scharrer, B. (1997) *Azúcar y trabajo: tecnología de los siglos XVII y XVIII en el actual estado de Morelos*. México, D.F. : Primera edición. Centro de Investigaciones y estudios superiores en antropología Social.
- Villar, L. (2012). *La cocina popular guatemalteca. Mitos, hechos y anécdotas*. Guatemala: Primera edición, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala. Editorial Universitaria.
- Wagner, R. (2007). *Historia del azúcar en Guatemala*. Guatemala. Primera edición. Editorial Galería Guatemala de Fundación G&T Continental.

Printed in the workshops of Editorial
Universitaria on November 28, 2017, with a
print run of.
500 copies.

CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS FOLKLÓRICOS



USAC
TRICENTENARIA
Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala

Avenida La Reforma 0-09 zona 10
Teléfonos: 2331-9171 / 2361-9260 / 2360-3952
e-mail: cefol@usac.edu.gt
www.facebook.com/Centro-De-Estudios-Folklóricos-USAC-1182845751861498/
www.revistascefol.usac.edu.gt

Empleo de la pichacha durante la cocción del jugo de caña.
Fotografía de portada: Sagastume Díaz.