



Amatitlán and its gastronomic identity

Ericka Anel Sagastume García

The Center for the Study of Cultures in Guatemala –*CECEG*— (for its Spanish acronym) of the *San Carlos de Guatemala* University was created on July 8, 1967. Like life and society, science is constantly changing and developing. To respond to the new challenges of multidisciplinary research on cultural dynamics, on July 24, 2019, the *San Carlos de Guatemala* University began a new stage of said center, for its mandate, which the Honorable University Superior Council approved in the “SECOND point, Item 2.1 Sub-item 2.1.1 of the Minutes no. 18-2019 of ordinary session held on July 24, 2019, aims to study culture from a holistic, dynamic vision, in constant construction and as a basis for the development of Guatemalan society, in a contemporary context, characterized by the global interrelation of different cultural manifestations. This goal is achieved by strengthening all the traditions inherited from the so-called “folkloric” studies in the past, and responding to the need to understand and study the ideologies of the current cultural dynamics.



Amatitlán and its gastronomic identity

Ericka Anel Sagastume García

Resumen

Diversa es la cocina guatemalteca, coexisten diversos platillos y recetas que son conocidos para muchos, pero totalmente ajenos para otros. Amatitlán, una comunidad histórica y distintiva en sus tradiciones no se queda atrás con sus representaciones gastronómicas, más en aquellas que incorporan los productos que en otras épocas emanaban de su atractivo lago, y que, a pesar de que la pesca ya no es una actividad recomendada en el lugar, dichos elementos culinarios se han fijado tanto en el imaginario colectivo, que los amatitlanecos se abastecen de ingredientes, seguros en calidad y semejantes, pero provenientes de otras localidades cercanas al municipio. Se realizó un estudio relativo al contexto de la comida tradicional de Amatitlán, como un elemento de identidad. Se desarrolló trabajo de campo en el casco urbano de la localidad, realizando entrevistas a personalidades clave y las consultas teóricas en distintos referentes que abordan el tema.

Palabras clave: Amatitlán, gastronomía, chirín, mojarra, compuesta, empanadas cuaches.

Abstract

Diverse is Guatemalan gastronomy, several dishes and recipes coexist that are known to many, but totally alien to others. *Amatitlán*, a historical and distinctive community in its traditions is not left behind with its gastronomic representations, more those that incorporate the products that once emanated from its attractive lake, and that, although fishing is no longer a recommended activity on site, these

culinary elements have been fixed so much in the collective imagination, that *amatitlanecos* are supplied with ingredients, safe in quality and similar, but from other locations also Guatemalan. A relative study was developed in the context of traditional *Amatitlán* cuisine, as an element of identity. Fieldwork was developed in the urban area of the town, conducting interviews with key personalities and conducting theoretical consultations in different references that address the subject.

Keywords: Amatitlán, gastronomy, chirín, mojarra, compuesta, empanadas cuaches, (recetas).

Introduction

Humans require goodness that provides energy and nutrients to grow, move, and reproduce, and they are consumed in a very particular way. Alimentation is usually varied and includes resources from all kingdoms of nature. Human beings select, combine, and transform those resources to give rise to a traditional cuisine, which is understood as a set of concepts and processes shared by a society.

Eating does not only imply satisfying a need but depends on a social response, although it becomes a culinary tradition through generations. Each tradition is a reflection of the ancestral knowledge of the environment and is complementary with the techniques used to transform nature into ingredients of individual and socially accepted dishes.

Chirín is one of the traditional dishes of the *Amatitlán* town. Nobody knows the meaning of the word; however, it is possible that it derives from any Poqomam word since the word *chi'is* means mouth and *choo* means lake (Poqomam online talking dictionary).

It is a dish prepared by men without any specific reason but the will to cook and spend time with other men. It is one of the so many gastronomic representations of the locality, which shelters unique characteristics and represents a particular taste among the *Amatitlán* people.

The ingredients selection, the preparation, and its consumption have become representative manifestations of a collective act, but a manly one. It is a dish that comes with the objective of “perking up the body” after a day of excess or just to spend a pleasant moment with other men who take over collecting, cleaning, and cooking the ingredients that give life to this dish. There is no season established for its preparation, so *chirín* could be considered a meal from the everyday life of the *Amatitlán* society.

Other dishes like the famed fried *mojarras*, the *tostaditas cuaches*, and the traditionally fermented beverage known as “*compuesta*”, are also gastronomic elements that share an identity symbolism in the society that interacts in *Amatitlán* town.

This article contains a brief description of the dynamic and tradition in cuisines as well as collective culinary, history, culture and identity, and the elements of the traditional gastronomy that identify the town under research are also described. It comes from the field work that was done during January, February, and March, 2020. Some qualitative research

techniques were applied, that is, organized interviews and inquiries to the corresponding theorist guides. Five field visits were carried out, which allowed the gathering of specific information on the content that is presented below.

Amatitlán and its attractive lake

It is estimated that the territory that the *Amatitlán* town currently takes up was already populated by indigenous according to numerous ceramic pieces found in the lake's depths such as griddles, censers, Mayan grinding stones, and some zoomorphic objects. It is believed that around 100 BC, inhabitants from the region used to practice religious rites in which they threw offerings to the gods (Fajardo, 2009, p. 7).

The inhabitants around the lake formed the language group Poqomam. Francisco de Fuentes y Guzmán relates that “it was a numerous nation belonging to the estate of the Kaxaualam cacique, one of the lords that called from the four main towns... contemporary of the *K'iche'*, *Kaqchikel*, and *Tz'utujil* kings” (Fajardo, 2009, p. 7).

Amatitlán is a town with a territorial area of 204 square kilometers. The urban area consists of a city formed by seven neighborhoods, a hamlet, 170 subdivisions, and four settlements. Regarding the rural area, it is formed by eight small villages and several farms (Fajardo, 2019, p. 24). It is one of the municipalities of the department of Guatemala, and it is located 27 kilometers south of the capital. Jacobo Hefkens described the road that leads to the town as an attractive route, “a large municipality called *Villa Nueva* is crossed. *Amatitlán* is located in a valley of which descent turns out to be steeper than *Antigua Guatemala's* one;

apart from that, it is largely cultivated, but what constitutes the main importance is the beautiful lake next to the town and the stream where the sea flows into” (Samayoa, 2016, p. 17).

The lake is in the North part of the town, about a kilometer from the park of *Amatitlán* city. It has an area of about three miles long (15.2 square kilometers) and encompasses the following municipalities: *Villa Nueva*, *Petapa*, *Villa Canales*, and *Amatitlán*. From the *Parque de las Naciones Unidas*, it can be seen that the lake has the shape of an eight or a guitar in whose waist is found the “filler”, which was built for the stretch of the railroad in 1881 during Justo Rufino Barrios’ government. High mountains surround it, and the climate is a bit warmer than the capital city (Samayoa, 2016, p. 17).

Currently, the town has many access roads from the capital city. One of them is from the interoceanic highway; another one branches off the one before at kilometer 19 in the vicinity of the *Parque de las Naciones Unidas* (called *ruta de la guitarra*); another access road is from *Santa Elena Barillas*; a fourth one connects the *Villa Nueva* municipality crossing *San Miguel Petapa* and part of *Villa Canales*. These last two roads join and go around a large part of the lake crossing several villages of the aforementioned towns. There are other access roads; one of them crosses *El Capulín* farm in *Amatitlán* to come out to the *El Salvador* route; another one is the *Barca* one, which, passing through the *Cortijo de Sánchez* heading North, joins the *Avenida Petapa* in the capital city; lastly, it is the road that bypasses the lake arriving to *Villa Canales* and then to *Amatitlán* by the *Avenida Hincapié*, also from the capital city (Samayoa, 2016).

An interesting fact of the *Amatitlán* town

consists of hot springs (sulfurous), which have been leveraged, primarily, for the construction of ancient sweat lodges and hot water pools; the aforesaid situation arises from the closeness to the *Pacaya* volcano (Samayoa, 2016).

The lake is fed by the *Villalobos* river and drains South through the *Michatoya* river. It turns its banks into large areas for cultivation and has had a large number of fishes; on this matter, it is worth mentioning the writings of the chronicler Tomas Gage, who related that during the 17th century, *Amatitlán* “enjoys the lake convenience by having its inhabitants sending fish to Guatemala and *Petapa*” (Gage, 2010, p. 326).

Ernesto Chinchilla Aguilar cites Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán, referring to the *Amatitlán* lake as

...that in that water, a large number of small fish swim and live and procreate others... in this splendid water that is not only recreational and an excellent ornament of this valley but the common provision of Goathemala in a large amount of given and fresh fish... out of numerous *pepesca* (*kind of small fish*) shoal and countless crabs, excellent in taste, and of an endless catch of *tapalcates*, small fish that are served to the Amerindians only; among this plentiful and useful fishing, in the caves and deep wells of the river, many otters are found, just like in the depths and bushy reeds of the lake a large number of alligators (Chinchilla, 1961, p. 16).

Amatitlán lake is characterized by being home to a large number of fish, especially mojarras that at some time were leveraged for local consumption and commercialization. *Sirica* (*Amatitlania*

nigrofasciata), tilapia, *guapote tigre* (cichlasoma managuense), *pescadito* (poecilia sphenops), black sea bream, and spotted sunfish also belong to that aquatic population (Fajardo, 2019). Due to contamination, nowadays some species have become extinct. In more contemporary times about 28 years ago, massive fishing in *Amatitlán* lake was possible. It was considered a “normal” activity despite the ongoing decline of that body of water. According to the chronicle, before the Spains arrived, there was an endemic fish that fed from the lacustrine plant life. In the first half of the 16th century, Fray Jerónimo Martínez introduced the famous “*mojarras and pepescas*” from the Pacific Ocean, according to Fray Antonio de Remesal in his *Historia General de las Indias Occidentales* (Galicia, 2018).

Over the years, the number of fish diminished; the introduction of tilapia caused the extinction of other species. However, tilapia can survive in contaminated places and has commercial demand. In fact, it is the only species that survived and is of local consumption. Since the first half of the 20th century, there has been proof of fishing regulations in *Amatitlán* to achieve a balance in fauna. By 1992, gill net fishing was prohibited and even the fish hook use was regulated, primarily during the closed seasons.

According to newspaper sources, the damage to *Amatitlán* lake arises from the lack of agreements among the authorities of the seven municipalities that form the basin and the sewage of the capital. To prevent the lake contamination, in the seventies the Municipality of Guatemala enacted restrictive measures that avoided the non-treatment sewage discharge into the beds of the basin rivers. Accordingly, drainage networks were built, which allowed

rainwater from wastewater to be separated, providing each homeowner with a septic tank with an absorbing well. This policy was maintained for 20 years; however, the project was not continued and supervised, which caused the proliferation of secondary solutions like discharging wastewater into nearby ravines. In 1976, the Municipality of Guatemala created the “*Plan Maestro de Alcantarillado para la Cuenca del Pacífico*” (Sewage System Master Plan for the Pacific Basin), in which the construction of wastewater treatment plants was considered. Unfortunately, the project was not concretized (Pape and Ixcot, 1998). Consequently, this body of water contamination started to be noticed.

Among the uses that have been given to *Atitlán* lake and its waters, it can be mentioned that it is a drinking and personal hygiene water source, traditional fishing, entertainment, tourism, irrigation, cultural activities, energy generating, cooling of thermoelectric processes, and waste sewer, the last one arises from the fact that in 1998, the lake received 60,300 m³ of wastewater daily and 1,500 tonnes of sedimentable solids mainly produced by 1,102,000 people, 665 plants, 23 farms, 1 sugar factory, and 440 chalets. Those above, added to several factors such as a set of wastewater treatment plants and a massive deforestation in the area of influence have caused three great impacts.

1. Toxic compound accumulation due to chemical pollution, including heavy metals such as lead, mercury, copper, and chromium; biocides like pesticides and herbicides and the combustion or hydrocarbon waste.
2. Proliferation of pathogens like viruses, bacteria, fungi, and parasites that give the lake an unhealthy environment.

3. Its water's eutrophication, which is the most significant impact from an ecological standpoint (Pape and Ixcot, 1998).

Among other projects to stop contamination, in 2016, the *Autoridad para el Manejo Sustentable de la Cuenca del Lago de Amatitlán* (Sustainable Management Authority of the Amatitlán Lake Basin) requested the removal of garbage to be regulated to avoid illegal landfills or the waste being thrown into the rivers that flow into the lake. However, despite the efforts to create environmental awareness among the inhabitants of the lake basin and actions like the sewage aerators system and the introduction of wastewater treatment plants, this town's attraction carries on an accelerated process of ecological damage caused by humans (Galicia, 2018).

In brief, only pleasant memories remain from those recreational fishing days at the beautiful still waters; although the place keeps an aura of charm that lives in the collective imagination and culture of Guatemalans, the situation is definitely no longer the same.

Culture and identity

The traditional popular culture is constituted by those manifestations with characteristics that develop in the deep imaginary of a nation. Etymologically, tradition means transmission; "Tradition does not refer to the ownership of an object but to the action of its transference" (Carvahalo, 1977, p. 204), in this way the world view of the social groups is expressed, sheltering in them the most outstanding and fundamental elements of their culture, just like establishing the general lines of their identity that are transmitted from generation to generation.

Due to the intentionality of this article, talking about gastronomy is essential. The appearance of recipes that represent a specific nation is transcendental to strengthen identity since it defines its most peculiar characteristics. Through them, the flavor and coloring of the ingredients that belong to the traditional gastronomy are stimulated.

The term gastronomy includes the art of producing, creating, transforming, evolving, preserving, and protecting those activities in which consumption, use, enjoyment, and healthy and sustainable benefit of the cultural, immaterial gastronomic heritage take part, and everything related to the human alimentary system (Montecinos, 2013).

Progressively, food is perceived and assessed as a manifestation of sensitivity and communication among people. It requires the presence of every sense and feeling to be truly integrated into body and spirit. In the mouth, the taste sense organ, the heart starts and exactly there, supported by the vision, smell, hearing, and touch senses, food becomes an integrally understood, assimilated, and ceremonially assumed element gaining symbolic value.

Eating is not only a complex biological action but an act that translates signs, formal acknowledgments, colors, textures, temperatures, and esthetics. So eating is an action that joins together memory, desire, hunger, meanings, sociability, rituals that talk about the person who consumes the food, and the context he or she lives in, communicating it also to the others who participate when eating.

The cultural value of the eating action is increasingly considered an inherited act since food, or a specific dish or recipe turns out to be a reflection of the people, nation, ethnic groups, communities, family, and individuals. "The sense of belonging to a society and a

culture, basically by speaking the same language, causes to share recipes and dishes and create daily habits of food” (Lody, 2008, p.120). Therefore, food becomes an element that defines and gives someone’s belonging, this is “to have an identity, share a model that joins together ethics, morals, hierarchy, and defines social roles for men and women” (Lody, 2008 p. 120).

The cultural fusion that characterizes the Guatemalan gastronomy stems from the strong European influence in both social and cultural formation of which the Mesoamerican region was a victim. Both Europe and Mesoamerica continue to be applicable mainly in the election and creation of recipes that substantiate the dishes, characterizing and constructing the Guatemalan palate.

It can be said that the social and cultural formation of the human being is understood by what is eaten and how it is eaten. The names of products, ingredients, and condiments highlight the diversity of communities that integrate gastronomy and eating habits. Of the variety of dishes that *Amatitlán* offers in its gastronomy, the *chirín* broth is one of the most important, and the fried *mojarras* one of the most common as they can be tasted not only for the holiday season but at any time of the year. Despite the references, both dishes are not unique to the place as it should be mentioned that *mojarras* can also be tasted in other destinations. Regarding the *chirín* broth, in *Monterrico*, a town located on the Pacific coast in the south of the department of *Santa Rosa*, the traditional shellfish broth also has the same name (Villar, 2014). Some suggest that the *chirín* originates in a Xinka legacy (Villar, 2014, p. 379). However, both *Monterrico* and *Amatitlán* are characterized by being fishing

villages, so the dish term could be considered an acculturation process, without playing down the fact that with all versions in their recipe, both towns consider it authentic and their own. Acculturation is understood as

...the set of events resulting from some groups of individuals from different cultures’ continuous and direct contact with the consequent changes that arise in the original cultural models of one or both groups. Understood in this way, acculturation must be distinguished from the adaptation to the environment (Redfield, Liton, and Herskovits, 1983 p. 10).

Dynamic and tradition in cuisines

Throughout history, the natural products selected like food have been fundamental elements of the so-called culinary inventiveness, which refers to the way of combining and changing them to give rise to preparations that are characteristic of the communities, establishing an identity through mixtures, colors, aromas, textures, flavors, temperatures, and other traits.

Constant changes are experimented in cuisines due to the incorporation of new food, disappearance or shortage of products either for their price or any difficulty to get them, modifications in culinary and preparation techniques, transformation in tastes and preferences, and outside forces that influence in the food demand. The introduction of products from South America during the colonial period (16th century); the inclusion of vegetable and animal species from Europe; the replacement of clay containers for metal ones, and the different ways to transmit heat at the moment of cooking are some of the culinary actions that have caused a change in what is considered purely traditional.

The word tradition derives from Latin and means delivery or transmission. It is defined as something preserved for being transmitted from generation to generation. Regarding traditional food, it is closely linked to a territory, and it has to be part of a set of other traditions to ensure its continuity over time (Vargas, 2017, p. 3).

To define cuisine and gastronomy as traditional, it has to meet the following qualities:

To be linked to specific places from where its ingredients are obtained; include products from the interaction between the region inhabitants and its resources over long periods; to be strongly rooted to the families and people's customs and link to a society's world view; to have features that stimulate the senses in a particular way with acceptance among the ones who taste them (flavor, color, consistency); it bases on the use of techniques and specific utensils, and its production has a general methodology but volatile at the same time (Vargas, 2017, p. 4).

It is worth mentioning that there are no authentic recipes in gastronomy since, as mentioned before, the ingredients, techniques, and utensils used change. However, the different dishes produced tend to remain in the collective imagination of a society, and that is the inevitable strength that gives it the symbolism of traditional and cultural identity.

Colective cuisine

Generally, the people in charge of food preparation meet this task individually; however, there are times when some help is needed. In regards to collective cuisine, it does not refer to the fact that the culinary journey becomes tiring at some point, nor for the reason that the food is intended for sale and requires the preparation of a large number of

portions but to the cuisine transformation into an art of social cohesion, an authentic coexistence (Villar, 2014).

On such occasions, the culinary ritual brings together a lively group of culturally supportive individuals. The people who prepare the food are brought together and help one another, in this way, the activity becomes more vibrant. They can talk and recall passages of family life, and some people with better abilities for a specific culinary task may settle in. It may also be that they can split the outlays; the task becomes less tiring, and it is a good opportunity to gather and talk, or maybe it is just customary (Villar, 2014).

These are undoubtedly reasonable spontaneities, but deep inside they conceal the authenticity of the culinary fact as an expression of the collective imagination, which makes food a link in the networks that strengthen the sense of social belonging and group affinity, as the social behavior arises, which leads to make satisfying to share food, ingredients, joys, and/or culinary secrets; exactly the subconscious presence of traditions and customs that ennoble cooks and their products (Villar, 2014).

Elements of the traditional gastronomy of *Amatitlán*

A succulent plate of *chirín* broth, some *tostadas cuaches*, or juicy fried *mojarra* are reasons for admiration and desire to taste to the ones who know and enjoy those representations of the traditional gastronomy of *Amatitlán*. Around alimentation, there is a complex skein of cultural threads that interact with the environment of the human groups: their climate, terrain, agriculture and livestock products, and economic relationships. Three representative dishes of the gastronomy of *Amatitlán* are described below.

The *chirín*

Amatitlán has been a fisher cradle. The oral tradition of the place explains that the *chirín* is a broth made up of freshwater, saltwater, and land products. It is a dish created by the ones who used to work in fishing or any other type of arduous work.

Ha! The *Amatitlán chirín* is a big deal. Not to brag, but although it has been imitated sometimes, it will never be equaled. It prevents illnesses and treats all sicknesses, especially aging, boredom, and the cruelest hangovers. It is good to make the best friendships flourish. It is an aphrodisiac, restorative, and a generous source of vigor and potency for men. It also helps women give birth. Those who come to this world and have not tried a good *Amatitlán chirín*, still do not really know what it is to live (Fajardo, 2014, p. 97).

Where does this dish's name come from? Nobody knows. It probably has its origin in the word "*chiringo*", as small crabs are also called, which in addition, are part of the extensive list of ingredients for the legendary dish, so the term *chirín* remained as a diminutive (Samayoa, 2016, p. 223).

The *chirín* is an *Amatitlán* dish par excellence; it is a tasty broth that was originally prepared with the various species from *Amatitlán* lake such as crabs, freshwater snails, *mojarras*, *siricas*, freshwater shrimps, and winkles, which the historian Efraín Alfredo Guzmán Monasterio called on one occasion "*laguiscos*" (Fajardo, 2020).

At what time did the dish appear in the locality? It is also unknown, but there are records from it that date back to the 1950s and 1960s (Fajardo, 2014, p. 101). As with any other custom, the preparation and consumption of this dish is a practice transmitted from generation to generation.

However, it should be mentioned that on this occasion, man and not woman is the lead in its making, taking part from the fishing to the cooking of all the ingredients. Efraín Guzmán (R.I.P.), a renowned *chirinero* in the locality said that "the *chirín* is a men's business" (Samayoa, 2020).

Years ago, a group of lively men gathered at the park or the shore of the lake on Sundays, "it was a country party". They used to organize to allocate tasks and commissions to buy all the ingredients needed. The excuse could have been to celebrate something or someone, or just to perk up after a meeting in which they had enjoyed some drinks. At present, this social activity is carried out at someone's house, but the tradition of preparing it outdoors still remains (Samayoa, 2016).

Oscar Fajardo Gil, the current city chronicler of Amatitán relates that he became a "*chirinero*" (the name given to a person who knows how to prepare *chirín*) in 1975, "first by paternal legacy (José Oscar Fajardo) and then by the frequent coexistence with purebred *Amatitlán* people". To prepare the *chirín* broth, the ingredients required are the following: the "*laguiscos*" could not be missing, which nowadays have been replaced by shellfish; home-grown chicken, beef bone, boneless, and foot to make a good basis; onion, celery, leek, tomato, *chiltepe* chili, beaten eggs, and spices (Fajardo, 2020). Cold cuts like black blood sausage and Extremaduran chorizo are also added, but this ingredient and the other by-products from edible animals that do not come from rivers or lakes are more contemporary since they were not included before (Samayoa, 2020).

Despite the outlays have been split between the cooks that support the broth preparation, the investment costs have increased nowadays, not only because everything has raised in price but

because now, the shellfish that replace the “*laguiscos*” that are no longer found must be bought. Years ago, it was not considered expensive to prepare *chirín* since fishing was customary, a not only recreational but also an income-generating activity that used to be performed in *Amatitlán* lake, besides the fact that it was populated by diverse “*laguiscos*” (Fajardo, 2019, p. 303). Blue crabs, clams, catfish, saltwater shrimps, and other fishes are currently used as complements to the ingredients mentioned before and have unfortunately replaced crabs, freshwater snails, *mojarras*, *siricas*, winkles, and freshwater shrimps, modifying the former recipe (Fajardo, 2019, p. 303).

As is the case with all dishes and because every cook adds creativity to the recipe being prepared, some include vegetables like pear squash, potato, carrot, cabbage, and even plantain or chickpeas, although according to Fajardo, these last ones could represent a similarity to the *tapado* that is prepared in Izabal. Some others also add rice (Fajardo, 2019, pág. 303).

To carry out the cooking that is traditionally done outdoors, the fire is made and the pewter pot is “treated” or covered with ash or soap, which prevents the pot from burning or staining with smut from the wood fire (Fajardo, 2014, p. 97). Enough water is boiled since the *chirín* broth is generally prepared in large amounts, from 30 to 100 portions depending on the case. The water starts to be seasoned with onion, tomato, thyme, and bay; when it starts boiling, the beef foot, neck bones, and meat are added, and afterwards on “the right moment”, one or several home-grown chickens and shellfish are incorporated, except for the fishes. These are added when the water starts boiling again with the ingredients incorporated previously; otherwise, it dissolves as fish is very soft. At

this moment, vegetables and rice are also added in case they are included since the authentic *chirín* does not include those (Fajardo, 2014, p. 97; Samayoa, 2016, p. 224).

Previously, in the description of a brief ingredients list, beaten eggs were mentioned, an ingredient that is added right before the broth is served, and some *chirineros* indicate that it is to give food a thick consistency. In addition, the quantity depends on the hangover acuteness. Why does this happen? It should be recalled that this recipe arises from the coexistence of a lively group of individuals, “it is a men’s business”, which does not mean there are no female cooks who can prepare a good *chirín*. However, according to Fajardo, who cites Professor Efraín Alfredo Guzmán Monasterio, who was once the city chronicler, the *chirín* appeared as an ideal dish for groups of friends or coworkers, specifically the ones who work in construction to gather somewhere outdoors, and sometimes on the shores of *Amatitlán* lake or *Michatoya* River. A wood fire would be made and each of the participants contributed any ingredient or culinary task. While the broth was cooking, it was not unusual to savor an aperitif (liquor). “Over the drinks, matters that are generally not of women’s domain or interest come out; in addition, the way of expressing is with the most colorful and vernacular vocabulary, decorated with coarse jokes” (Fajardo, 2014, p. 99).

Despite women are the ones who have stood out the most regarding cooking and culinary skills, it is said that they do not have the seasoning required to prepare a good *chirín* broth. It is also said that those who have a bad temper or humor (frame of mind shown to the outside) can “cut” the *chirín* so much that it does not “get just right” (Fajardo, 2020).

There have been many “*chirineros*” that have stood out throughout the culinary history of *Amatitlán*. At present, Oscar Fajardo Gil and Luis Peralta, who is popularly known in the locality as “Wittin” stand out in the culinary skills (Blanco, 2020).

Fried mojarrras

Visiting *Amatitlán* without enjoying delicious and appetizing fried *mojarrras* is an incomplete visit. Despite the *chirín* broth is considered the traditional dish par excellence, the *Amatitlán mojarrras* have gained popularity throughout history. It is a kind of fish that used to be plentiful in the lake’s fauna. In addition, as previously mentioned, according to historical sources, it is a kind of fish that was moved in clay jars from *Mar del Sur* approximately in 1550 and has proliferated since that time (Fajardo, 2014, p. 77).

Unfortunately and due to the uncontrollable contamination, consuming the *mojarrras* from there is not recommended. However, no regulation controls fishing in the lake (Blanco, 2020), and acceptable-quality *mojarrras* are found every once in a while. In spite of this, the vendors on the lake’s main shore continue preparing and providing this gastronomic delicacy to both, the local population and visitors. It is worth mentioning that the *mojarrras* provided to consumers are not from the fishing in the lake. For the last 30 years, approximately, most of the *mojarrras* that are prepared and consumed in *Amatitlán* have been brought from hatcheries or fish farms. For some years, they would come from *Izabal* or *El Salvador* and more recently from the south coast: *Escuintla*, *La Gomera*, *Masagua*, *Puerto San José*, *La Democracia*, *Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa*, *Siquinalá*, and other municipalities.

The people who prepare and sell fried *mojarrras* allow the consumer to select the most appetizing *mojarra* to them, and the price will depend on its weight, which goes from Q. 20 to Q. 80 (*Guatemalan currency*). It is prepared when doing the order, using enough oil or vegetable fat that indeed has to be over 300 degrees Fahrenheit, which allows the *mojarra* to fry instantly and prevents it from absorbing fat.

To flavor de *mojarrras*, it is used salt, lemon, pepper, and garlic; actually, they are prepared to the consumer’s liking. Some dust the *mojarra* with flour so that the stir-fry turns out crunchier. It is generally paired with garnishes like rice, salad, fries, and avocado. Some others sell the fried *mojarra* only for those who would rather enjoy this dish in the comfort of their home, which commonly happens with local consumers.

Many people are dedicated to preparing and selling fried *mojarrras*, and some stalls can be located on the market or outside of it, in front of the central park of *Amatitlán*. Different from the *chirín* broth preparation, the following product of the local gastronomy can be prepared for both women and men, since it is common to see both dedicating to such pleasant and thorough culinary task.

Tostaditas cuaches

The term “*cuache*” means that which offers duplication, something that consists of two alike parts. Erick Blanco, a teacher of *Liceo Mixto San Juan* says that the *tostaditas cuaches* are other representative elements of the *Amatitlán* gastronomy (Blanco, 2020).

They are fried tostadas, “that join together like a hamburger, but actually, the two of them are spread with refried beans and join

together” (Blanco, 2020). Easy and quick to prepare, the *tostaditas cuaches* are one of those crunchy but soft snacks to the palate and can save anyone at any time (Fajardo, 2014, p. 41). It is a product of the *Amatitlán* gastronomy that can be a whim for the morning or evening light refreshment. It is also useful as a garnish to complement some other meal or as a snack for any social occasion, but one of those popular gatherings that are accompanied by some heady drinks.

The cooked corn dough tortillas of medium size are prepared, just a bit smaller than a traditional tortilla but not too much that it looks like a *garnacha*. Then, they are fried in abundant hot oil or vegetable fat, “when they are browned, they are prepared in twos, one on top of the other as if they were lids, and a generous amount of refried black beans is spread in the middle” (Fajardo, 2020).

According to the current city chronicler of *Amatitlán*, the *tostaditas cuaches* are distinctive of the *Amatitlán* gastronomy (Fajardo, 2014, p. 42).

Compuesta

It is nothing more than a beverage that comes from the traditional fermentation of several ingredients. It is a recipe that dates back to over 50 years of existence. Celedonia Leiva de Pérez was renowned for preparing and selling this refreshing beverage at her shop known as “*Tienda Concepción*” (Fajardo, 2014).

This beverage is no more than a combination, and the term “*compuesta*” derives from here, from the traditional *fresco de súchiles* with the *Farolazo* type wine, a slightly sweetened wine with fruity notes that is produced in the *Vinícola Centroamericana S.A.*, but which in its beginnings was produced by *Bodegas Saara*, located in *Barrio Hospital de*

Amatitlán. Despite a processed wine is added to the *compuesta* to accelerate its fermentation, the basis is produced traditionally.

The *refresco de súchiles* is prepared with yellow corn, barley, allspice, clove, cinnamon, anise, and spiked pepper. These ingredients are browned on a clay griddle and then put into a large clay or pewter pot. Raw cane sugar, pineapple peel, ginger, and enough boiled water are added, and sometimes tropical plums are also included. It is left to stand for between three and eight days, which causes the fermentation of its fruit-derived ingredients. To taste it, it is strained and refrigerated to serve it as a cold beverage (Fajardo, 2014, pp. 65-67).

For years, the *compuesta* has been a refreshing beverage for the *Amatitlán* population since as Oscar Fajardo relates it, even the ones who are at the top of the *Amatitlán* society order and enjoy this tasty traditional beverage (Fajardo, 2014).

Final comment

Gastronomy involves a set of knowledge and activities that are directly associated with ingredients, recipes, techniques, and culinary secrets. The community of *Amatitlán* town has traditional and cultural wealth, and it is impossible to omit its distinctive gastronomy.

The word *chirín* is most likely to derive from Poqomam words since it is already known that the word *chi’is* refers to “mouth” and *choo* to “lake”.

In the sense that the *chirín* “is a men’s stuff”, culinary masculinity is the tendency in the preparation of this dish, not as an expression of his gender identity but as a redefinition of his tasks considered as masculine through the fundamental element of his image as the

provider. That provider image is what has allowed men to develop culinary skills that are put into practice in their workplace, in recreation, in everyday life in general, and in cultural celebrations that are directed by the presentation of a traditional dish.

Among other aspects, social groups create cultural boundaries to delimit what they consider authentic and their own, what has been created inside their community. Undoubtedly, eating habits shape an exceptional resource to establish cultural boundaries between different groups in contact. However, the acculturation process causes the integration of diverse practices, in this case, the eating habits as typical of the region but that have stood out and become known in other places. This is the case with *mojarras* since although they are a distinctive element of the *Amatitlán* gastronomy, they can be prepared and savored in other places of Guatemala, different from *chirín* and *compuesta*, which are dishes considered purely local because of the origin of their ingredients.

Many are the ingredients of prehispanic origin, but since the 16th century to date, a very close bond has been created with the products brought from Spain, which have allowed to enhance a recipe and highlight its flavor. In the Guatemalan culture, gastronomy is also considered a sign of coexistence, since in small restaurants, homes, popular food stalls, or simply outdoors, a group of individuals, acquaintances, or strangers gather to enjoy any meal.

The gastronomic aspect has grown so much that it is even closely associated with the people's popular expressions and family, everyday life, and holiday traditions, which are elements that involve gastronomy transforming it into a clear example that the culinary art

constitutes an element of social cohesion and that, therefore, alimentation is a distinctive of a town's identity.

It is important to make known part of what shapes the traditional gastronomy that identifies a particular group since it is part of those elements, which although not declared by the ministerial agreement, belong to the people's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. One of the main goals is to promote among the members of the same society that all of the cultural elements have to endure in the collective imagination and continue to be practices of generational transmission in order to protect those unique values.

References

- Chinchilla, E. (1961) *Historia y tradiciones de la ciudad de Amatitlán*. Guatemala: Editorial del Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- De Fuentes y Guzmán, F. (2012). *Recordación Florida. Discurso historial y demostración natural, material, militar y política del Reyno de Guatemala*. Tomos I y II. Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Editorial Universitaria.
- Diccionario hablado poqomam. K'ulb'il Yol Twitz*
- Paxil (2014) Academia de lenguas mayas de Guatemala, Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. Disponible en <http://www.talkingdictionary.org/poqomam>
- Fajardo, O (2014). Amatitlán 465. *Del pumpunjuche al chirín pasando por la compuesta*. Guatemala: Primera edición. Impreso en Talleres FORMATEC
- Fajardo, O. (2009). *Crónicas de nuestro pueblo. Recopilación histórica y hemerográfica del municipio de Amatitlán, Guatemala*. Guatemala. Impresos computarizados, S. A.

- Fajardo, O. (2019). *Tierra de Amatlés. Monografía de de Amatitlán*. Guatemala: Segunda Edición. Sistemas de impresión JL.
- Gage, T (2010). *Los viajes de Tomas Gage en la Nueva España*. Guatemala: Reimpresión. Tipografía Nacional.
- Galicia, E. (2018) *Amatitlán era un lugar de pesca*. Guatemala: Prensa Libre. Disponible en <https://www.prensalibre.com/hemeroteca/amatitlan-era-un-lugar-de-pesca/> Date of query: October 13, 2020.
- Lody, R. (2008). “Acarajé, comida y patrimonio del pueblo brasileño”. *Identidades en el plato. El patrimonio cultural alimentario entre Europa y América*. Barcelona, España: Primera edición. Icaria editorial, S.A.
- Pape, E. and Ixcot, L (1998) El lago de Amatitlán y problemas. *Economía ambiental y desarrollo sostenible: valoración económica del lago de Amatitlán*. Guatemala. FLACSO.
- Redfield, R. Linton, R and Heskovits, M. (1983). “Memorandum for the study of acculturation”. Cited by *La antropología*. Bilbao: Ediciones mensajero.
- Samayoa, A. (2016). *Amatitan (Tradiciones)*. Guatemala: Quinta Edición. Kolash Publicaciones
- Vargas, L. (2017) *Dinamismo y tradición en nuestras cocinas*. Revista Ecofronteras Vol. 21 No. 60. Publicaciones Ecosur.
- Villar, L. (2012). *La cocina popular guatemalteca. Mitos, hechos y anécdotas*. Guatemala: Primera edición, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala. Editorial Universitaria.

Interviews

- Fajardo Gil, Oscar (February 05 and 18; March 03, 2020). Interview. Interviewer: Ericka Anel Sagastume García.
- Samayoa, J. (February 28, 2020). Interview. Interviewer: Ericka Anel Sagastume García.
- Blanco, E. (February 28, 2020). Interview. Interviewer: Ericka Anel Sagastume García.



Image 1. Process of the mojarra's preparation (Sagastume).



Image 2. Fresh *mojarras*, stall located in front of the church in the park of Amatitlán (Sagastume).



Image 3. Oscar Fajardo Gil, city chronicler of Amatitlán... and “*chirinero* since 1975” (Sagastume).



Image 4. Mojarras on the stove (Sagastume).



Image 5. Fried *mojarra*, a gastronomic sign of Amatitlán (Sagastume).

This publication was printed in the graphic workshops
of Serviprensa, S.A. in November 2021.
This edition consists of 500 copies printed in 80g
bond paper.



Directorate

Authorities of San Carlos de Guatemala University

Rector

Pablo Ernesto Oliva Soto

General Secretary

Gustavo Enrique Taracena Gil

General Director of Research

Félix Alan Douglas Aguilar Carrera

Director of the Center for the Study of Cultures in Guatemala

Mario Antonio Godínez López

Principal Researches

Aracely Esquivel Vásquez Deyvid

Paul Molina Armantina Artemis

Torres Valenzuela Aníbal Dionisio

Chajón Flores Abraham Israel

Solórzano Vega Byron Fernando

García Astorga

Intern Researchers

Xochitl Anaité Castro Ramos

Erick Fernando García Alvarado

Ericka Anel Sagastume García

Intern design and layout

Diagramación: Maite Sánchez

Revisión de textos: Jaime Bran

Cover photograph

Ericka Anel Sagastume García

Avenida La Reforma 0-09, Zona 10

Tel numbers: 2231-9171 / 2361-9260 / 2360-3952

Web: <http://ceceg.usac.edu.gt/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ceceg.usac/>