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Food Detective: Chewing on gum's origins

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Pre-Columbian civilizations of Mexico gave us many fruits and vegetables that have become universal foodstuffs.

Tomatoes are so common in Italian cooking that many think they originated somewhere in Sicily. But the first reported use of tomatoes was by the Maya, who flourished in Mexico and neighboring regions centuries before Cortez wannabes laid waste to the Yucatan peninsula.

Corn, the golden symbol of the fruitful Midwestern plains, was being cultivated in Mexico 5,000 years ago.

And then there's chewing gum.

Though Chicago's Wrigley is probably the world's most recognized brand of gum, it was Thomas Adams who created the almost-as-famous Chiclets with the encouragement of Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, best known — or despised — as the Mexican general who defeated and killed Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie at the Alamo.

The candy-coated gum's name is derived from "tziktli," which roughly translates to "sticky stuff" in Nahuatl, an indigenous Central American language. Walking through Latin American cities today, it's not uncommon to see street people selling tiny boxes of Chiclets.

When Santa Anna was living with Adams in Staten Island, he suggested to the inventor that sapodilla sap could supplement natural rubber in the manufacture of less expensive tires and rain boots.

Adams bought several shipments of the sap from Santa Anna, but he was unsuccessful in using it as a rubber substitute. Not sure what else to do with all that sap, Adams made chewing gum. The public loved the stuff. In 1871, Adams opened his first gum factory.

In Yucatan recently, I visited Muyil, an archaeological zone and one of the earliest Mayan settlements in the state of Quintana Roo, tucked into the jungle along the recently renamed Riviera Maya. Gerardo May, my driver, took a lot of pride in the achievements of local Native Americans, and he showed me the zig-zag gashes on the sapodilla tree where sap was extracted to make gum.

In the airport on my way out of the country, I spotted Chicza, an "organic Mayan rainforest chewing gum." Harvested by a cooperative of chicleros, Chicza contains no synthetic polymers and has none of the sweetness of common varieties. It's a good chew.

The next time you unwrap a stick of Doublemint or pop a Chiclet in your mouth, remember that the Alamo's victor, Santa Anna, deserves some credit for popularizing gum, and that in addition to creating some of this continent's most stunning architecture, the Maya also provided the raw materials for this satisfying, low-calorie confection.

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