

[suntimes](#)

Food Detective: Make mole part of Thanksgiving ritual

BY DAVID HAMMOND

Last Modified: Dec 21, 2011 08:03AM

During Day of the Dead observances in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, I watched as a family made the ceremonial pilgrimage to a rain-battered cemetery, part of a centuries-old celebration of life and death.

At gravesites, loved ones light candles, arrange flowers (often marigolds) and offer the deceased their favorite drinks and foods, including tequila, tamales and mole (mow-lay).

Whether red, yellow, green or black, mole sauce has a romantic reputation, purportedly requiring a pantry full of ingredients and a Homeric time commitment. For a festival dedicated to recognizing the poignancy of time passing, there's no more poetically appropriate sauce.

Traditionally served with turkey, mole brings Thanksgiving leftovers back to life . . . though it needn't require days of your own life to prepare.

Before Columbus, Mexican spices were ground by hand in a mortar. With a food processor, it's faster. I made a traditional mole poblano, using a recipe by Mercadito's Patricio Sandoval, in 90 minutes.

Mole contains dozens of ingredients, including garlic, tomato, sometimes chocolate and usually three or four varieties of tongue-tongling chile peppers.

And mole recipes use many minor ingredients, like "1/2 teaspoon of dried thyme" or "scant teaspoon of oregano." Such small quantities seem unlikely to add perceptible dimension to the final product. That doesn't mean, however, that these ingredients are not essential.

Last October, Kendall College held a Taste of Sister Cities, which brought together chefs from Mexico City and Chicago. I asked chef Daniel Olvadia of Mexico City's Paxia why mole demands ingredients even a sensitive palate could not discern in the finished sauce. Although you may not taste all of them, Olvadia said, "You need to include those tiny little ingredients. It's part of the ritual."

And as Chicago's Rick Bayless told me, mole's flavor should be like a "chorus where no single voice is heard above the rest." Even minute ingredients have a place.

Enacting the ritual steps of preparing mole proves you care about those you cook for, in this life and the next.

David Hammond is an Oak Park writer and contributor to WBEZ (91.5 FM) and LTHForum.com. E-mail detective@suntimes.com.

Copyright © 2012 — Sun-Times Media, LLC
