

Chapter 9

A Special Community of Women Social Entrepreneurs in Mexico: Cocineras Tradicionales and Maestras Culinarias

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the Cocineras Tradicionales of Mexico as women social entrepreneurs who transform kitchens into spaces of identity, resilience, and sustainable development. Since UNESCO's 2010 recognition of Mexican gastronomy as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, these women have been central to preserving rituals, biodiversity, and culinary knowledge, yet their work remains undervalued and threatened by inequality and exclusion. The chapter highlights the program *New Generation of Traditional Cooks: Bridge of Flavor between France and Mexico*, which trained ten young cooks and projected their traditions internationally. Their stories show five types of impact: economic, by turning unpaid labor into community ventures; social, by reinforcing cohesion and intergenerational transmission; cultural, by revitalizing languages and rituals; environmental, by safeguarding biodiversity; and innovative scaling, by transforming local heritage into global cultural value without losing authenticity.*

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional Mexican cooks represent much more than guardians of ancestral recipes. They are social entrepreneurs who, through their kitchens, foster community cohesion, preserve biodiversity, transmit worldviews, and strengthen national pride. In 2010, thanks to the leadership of the Mexican Conservatory of Gastronomic Culture (*Conservatorio de la Cultura Gastronómica Mexicana*: CCGM) and Dr. Gloria López Morales, Mexican cuisine was inscribed by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This historic achievement underscored the central role of these women in safeguarding agricultural, ritual, and culinary practices.

This chapter explores their role in shaping national identity, the challenges they face, and the opportunities to position them as agents of change. Through the stories of the finalists of the New Generation of Traditional Cooks competition, it illustrates how these women have charted paths to reinvent the future without losing the past.

UNESCO's 2010 designation did not honor fine dining restaurants, but rather a complete cultural system: the milpa as an agricultural foundation, nixtamalization as a fundamental technique, patron saint festivals as spaces of social cohesion, and, above all, the women who have kept this legacy alive. Mexican cuisine was inscribed alongside the Mediterranean diet and the culinary traditions of France and Japan, yet it holds a unique feature: *its profound community roots*. Traditional cooks do not work in isolation, but within family and community networks where the kitchen is both the heart of the home and a symbol of hospitality.

Mexico, with its immense natural and cultural wealth, has established itself as a world-class tourist destination. Its infrastructure, the diversity of cultural expressions, and the strength of its traditions offer visitors a unique experience, marked by the unmistakable Mexican cultural *apapacho* —a warm embrace of care and hospitality. Within this context, Traditional Cooks stand out as true guardians of the ancestral legacy of Mexican gastronomy. For generations, these women have learned and safeguarded recipes that tell the story of their communities. They know and skillfully use the products of their environment, transforming them into both everyday and ceremonial foods that embody identity, memory, and belonging. Each dish they prepare is a celebration of Mexico's living culture.

These cooks have been a source of inspiration for renowned chefs, both in Mexico and abroad. A prominent example is René Redzepi, the Danish chef celebrated for his restaurant Noma, renowned for its focus on local ingredients and innovative approach. In 2017, he opened a temporary branch of Noma in Tulum, Mexico, where he immersed himself in the knowledge of Maya women, learning ancestral techniques such as maize nixtamalization and underground pit cooking (*pib*). This experience transformed his approach to working with native ingredients and fermentation processes.

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