



There's pan dulce the food, and pan dulce the ritual.

"Around 1 p.m., you head to the panadería, grab a tray and a pair of plastic tongs," says cookbook author and Mexico City food expert Lesley Téllez. "There are kids running around your feet, and everyone's chatty, and there's row after row of beautiful breads in every shape and color." As many as 2,000 varieties of sweet breads and pastries are baked across Mexico; some nationwide, others

only in single villages. Tortillas may be the nation's foundational food, but panes dulces are its daily bread.

Unfortunately, most panes dulces leave a lot to be desired. Sensitive to the financial needs of their customers—more than 40 percent of Mexicans live below the national poverty line—bakeries are often forced to cut ingredient costs to keep their products affordable, which means working with heavily refined flour and using shortening

instead of butter, and chemical leaveners in place of more flavorful yeast. But in cities like Oaxaca and Mexico City, a boost of culinary talent—and tourist dollars—has given a cadre of bakers the freedom to experiment with organic grains and serious bread-making techniques. These days, Téllez explains, "any chef opening a breakfast restaurant in Mexico City has to have good pan dulce," and the rise of quality bakeries shows no sign of stopping.



Pan de Muerto, Juan Pablo Hernandez, Boulenc,
Oaxaca City, Mexico. RECIPE, p. 97.



Pan dulce is what happens when European viennoiserie meets Mexican innovation. Though the sweet breads and pastries began as a way to satiate the tastes of French and Spanish colonizers, pan dulce has since developed into a tradition all its own. Some breads, such as crackle-crust conchas and croissant-like cuernitos, are everyday fare, while others are holiday-specific. Pan de muerto, an anise- and orange-blossom-kissed bun crowned with lengths of dough that recall a skull and crossbones, only emerges in October and November for the Day of the Dead (recipe, p. 97).

On a good day, Elena Reygadas sells as many as 700 panes dulces at Panadería Rosetta, her bakery in the Juárez neighborhood of Mexico City. After getting a culinary education in New York (at the French Culinary Institute) and London (working in restaurants), Reygadas returned to Mexico in 2008, and two years later opened a restaurant with its own line of baked goods. The neighbors kept clamoring for bread in the morning, so two years after that, she opened a companion bakery that now supplies sourdough breads and pan dulces to several restaurants across the city.

Reygadas is now one of the nation's top bakers, sprinkling laminated layers of dough with locally grown rosemary (recipe, [plateonline.com](#)), and sweetening cemita buns with indigenous piloncillo (recipe, [plateonline.com](#)). She's especially interested in rare panes dulces from rural areas, such as pan de pulque, a bread leavened by the fermented juice of agave. "Pan dulce is endless," she says. "And we have so many fruits and sugars to play with here in Mexico."

Baking in Mexico forced Reygadas to compromise—and thus to innovate. Unbleached American wheat flour is too



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—Lesley Téllez



means conchas risen with a sourdough sponge (recipe, plateonline.com); kouign-amann-style rolls that ooze tarragon syrup with each bite; and a textbook croissant stuffed with ham and gooey cheese, which he proofs and laminates—despite the swampy Oaxacan heat—by sheer force of will (and with a lower hydration dough than European recipes, using a mix of local, organic whole wheat flour and bleached commodity-grade). The Saltillo-born baker developed a keen interest in sourdough from Peter Reinhart, Chad Robertson, and Claus Meyer and is excited about the slow but steady growth in high-end domestic wheat production for quality flours.

There's no distinction between European, American, and Mexican baking at Boulenc; the genres are inextricably intertwined. For Hernandez, that's part of the fun. Nixtamalization and corn tortillas are thousands of years old; by contrast, pan dulce is a mere post-Columbian baby that demands a baker's creativity. “People have been making bread since ancient Egypt. I'm not trying to run a European or American place in Mexico. I'm just a bread fanatic,” he says.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Lesley Téllez has an easier time finding \$3 per dozen handmade tortillas made with heirloom corn than a decent cuernito.

Most panaderías in the U.S. face the same cost-conscious quality problems of their Mexican peers, and despite a new-found culinary obsession with everything Mexican, many Americans have overlooked the humble yet ubiquitous pan dulce.

The exceptions deserve mentioning. Téllez credits mini-chain La Monarca as a pan dulce vanguard in Los Angeles; the panadería has become an institution for its innovative use of ingredients like agave nectar and tequila in traditional breads. Up until 2016, when the restaurant abruptly closed, Chicago's Cantina 1910 delighted locals with a flan-stuffed concha. And in New York City, pastry anthropologist Fany Gerson does a pan dulce weekend special at La Newyorkina: two scoops of housemade ice cream sandwiched in a split-open concha, a wholly Mexican nod to Sicilian brioche con gelato.

Those standouts matter to Téllez. “Pan dulce is this shared experience we all have as Mexican-Americans. And when we don't see our experience reflected in popular culture, we have to cling to the things we share as a community.”

Max Falkowitz scarfs down street tamales on the regular, but his heart sings for a homemade pot of Mexican beans.

Rosca de Reyes, Elena Reygadas, Panadería Rosetta, Mexico City. [RECIPE, plateonline.com](http://RECIPE.plateonline.com).

costly for the Mexican market, so when she first started baking, she used the same commodity-grade domestic flour as industrial panaderías. “It wasn't the best flour,” she admits, “but it's important to me that bread is accessible to everybody. And with good fermentation technique, you can still make very good bread.” She's since found a “beautiful” unbleached flour produced in northern Mexico, though she still imports butter to get the quality she needs.

In Oaxaca, Juan Pablo Hernandez has taken innovation to heart at his wildly popular Boulenc bakery and café. That