



Study abroad.

SYLLABUS

TORTILLAS, TOMATOES, & T-BONES: DIET & DEVELOPMENT IN MODERN MEXICO

Instructor: Jack Corbett

Contact Hrs: 40

Language of Instruction: English

MORELIA, MEXICO

One of the promises of NAFTA was that it would raise the living standards of the poor and marginal populations in Mexico, improving the quality of their lives and reducing the pressures to migrate to urban centers and the United States. Yet in 2007 official sources report that since 1994 6.2 million Mexicans have abandoned the countryside due to economic decline and millions of rural and urban poor suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition. Meanwhile American supermarkets are filled with fruits and vegetables grown in Mexico, Mexican cattle flow into Southwestern feedlots, and American fast-food restaurants proliferate from Baja California to Yucatan. Understanding transformations in the Mexican diet becomes a valuable device for assessing the impact of social and economic change in the wake of NAFTA. Agriculture has long been a central concern of Mexican development strategies but the critical question is whether recent changes serve the interests of national or international consumers. As we explore the dynamics of change we will understand how food systems give us insight into critical issues related to social justice, environmental protection, and international relations.

Primary Readings

Daniel Jaffee, Brewing Justice. University of California Press, 2007.

Casey Walsh, et al, Social Relations of Mexican Commodities. University of California – San Diego, Center for U.S.-Mexican Relations, 2005.

Roberto Gonzalez, Zapotec Science, University of Texas Press, 2001.

Course Objectives

- 1) Understanding how a general theme of “Diet and Development” lends itself to talking about Mexican history, social and economic relations, the indigenous population, Mexican international relations, and a host of other topics. In effect it becomes a case study in the use of different conceptual lenses to examine and illuminate a specific concern.
- 2) Recognizing that flows of influence among communities and cross borders involves not only formal mechanisms of economic exchange and public policy but the transmission of status, of habit, and self-identity.
- 3) Appreciating that “development” does not always mean unidirectional improvement, and that unanticipated consequences may undermine serious efforts on other fields.

- 4) Exploring the heavy dependence of the poor on what Mexican doctors call “Vitamin T” (tortillas, tamales, tacos, tortas, tlayudas) in terms of the economics and social implications, not simply assume it reflects cultural preferences.
- 5) Making students aware of the significance and implications of something which appears relatively simple and unimportant, like a tortilla or a taco.

Field Experiences

- A) Central market
- B) Regional market
- C) Traditional ejido
- D) Small subsistence and commercial producers
- E) Large modern producers

Instructional Methodology

This course depends heavily on field observation because most students will come from urban backgrounds and need to see agricultural production and distribution systems as well as what their organizational arrangements are; if they have never plowed a field, harvested dried beans, or made cheese they will have an incomplete understanding of the meaning of the course. Students will keep journals on eating patterns (where does food come from, what does its preparation and distribution require, what kinds of support systems are needed), will interview consumers, producers, and distributors, and generally see food systems from the organization of inputs to final consumption. One central expectation will be to tie the concepts and models appearing in readings and class discussions to elements they see in and around Morelia.

Evaluation

In addition to the mid-term covering readings and lectures students will present their journals, specific exercises addressing food access and preparation, and will work as teams to develop poster presentations on diet and development, with particular emphasis on how changes in macro-level circumstances (e.g. import policies, droughts) affect individual and family decisions. The poster presentations at the end of the quarter will share research findings with the rest of the student body.

Schedule

- A) Week 1. Understanding food systems, the politics of nutrition, and development processes.
- B) Weeks 2-3. The organization and history of the Mexican food system, with particular attention to issues related to the persistence of traditional patterns and the emergence of transnational tastes and markets.
- C) Week 4-6. Production for consumption and for markets. Transnationalization of food production and consumption with reference to international trade.
- D) Week 7. The emergence of special markets, e.g., beef and the “world steer”.
- E) Week 8. Backwards and forwards linkages, from pesticides to Starbucks Coffee.
- F) Week 9. Food security vs. commercialization and commodification. Biotechnology and poison seeds. Trout farming by the poor for the rich.
- G) Week 10. Does development offer hope or threaten disaster? Efforts at green revolutions and the future of food in an uncertain world.