The “It” Ingredient
Huitlacoche is front and center at Lorea, Oswaldo Oliva’s new Mexico City restaurant.
Rescuing Chocolate  In the state of Tabasco, Mexico, biologist Alma Rosa Garcés Medina is leading a bean-to-bar cacao revival.  

By Simran Sethi

THE LUSH PLAINS of Chontalpa, a region in the state of Tabasco on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, are known for the production of cacao, the seed that becomes cocoa and chocolate. “Cacao par excellence,” stresses conservationist and artisan-chocolate maker Alma Rosa Garcés Medina. The effusive 59-year-old biologist has been working with cacao farmers in Tabasco since 1990.

Cacao was first consumed in modern-day Mexico roughly 3,000 years ago by the Olmecs, the forerunners of all Mesoamerican cultures. They fermented, roasted, and ground the seeds into a paste for a cacao version of atole, a corn-based beverage that is still made throughout Mexico today. Yet despite this long history, sustaining the crop has been a challenge. In 2007, months of rain flooded Tabasco. Farmers were unable to harvest their cacao; many abandoned their fields for good. Garcés Medina was among those who stayed. She helped to establish the Chontalpa Cocoa Presidium, which supports farmers who use traditional techniques to grow Criollo cacao, a local variety. Producers now are able to sell directly to chocolate makers, such as Italy’s Guido Gobino, who prize the cacao for its rich mouthfeel and tangy fruitiness. These connections not only improve livelihoods—they also instill a sense of pride. Especially for Garcés Medina. “I found cocoa,” she says, “and cocoa found me.”

WHERE TO GET CHONTALPA CHOCOLATE

VISIT Chocolate Maya (52-55-2842-9234) in Mexico City.

ORDER Guido Gobino Chontalpa chocolates at chocosphere.com.

Cacao Husk Atole

ACTIVE 45 MIN; TOTAL 1 HR
SERVES 12

Atole is a pre-Columbian drink thickened with masa and sometimes flavored with chocolate. The version from Chontalpa is unique in that the chocolate flavor comes from cacao bean husks, sold as cacao tea at many health-food stores, instead of the beans.

1½ cups Chontalpa cacao bean husks (cacao tea)  
(about 3½ oz.)
1½ cups instant corn masa flour (such as Maseca)
10½ cups water, plus more as needed
1½ cups unrefined Mexican sugar (panela or piloncillo)
¼ tsp. ground allspice
¼ tsp. ground cinnamon
¼ tsp. cayenne pepper (optional)
1 tsp. vanilla extract

1. Place cacao bean husks in a large enameled Dutch oven. Cook over medium-low, stirring often, until dark brown (not black) and fragrant, about 6 minutes. Transfer to a large plate; spread in an even layer, and let cool, about 15 minutes. Working in batches, grind husks in a spice grinder until husks become a fine powder. Transfer to a small bowl, and set aside. Wipe out Dutch oven with a paper towel.

2. Place masa flour in Dutch oven. Cook over medium, slowly whisking in 2 cups water. Cook, whisking constantly, until smooth. Whisk in remaining 8½ cups water, and bring to a boil over medium-high, whisking bottom and sides of Dutch oven often. Whisk in cacao bean husk powder, sugar, allspice, cinnamon, and, if desired, cayenne. Reduce heat to low, and simmer, whisking often, until mixture is thickened and tastes of chocolate, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat, and whisk in vanilla. Ladle atole into warm cups, and serve warm or hot.