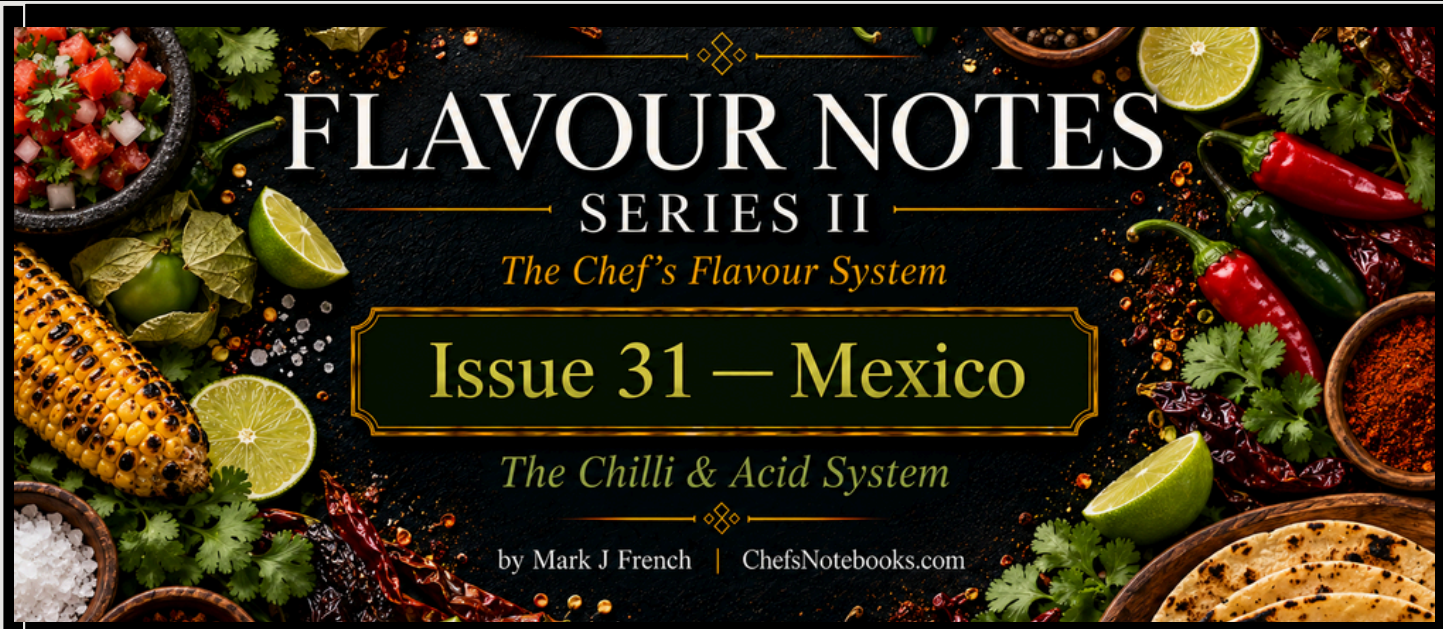


I don't remember experiencing Mexican food when I was young in England. Certainly not in the South-West, where I grew up, and not even in London.

My introduction came much later, in a small restaurant in St Thomas, in the US Virgin Islands. I remember little pots of naturally fermenting hot sauce bubbling away, and the wonderful zingy contrast between chillies and lime.

I have always loved spicy food, and although those early creations were probably not the most authentic examples, I was converted.

Since then, I have relished opportunities to explore Mexican cuisine, from memorable restaurants to the occasional disappointing imitation. I even discovered a remarkable Mexican restaurant here in the Philippines!

Working alongside chefs in Mexico was especially revealing. I learned techniques for roasting chillies, combining fierce heat with subtler varieties, and creating dishes where rich, fiery flavours are brought into focus by acidity.

Dedicated chilli kitchen gardens were another discovery, as was a property growing agave and producing its own tequila.

Mexico is a remarkable culinary destination, and those experiences have stayed with me.

In fact, my mouth is watering as I write this!

This week, we explore the relationship between chillies and acidity, and how Mexican cooks use these elements to create flavour that is far more complex than heat alone.



Kitchen Haiku

Chillies meet the flame
Lime awakens deeper notes
Bright flavours unfold

This Week's Focus - Heat Is Only the Beginning

Mexican cuisine demonstrates that chillies are not simply a source of heat.
Different varieties contribute fruitiness, sweetness, earthiness, smokiness and aromatic depth.
Their character changes through roasting, toasting, soaking, grinding and cooking.
Acidity provides the essential counterpoint.
Chillies - Heat, colour, aroma and depth.
Tomatillos - Tangy freshness and body.
Lime - Brightness and finishing acidity.
Sour Orange - Fragrant acidity for marinades.
Vinegar - Structure, sharpness and preservation.
Pickled Vegetables -Acidity, crunch and contrast.
The result is a cuisine where richness and freshness can exist together.
The character comes from how the elements interact, not simply how hot the dish becomes.



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Flavour Lens

Profile

Fruity • Earthy • Smoky • Tangy • Aromatic • Warming • Fresh

Behaviour

Toasts • Roasts • Rehydrates • Infuses • Concentrates • Brightens

Balance Role

Dried chillies provide depth and body; fresh chillies bring sharper, greener notes; acidity lifts richness and gives the finished preparation definition.

Key Pairings

Guajillo • Ancho • Pasilla • Chipotle • Serrano • Habanero • Tomatillo • Tomato • Lime • Sour Orange • Vinegar • Coriander • Mexican Oregano • Corn



Chef's Insight – Contrast Is a Form of Seasoning

Chilli Is an Ingredient, Not a Heat Setting

One of the most useful lessons I learned from Mexican chefs was to stop thinking of chillies simply in terms of strength.

A mild, fruity chilli may provide the foundation of a sauce.

A darker variety can introduce earthy complexity.

A small quantity of a hotter chilli may provide the final intensity.

The important consideration is what each contributes.

Heat should support the flavour, not conceal it.

And acidity is often what brings the entire preparation into balance.

Five Functions of Chilli

In the Mexican system, chillies perform several distinct jobs.

COLOUR
Guajillo and other red chillies contribute the characteristic colour of many adobos and sauces.

FRUITINESS
Ancho and guajillo provide rounded flavours beyond pungency.

DEPTH
Pasilla and other dried varieties introduce darker, earthy complexity.

SMOKE
Chipotle and other smoked chillies contribute a distinctive aromatic dimension.

HEAT
Fresh or dried hot varieties provide controlled pungency according to the preparation.

Use chillies as complementary flavour components, not interchangeable sources of heat.



Apply the System Across the Menu

- **GRILLED MEATS**
  Deep chilli marinades balanced by lime and fresh salsa.
- **SEAFOOD**
  Fresh chilli, citrus and herbs for brightness.
- **VEGETABLES**
  Roasted chilli sauces, tomatillo and acidity.
- **SOUPS & BRAISES**
  Dried-chilli depth with a refreshing finish.
- **SALSA & CONDIMENTS**
  Freshness, pungency, acidity and texture.

LEARN THE FLAVOUR SYSTEM, NOT SIMPLY THE RECIPE.

Mexico Chilli & Acid Podcast

This Week's Infographic



Ingredient Spotlight – Dried Chillies *Beyond the Burn*

Dried chillies are fundamental to many Mexican sauces, marinades and braised preparations.

Drying changes their character, concentrating flavour and creating notes that may suggest dried fruit, earthiness or smoke, depending on the variety and processing.

- **Guajillo** contributes bright, fruity flavour and a rich red colour.
- **Ancho**, the dried poblano, provides mild warmth, sweetness and depth.
- **Pasilla**, commonly the dried chilaca, contributes darker, earthy and dried-fruit notes.
- **Chipotle**, a smoked, dried jalapeño, adds a distinctive smoky character.

Toasting can develop aroma, but excessive heat quickly introduces bitterness.

Rehydration softens dried chillies for blending into sauces and adobos.

Chef's Rule

Choose chillies for their flavour characteristics first, and their heat level second.



Chef's Insight

"The skill is not in making a dish as hot as possible. It is knowing how to develop the chili's flavour – and when acidity will bring it to life."

Kitchen Practice – Five Ways to Build the Mexican System

1. Select Chillies for Flavour –Combine varieties according to their fruitiness, earthiness, smokiness and desired heat.

2. Toast with Care – Briefly toast suitable dried chillies to develop aroma. Burnt chillies can make the finished sauce bitter.

3. Develop the Adobo – Rehydrate, blend and cook the chilli mixture with appropriate aromatics, spices and acidic ingredients.

4. Balance Richness – Use acidity to complement fatty meats, rich sauces and slow-cooked preparations.

5. Finish for Freshness – Lime, coriander, onion, salsa and pickled vegetables provide contrast at service.

Build the Depth. Control the Heat. Finish with Brightness.



Pairing Logic

Ingredient	Character	Application
Lime	Bright, fresh, sharp	Finishing, salsa, dressing
Tomatillo	Tangy, green, fruity	Raw or cooked salsa
Sour Orange	Fragrant, tart	Marinades, braises
Vinegar	Direct, structured acidity	Adobo, pickles
Tamarind	Fruity, sweet-sour	Drinks, sauces, sweets

The Guiding Principle:

Develop depth during cooking. Use acidity deliberately to provide balance and definition.



A practical application of this week's flavour system

Birria de Res

Slow-Braised Mexican Beef in a Rich Dried Chilli Broth

Originating from Jalisco, birria is a richly flavoured preparation in which meat is slowly cooked with chillies, aromatics and seasonings until exceptionally tender.

Our featured beef version combines guajillo, ancho and pasilla chillies with tomato, garlic, Mexican oregano, cumin, cinnamon, cloves and vinegar.





What This Dish Teaches

Beef — Savoury richness and body.
Guajillo — Fruity brightness and colour.
Ancho — Sweetness and rounded depth.
Pasilla — Darker, earthy complexity.
Aromatics & Spices — Warmth and character.
Vinegar — Acidity within the adobo.
Lime, Onion & Coriander — Freshness and contrast at service.

The three dried chillies create a complex flavour base without relying on excessive heat.

The lime is not merely a garnish. It completes the balance.

🔗 **Recipe: Birria de Res**

The Liquid Counterpoint

Agua de Jamaica

A chilled hibiscus infusion offers refreshing tartness, vivid colour and restrained sweetness.

Its bright acidity provides a pleasant contrast to richly seasoned dishes.

From the Kitchen – The Importance of the Chilli

In Mexico, I encountered dedicated chilli kitchen gardens that demonstrated the importance of understanding individual varieties.

Fresh, dried and smoked chillies each have a different purpose.

Some provide the foundation of a sauce; others contribute fragrance or intensity.

Roasting, blending and balancing these flavours with acidity are techniques that translate readily into the professional kitchen.

They can be applied to grilled meats, seafood, vegetables, soups, sauces and marinades.



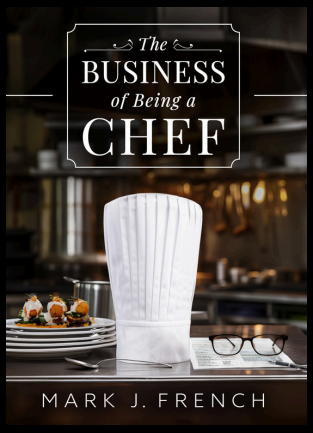
Further Reading & Resources

From the Library

See flavour balance charts and acidity mapping in the ChefsNotebooks archives.

The Business of Being a Chef

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, The Business of Being a Chef provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.
🔗https://chefsnotebooks.com/books



The Business of Being a Chef is the result of more than 30 years of experience in hotels and restaurants throughout the world. It is a guide to managing the multiple business demands of today's executive chef, encompassing diverse areas including cooking, taste, food safety, human resources, finance, and sales & marketing, amongst others. It is also a great resource for operations managers.

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About the Author

Mark J French is a hotelier, chef, consultant, and author of several books on culinary arts and business. Based in the UK and Philippines, he blends classical training with global flavours.



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