



# Maya Food



As well as growing crops, the Maya were hunter gatherers, gathering wild plants and hunting wild animals to supplement their diet. Try to work out which of these foods were available in the three different environments that you studied in the History Skills section.

## Fruit

Wild cucumber trees known as Kat or Cat in the Maya language, grow in South Mexico and Guatemala. The fruits are known as pepino kat in Yucatan always eaten cooked.



The Achiotl or Ku'u up in Maya, or Achiote in Spanish, grew originally in Mexico. Achiote is an important ingredient in "Pibil Pastes" and Mayan cooking. The spiny fruits are red-brown and contain the valuable burned red seeds. Seeds are dried and used as powder.



Habanero Chilis, are native to the Yucatan peninsula. Habanero chili have green, yellow and orange skins when ripe and are considered to be the world's hottest chili. It was used to flavour lots of Maya foods, including chocolate and the corn-meal gruel known as ul.



Sapote trees, Cuyche in Maya bear light brown velvety fruits with soft creamy texture pulp in the middle and grow all over Mesoamerica.



## Other plants

Coconuts, Kastelan tuk in Maya, don't grow in the mountains. Coconut palms require sandy soil, full sun, and high humidity for growth, so prefer the rainforest.

The Ramon tree, Tax'Osh in Maya, are found across Mesoamerica. Ramon trees produce small round seeds with one starchy highly nutritious nut.

The Elephant Ear Tree, Piich in Maya, also grows over Mesoamerica. Piich exotic seed pods, (that look like purple ears), contain seeds with a light peanut flavour. Maya people cooked Piich seeds as snacks (much like pop-corn) and to make flour for tortillas when corn crops are not good.



## Animals

As well as keeping some animals, like dogs, for eating, the Maya also hunted for meat. They hunted armadillos, who preferred the grasslands and rainforest to the mountains.

Tapirs were also hunted. They are a small pig-like animal with a long snout, although they're more closely related to horses. They live in the mountains as well as the lower ground.



Monkeys were also hunted, like the howler monkeys who live in the rainforests.

Wild turkeys, which lived in the grass and scrub in the Yucatan peninsula, were hunted too.





The Maya hunted with spears, bows and arrows and blowpipes, as shown on these images from Maya vases.



### Websites to carry out research from:

[Traditional Mexican and Maya recipes](#)

[Maya foods—National Geographic](#)

[Mayakids—Food](#)

[10 Maya foods that changed the world's eating habits](#)

# What did the Maya Eat?



Name:.....Date:.....

Find a picture of your food item and draw it in the middle. Label it on the line underneath.

What interesting facts can you find out about your food item? Where can you find them today? How might they be used in cooking? In which countries are they popular?



# It was all about the MAIZE!

Maize was a very important crop, it made up 80% of their diet.

To plant the maize, holes would be made in the soil with a sharp bladed, wooden digging stick called a dibble or uictli.

The soil was very dry and if the May rains didn't come, a whole year's crop would be lost

Yum Caax was the Maya god of maize. All Maya would worship the maize god as the crop was so important.

Farmers planted maize wherever they could.



Maize is more commonly known as corn.

It is  
A-MAIZE-ING!



For thousands of years the Mayans worshiped the maize god and believed that the first humans were made by the gods from maize dough!

Because of this, when suffering from severe illness they would eat nothing but corn.

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## What else can you make from maize?

- The maize dough, **zucan**, could be mixed with water and boiled to make a loose porridge called **pozole**. Pozole would be eaten on special occasions. After the Spanish colonised Central America the traditional ingredients of pozole changed and it became more like a soup or stew, with meat and vegetables added to the maize, but it is still eaten today.
- Stuffed dumplings, tamales, were made from balls of zucan, baked in a shallow dish.
- It could be a hot drink, **atole**, which was the **zucan** mixed with water and sweetened with honey.
- When fermented, the maize could be made into an alcoholic drink called b'alche, drunk at religious festivals. It was flavoured with tree bark.



pozole



tamales

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# Chocolate!

The Maya did not make chocolate as we know it today, but they did use cacao beans to make a drink that was available only to the very rich and important. It was very bitter and sometimes spiced with chilli pepper.

Cacao trees were rare which made the beans very valuable. So valuable they were used as a type of currency.



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## Other Food

Although maize was the important crop, the Maya had other food as well.  
Some examples are:

- beans (they would plant beans next to the maize so the vines would wrap around the growing maize stalks)
- squash
- chilli peppers
- tomatoes
- sweet potatoes
- pumpkins
- cassava
- jicama
- avocados
- papayas
- honey - they kept bees
- turkey - they bred from the wild turkeys



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# Tortillas

1. The ripened maize was dried out.
2. The kernels were scraped from the cob and boiled in water and white lime.
3. They were left to soak for up to two weeks.
4. The moist grains were ground with a stone grinder and mixed with a little water to make a dough.
5. The dough was rolled out on a metate (a flat stone) using a mano (a stone rolling pin).
6. The dough, called zucan, was shaped into rounds and baked on a comal (a stone griddle) over the fire.



A metate & mano, often made from basalt, a volcanic rock.



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## Waj (tortillas)

### Ingredients:

120 grammes of fine corn meal  
Pinch of salt  
180 millilitres water

### Directions:

Mix all ingredients.  
Roll into 8 golf ball sized balls.  
Flatten into rounds with a rolling pin, between sheets of plastic film.  
Dry-fry in medium hot pan on the hob for about 40-60 seconds per side until they are a bit bubbled on both sides.  
Keep warm and covered until serving so they won't dry out.  
Careful supervision will be needed when working with heat.

## Ul or atol (corn-meal gruel)

### Ingredients:

275 grammes of corn meal  
Pinch of salt  
600 millilitres of water

### Directions:

Mix together cornmeal, water, and salt in a medium saucepan.  
Cook over medium heat on the hob, stirring frequently, until mixture thickens (about 5 to 7 minutes).  
The Maya ate this with chilli in it, but you could try it with honey.

## Guacamole

### Ingredients:

2 mild chillies, finely chopped (optional – wear latex gloves to chop them)  
2 tomatoes, finely chopped  
Salt, to taste  
1 onion, finely chopped  
½ lime, juice only  
3 ripe avocados

### Directions:

In a pestle and mortar, pound the chillies, tomatoes, salt and onion to a fine paste.  
Add a little water and lime juice to make a looser mixture. Mash in the avocados. Serve.

## K'utbi p'ak (a type of salsa)

### Ingredients:

1 onion  
2 cloves garlic  
4 tomatoes  
Pinch salt  
Juice from 1 lime

### Directions:

Chop and fry onion and garlic.  
When slightly golden brown, add chopped tomato and salt.  
Cut the lime in half and squeeze the juice out.  
Mix the lime juice in with the tomatoes.  
Mash a little until it's chunky.