

Communal table

Food for a community

Every year for many years the people of Milpa Alta, Mexico, have prepared a feast in the week before Christmas. Sixty thousand tamales and 15,000 litres of hot chocolate are made in less than a week, not too much and not too little for the thousands of people who show up for the feast. The feast is called *La Rejunta* and is made for pilgrims preparing for the long walk to the holy cave of *El Señor de Chalma* on January 3rd. The people responsible for organising *La Rejunta* are called the *majordomos*. It's an honour to be chosen and so many people want to do it that the waiting list is full until 2046.

The stages in the organisation of *La Rejunta* are the same every year. Tradition is important to the Milpa Alta people. Corn has been grown here for hundreds of years and the name of the region means 'high cornfield'. Local farmers grow most of the corn, meat, and vegetables needed as ingredients for the meal. And a year before the event, the men go to the forest and collect wood that they pile up high near the home of the *majordomo* so that it will be properly dried before it's used for open-air cooking. This year's *majordomos* are Virginia Meza Torres and her husband Fermín Lara Jiménez. 'There is an infinity of things to do,' Virginia Meza Torres says firmly, as if to indicate there is no time to talk. Virginia is heading to the local offices to get the necessary permits and Fermín sets off into the countryside in search of more ingredients. They leave their daughter Montserrat Lara Meza in charge. She is a 24-year-old graduate student who's come home to help her parents for the week. Volunteers are starting to arrive and Montserrat wanders down the hill to a shed to see how the toasting of the corn is going. Everything is made from the basics – no instant mixes or other culinary shortcuts are allowed.

Such traditional approaches are part of everyday life here. Eating together is perhaps the most important example. 'In my experience, there is a glue, a bonding, that comes from the time together at the table,' says Josefina García Jiménez. She often cooks for her nieces and nephews and says, 'It feels like I am passing down a tradition, and when it comes to their turn to be adults, they will remember what I have done. Here we have time to cook, time to think just what ingredients are needed, time to show our kids through cooking that we love them.'

When the day of *La Rejunta* arrives, the volunteers have been up all night, though no one admits to feeling tired. Fermín has made sure there are enough tamales for everyone, and the head cook has been stirring the *atole* (chocolate drink) all night. After a 14-year wait, and a full year of preparation, it's almost time for Fermín and Virginia to hand over responsibility to the next *majordomos*. But first, there are thousands of cups of *atole* to serve.

glossary

culinary (adj) related to cooking

tamales (n) a type of food made from corn with a variety of fillings

pilgrim (n) a person who travels to a holy place

shortcut (n) a quick route to somewhere or a quick way of doing something