Forget grubs, sheep’s eyes, and moss; the ultimate in exotic culinary experience must surely be the eating of human flesh. Pork most closely resembles it in taste and texture, said the Aztec of Central Mexico, who before the arrival of the Spanish in 1519 were enthusiastic practitioners of cannibalism, and who in the 1520s received domesticated pigs from the Spanish invaders. The similarities probably reflect the diet of swine, which, like people, are omnivores and lack the delicate flavor of grains, roughage, and flower-fed animals or the gamey bouquet of carnivores. Both species exercise just enough to keep some muscle tone but not so much as to be all gristle.

While there is no doubt that the Aztecs were cannibals — they readily admitted it to Spanish chroniclers — they had strict rules about when human flesh could be eaten, who could consume it, and who were to be the guests at the banquets that occurred in the annual cycle of agricultural rituals. They did not practice a culinary free-for-all in which anyone could unexpectedly end up as the pièce de résistance. Nor did they gulltously inhale every single morsel of the body. Instead, consumption of another person was intimately tied to ideas of transforming human flesh into a highly potent substance that conveyed life force and that could be eaten only by other people who were already halfway to being gods themselves.

**BANQUETING OCCASIONS**

In the decades before the Spaniards arrived, the Aztecs had integrated the consumption of human flesh into a complex set of rituals tied to the 365-day agricultural year. Through costume they transformed their victims into beings that personified food and useful plants, the earth in the cycle from sowing to harvest, or game animals. In one rite, for example, two Aztecs carried a sacrificial victim with arms and legs tied over a long pole, as if he were a deer. Later in that ceremony, noble participants ate small pieces of the man’s body. Occasionally, priests dressed the victims as enemies from the Aztec past, and ritually defeated them again. Usually, the Aztecs treated their victims as honored guests and adorbed them in the rain of the gods, which brings us to the question of who could be so dressed, altered into a spirit, and then eaten.

**WHO WAS THE ENTREE?**

The Aztecs rarely ate, or sacrificed, one another. For a few rituals, they chose victims from their own number, but these required special signs of supernatural selection and such individuals were difficult to find. For example, they sacrificed children in the springtime during times of drought, but only if those youngsters had two cowlicks. Instead, the intended victim was usually a captive or slave taken in battle or purchased for the occasion. In the former instance, a brave warrior nabbed a prisoner and returned with him to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, where he sometimes fed and housed his captive until the time of sacrifice. The purchase of an appropriate human offering required a sizeable outlay of resources that ordinary farmers, fishermen, or small merchants could not hope to amass.

Men of noble status with access to land and wealth sometimes sponsored a human sacrifice for the benefit of the entire city. Or an unfortunate victim might be acquired by a wealthy merchant, one of the pochteca (traveling traders) who were in the process of becoming highly influential in Aztec economic, social, and political life when the Spanish arrived. Other native peoples in Mexico feared and suspected the pochteca because they also served as spies for the expansionist Aztec empire. The pochteca often disguised themselves to trade (and spy), lest their enemies seize and kill them. Old merchants warned the young not to leave captured comrades behind to fill an enemy’s cooking pot. Merchants often had to fight their way out of hostile villages, and many never returned home. Whether captured of purchased, the sacrificial victims were people from outside Aztec society. Often, they did not speak the language or know the customs, and they had no kin to speak up for their lives.

**TONALI, THE "LIFE FORCE"**

The Aztecs considered the human body to be equivalent to corn. Modern speakers of Nahualt, the language of the Aztecs,
The pre-Columbian rain god Tláloc wears elaborate feathered and jeweled ornaments to express his life force, or tonalli, and to establish his identity. The Aztecs dressed human beings in the costume of this deity to transform them into living images of the gods and to confer vital powers on them. After death, the souls of Aztec nobles became rain spirits in the forms of clouds, mists, and fog.

The difference between human and "divine" being was in large part a difference in the amount of tonalli that each contained.

GUESTS AT THE BANQUET

The emperor, nobles, and high-ranking soldiers were the most consistent consumers at cannibalistic rites. Occasionally guests included warriors or merchants, and especially the men who provided the human sacrifices and their families. In public, the emperor dressed splendidly in intricately woven clothing, magnificent jewelry in precious stones and gold, and iridescent quetzal feathers as evidence of his strong tonalli. Nobles, the Aztecs believed, had tonalli different from that of ordinary men and women. They, too, were granted special, rich clothing, as were warriors who had proven the strength of vital powers through their bravery and survival of many battles. Only those who already possessed great tonalli could expect to receive additional life force. Their vital powers placed them between the average human being and the gods, and like the gods, they were fortified with the tonalli of others.

After the Aztec said, the character of an individual's tonalli was clearly revealed. Out of the body, the vital forces of common men and women became weak, skimp, or other smelly animals with unsavory habits. Those of nobles transformed into the mists and fogs that brought life-giving rains of the wet, agricultural season. Nobles achieved the status of deities after death. They did not just become dead ancestors but in essence revealed their nature as life-sustaining rain gods.

On one level, human flesh was part of a natural cycle. The sun gave warmth, and the corn sealed its energy in juicy kernels. Then people ate maize and turned it into flesh. In exchange, the Aztecs, common and noble, often offered their blood (which they believed carried tonalli) to the gods, to replace the life force that the deities originally gave to the sun and to replace the life force the sun showered onto the earth.

A costume, rich jewelry, and feathered ornaments transformed a human being into the living image of a god by adding to his or her tonalli. Nobles, and sometimes valiant warriors and wealthy merchants, consumed part of that tonalli-charged body, because high-status people were already tonalli-rich. After their deaths, although their bodily parts might also be eaten by the earth, their tonalli transformed into rain clouds and mists. In the wet season, their life forces thundered across the wide Valley of Mexico, watering it and making the plants, and especially the maize, bloom and grow.

If a common man could not join a ritual meal of human flesh, he could hope that the tonalli of the nobles — future rain spirits — would be fed and grow strong. In the ritual consumption of flesh, the human body was no longer present. Instead, the near, or soon-to-be, god ate the image of the god, as the living nobles gained vital power that they would use after death for the benefit of everyone.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Kaiser Library and Verlaganstalt of Graz, Austria, for its generous permission to publish illustrations from its facsimile editions of Codex Laud and Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I. I would also like to thank Peter T. Forst for sharing his photographs.

For Further Reading