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5 Mayan Foods You Should Eat Before the World Comes to an End

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The Mayan organizational pyramid—perhaps easier to understand than their calendar. (Credit: Gianni Dagli Orti/CORBIS)

With the Mayan calendar coming to an end this Friday, December 21, many of you, **faced with the possibility of apocalypse (or maybe not)**, are asking a lot of questions: Who are the Maya? What are their beliefs? And if it really is the end of the world, why couldn't they have extended their calendar a little bit longer, say, until the new season of *Downton Abbey* had aired in the U.S.?

Sadly, we have no answers for you (beyond "Google it"), but we can tell you about the cuisine of this Central American people. Beyond their prehistoric knowledge of architecture and the cosmos, the Maya also worshiped their local foods and were apt to discover sustainable and healthful edibles—like these five versatile, flavorful, and functional ingredients. Try them, well, let's just say as soon as you possibly can.



Chayote (Credit: Yarvin, Brian/the food passionates/Corbis)

1. Chayote: A member of the gourd family and about the size of a pear, the Maya peoples say that chayote is vital for survival; it's what they cooked, usually by steaming, to get through food shortages. "I like chayote because of its neutral taste—I can use it in a variety of dishes," says Noe Bernardo García, executive chef at Sal y Fuego in Playa del Carmen, on Mexico's so-called Mayan Riviera. "The chayote is used in a variety of dishes such as soups, purees, and in desserts. I love to cook it as puree and adapt it to fish and reef lobster."

Chayote can be eaten raw or cooked (as in our **Sautéed Chayote with Garlic and Herbs**), and the seeds are edible, too, with a taste much like a young almond, says Laura Brea, chef and owner of El Tabano in Tulum, Mexico. It's also known as the vegetable pear and, in Louisiana, the mirliton. (Oh, look! Here's our **mirliton relish** recipe.)

2. Chia Seeds: First there were Chia Pets. Now there are bottled chia drinks. But before all of that, the Maya used chia as a food supplement for their warriors, who could endure hunger for 24 hours thanks to the seeds' nutritional density: they're rich in omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, protein, and fiber. "Women were responsible for providing this type of food so that their husbands were able to defend their territory," says García, who likes to roast them or use them as a crust for fish. The tiny black or white seeds, which have a very light nutty flavor, are actually quite easy to incorporate into everything you eat, from sprinkling them on yogurt, salads, and cereals to mixing them into smoothies and BA's limeade.

3. Chaya Leaves: Growing wild in the jungles of the Riviera Maya, chaya "is our local spinach," says Brea, "with many of the properties a green leaf has, except it is a bit crunchier and the white milk it bleeds when you cut it can give you a rash, similar to poison ivy." While some say the leaves are toxic if eaten raw, in small amounts—as part of a smoothie or juice—they're a natural diuretic and have the light but grassy taste of pea shoots, but with the texture and bitterness of kale. "Cooked as a veggie," says Brea, "it functions just like spinach."

Chaya can be hard to find in the U.S., but if you get your hands on some, try García's recipes:

Lime Juice with Chaya

3 liters of water
10-20 chaya leaves
7 limes
Sugar to taste

Blend chaya leaves with a little water, drain, and add remaining pulp to water. Squeeze the limes and add to the water. Mix and sweeten with sugar.

Chaya Gordita Appetizer

Serves 5

7 fresh Chaya leaves, well-washed and chopped
7/8 cup of Masa de Maiz (corn dough)
4 teaspoons of pure water
2 tablespoons butter
1 3/4 teaspoons salt
3/4 cup of roasted corn
3/4 ounce Edam cheese
1 hard-boiled egg, sliced
2/5 cup of Yucatecan Chiltomate (Habanero Sauce)

Mix the dough with salt then add butter and the chopped chaya. Mix well and add the crushed roasted corn and water until the dough becomes smooth and manageable to make the gorditas in shape of tortillas. Fry the gorditas on a griddle or in a pan until golden brown and fully cooked.

Serve in a bowl and add the grated Edam cheese and the sliced egg.

Garnish the egg with a spoonful of Yucatecan Chiltomate.

Yucatecan Chiltomate

Mix 3 roasted tomatoes, ½ cup of chopped cilantro and ½ cup of onion and salt and pepper to taste. Grind all these ingredients in a food processor and leave as a rustic tomato sauce.

4. Jicama: High in water content and reminiscent of an Asian pear or radish, jicama was used by the Maya in two different ways. Its tuberous roots, now widely available in the U.S., were a crunchy, sweet, and refreshing food—"almost always used raw with chili powder and lemon," says Brea—and its stalk served as a pesticide for crops. So, like, don't eat the leaves! Instead, try one of our recipes:

Shrimp, Lobster, and Jicama Salad

Jicama-Sesame Slaw

Black Bean, Jicama, and Grilled Corn Salad

Trout with Red Cabbage, Jicama, and Chipotle Slaw

Fresh Vegetable Pickles

5. Hominy: Once worth its weight in gold, maize was considered a sacred grain by the Maya, who used it in large ceremonies, says García. "When the Mayans harvested corn, they paid tribute to the god of rain for listening and being blessed with it," he says. Often, they turned corn into hominy (sometimes called posole) by soaking maize kernels in an alkali solution of either lime or lye. Today chefs use hominy whole in soups or grind it up to make a polenta. Try one of our recipes:

Pork and Hominy Stew

New Mexico Chile-Glazed Chicken on Hominy Polenta

Roast Salmon with Sweet Chipotle Glaze and Hominy Puree

Hominy, Tomato, and Chili Soup

Posole with Red Chile

—Amy Sung

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