

Locals try to save threatened, traditional 'Mexican caviar'

October 10 2022, by Fabiola Sánchez



A dead axayacatl, a type of water bug, floats on the waters of Lake Texcoco, near Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. The insects eggs are consumed as ahuate, known as the Mexican caviar. Ahuate is threatened by the drying out of Lake Texcoco, development around the lakeshore and waning interest in the ingredient among younger generations. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano

In a shallow lake on the outskirts of Mexico City, a handful of farmers still harvest the eggs of an evasive, fingertip-size water bug in a bid to keep alive a culinary tradition dating at least to the Aztec empire.

Caviar is typically associated sturgeons swimming the Caspian Sea, but the Mexican version is made from the tiny eggs of the an aquatic insect of the corixidae family, also know as the "bird fly," because birds like to eat it. Similar bugs are often known as "water boatmen" in English, because of the way they seem to row in ponds and streams.

The bug, which only occasionally surfaces before diving again in a trail of bubbles, would not look like food to most, but it was once important to the people of the Valley of Mexico.

For Juan Hernández, a farmer from San Cristóbal Nezquipayac, cultivating and collecting the tiny insect eggs known as "ahuautle"—meaning water amaranth in Nahuatl—is a way of life.

"For me, more than anything, it means tradition," said the 59-year-old Hernández. He is one of only six people known to still harvest ahuautle, at least in the Texcoco area, they fear they may be the last.

The painstaking collection of "Mexican caviar," known for its intense but delicate flavor, is threatened by the drying out of Lake Texcoco, development around the lakeshore and waning interest in the ingredient among younger generations, said Jorge Ocampo, agrarian history coordinator at the Center for Economic, Social and Technological Research on Agribusiness and World Agriculture in Mexico State.



Ahuautle, also known as the Mexican caviar is harvested from pine needles in Lake Texcoco, near to Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. Ahuautle was once an important food to the people of the Valley of Mexico. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano

Ocampo called the dish's survival an example of "community resistance," similar to the way in which inhabitants around Lake Texcoco—a shallow, saline lake that once covered most of the eastern half of the Mexico City valley—have managed to preserve other traditions, festivals and ceremonies.

For Hernández, it's hard, dirty work that few are willing to do anymore.

Dressed in a hat, long-sleeved shirt, shorts and rubber boots, Hernández wades through the calf-high waters of Nabor Carrillo—a smallish lake formed from the remnants of Texcoco—to collect pine branches he had poked into the muddy lakebed the week before.

The branches serve as an anchor for the bird-fly bugs to deposit their eggs.

Under a blazing sun and accompanied by the calls of hundreds of herons, plovers and other migratory birds that stop at the lakes, Hernández gathers dozens of egg-coated sticks and lays them on a raft of styrofoam.



Ahuautle, the eggs of the axayacatl, a type of an aquatic insect, are seen attached

to pine needles before being harvested at Lake Texcoco, near to Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. The tiny insect eggs known as "ahuautle" are part of a culinary tradition dating at least to the Aztec empire that a few local farmers are trying to keep alive. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano

"We look for them along the edges of the lake, where the flies are more active," Hernández said. He started as a young man, after a period of joblessness, joining about four dozen other local residents who used to work the lakes during the ahuautle season—the rainy period from June through September.

After about two hours, Hernández has gathered a heap of sticks covered with thousands of bird-fly eggs.

He returns to the edge of the lake to lay the sticks out to dry in the sun, which can take several hours or days, depending on the weather.

"Cleaning is a process that takes a lot of work," said Hernández, as he rubs his hand over the sticks to remove the eggs, which he then places on a piece of cloth.

Later, he takes the eggs home and runs them through a sieve to remove any bits of pine bark or mud. Then he packs them in bags he offers for sale.



Juan Hernandez collects ahuautle, or the eggs of the Axayacatl, a type of water bug, on Lake Texcoco, near to Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022 For Hernandez, a farmer from San Cristóbal Nezquipayac, cultivating and collecting the tiny insect eggs is a way of life. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano

While Hernández takes care of collecting the eggs, restaurant owner Gustavo Guerrero serves them to customers at his eatery in the east-side borough of Iztapalapa.

One of Guerrero's favorite recipes is to mix the ahuautle with breadcrumbs and bind them with eggs to form a croquette, which he

then fries and serves with green tomatillo sauce, nopal cactus and squash flowers—all pre-Hispanic ingredients.

"Eating this is like revisiting the past," said Guerrero, 61. He says the flavor of the ahuatele reminds him of his childhood, when his mother cooked the dish according to a recipe she learned from her grandmother.

But Guerrero acknowledges that "Mexican caviar" is at risk of disappearing because younger generations aren't familiar with the dish, and ever-fewer people harvest it in the scarce remaining lakes where it is found.



A cook prepares green sauce to accompany a pre-hispanic recipe made with ahuatele in Iztapalapa, near Mexico City, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. Ahuatele

or the tiny eggs of the an aquatic insect of the corixidae family, also know as the "bird fly," is known for its intense but delicate flavor. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano

Ahuautle is also at risk of becoming only a gourmet dish for the rich: A kilogram of the eggs can sell for the equivalent of \$50 (roughly \$25 a pound).

Insects, their eggs and larvae have been a part of Mexico's cuisine for hundreds or thousands of years. Edday Farfán, an entomologist at Mexico's National Autonomous University, said there are more than 430 species of edible insects in Mexico.

Farfán has been studying bird flies since 2016, and even has one tattooed on his arm.

Farfán said indigenous peoples living around the lakes adopted the insect eggs as a source of protein because prior to the Spanish conquest of 1521, they had few domesticated animals or livestock.

But now, Farfán said, the dish "is associated with the countryside, perhaps with poverty, as if it were an undesirable protein."



A bowl of ahuautle sits ready for the preparation of a pre-hispanic dish at a restaurant in Iztapalapa, near Mexico City, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. Ahuautle is also at risk of becoming only a gourmet dish for the rich: A kilogram of the eggs can sell for the equivalent of \$50 (roughly \$25 a pound). Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Juan Hernandez enters Lake Texcoco to collecting ahuatele, also known as the Mexican caviar, near to Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. Hernandez wades through the calf-high waters towards the pine branches he had poked into the muddy lakebed the week before, where the bird-fly bugs deposit their eggs he collects. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Juan Hernandez cleans ahuatele, known as the Mexican caviar, in Texcoco, near to Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. "Cleaning is a process that takes a lot of work," said Hernández, as he rubs his hand over the sticks to remove the eggs, which he then places on a piece of cloth. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Croquettes made with ahuautle, known as Mexican caviar, are served at a restaurant in Iztapalapa, near Mexico City, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. "Eating this is like revisiting the past," said restaurant owner Gustavo Guerrero. He adds that the flavor of the ahuautle reminds him of his childhood, when his mother cooked the dish according to a recipe she learned from her grandmother. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Juan Hernandez, front, and a friend arrive at Lake Texcoco lake to harvest ahuaute, the eggs of the Axayacatl, a type of water bug, near Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. "We look for them along the edges of the lake, where the flies are more active," Hernandez said. He started as a young man, after a period of joblessness, joining about four dozen other local residents who used to work the lakes during the ahuaute season, the rainy period from June through September. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Dry axayacatl, a type of water bug, are displayed at a restaurant that specializes in pre-Hispanic dishes in Iztapalapa, near Mexico City, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. Framers harvest the eggs of this evasive, fingertip-size water bug in a bid to keep alive a culinary tradition dating at least to the Aztec empire. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Ahuautle, the eggs of the Axayacatl, a type of water bug, are collected on pine needles after harvesting at Lake Texcoco, near Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. The eggs are run through a sieve to remove any bits of pine bark or mud. Then they are packed in bags for sale. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Juan Hernandez drags a styrofoam raft to harvest ahuatele, the eggs of the Axayacatl, a type of water bug, known as the Mexican caviar, at Lake Texcoco, near Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022 For Hernandez, it's hard, dirty work that few are willing to do anymore. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Ahuautle, known as Mexican caviar, is displayed at a restaurant specialized in pre-hispanic dishes in Iztapalapa, near Mexico City, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. Ahuautle or the tiny eggs of an aquatic insect of the corixidae family, was once an important food to the people of the Valley of Mexico. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Juan Hernandez prepares to harvest ahuatele, the eggs of the axayacatl, a type of water bug, at Lake Texcoco, near Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. For Hernandez, a farmer from San Cristóbal Nezquipayac, cultivating and collecting the tiny insect eggs is a way of life. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



A water fowl flies over Lake Texcoco where Ahuautle, the eggs of the Axayacatl, a type of water bug, are cultivated and harvested, near Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. In this shallow lake a handful of farmers still harvest ahuautle, the eggs of an evasive, fingertip-size water bug in a bid to keep alive a culinary tradition dating at least to the Aztec empire. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Juan Hernandez drags a styrofoam raft with with pine needles loaded with Ahuautle, the eggs eggs of the axayacatl, a type of water bug, in Lake Texcoco, near Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. In this shallow lake a handful of farmers like Hernandez still harvest ahuautle in a bid to keep alive a culinary tradition dating at least to the Aztec empire. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Pumpkin flowers are prepared to accompany a pre-hispanic recipe made with ahuate, known as Mexican caviar, at a restaurant in Iztapalapa, near Mexico City, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. According to Jorge Ocampo, agrarian history coordinator at the Center for Economic, Social and Technological Research on Agribusiness and World Agriculture in Mexico State, the painstaking collection of ahuate, "known for its intense but delicate flavor, is threatened by the drying out of Lake Texcoco, development around the lakeshore and waning interest in the ingredient among younger generations. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano



Juan Hernandez collects ahuautle, the eggs of the axayacatl, a type of water bug, on Lake Texcoco, near Mexico City, Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. Hernandez is one of only six people known to still harvest ahuautle, at least in the Texcoco area, they fear they may be the last. Credit: AP Photo/Fernando Llano

Even those still familiar with ahuautle often consider the insects that produce it to be feed for chickens or turkeys, and may think of it literally as "for the birds."

With the odds stacked against it, there is no guarantee that Mexican caviar will even be a choice for future generations.

"There are a lot of kids, young people who don't eat it anymore, they don't like it," Hernández admits.

"Now we are just keeping ahuatele alive," he said. "I hope it doesn't disappear, because it is a source in income for those of us who live off the land."

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