Latin American Experiential Report: *Rajas con queso y crema*

Prompt for experiential report: Shop for and make *rajas con queso y crema mexicana*, a Mexican dish; and record the experience using a rubric about food and human interaction.

Guest Expert: Doña Cynthia Garcia-Macedonio

Sample Student Reports

- Alex L
- Sofia FC
- Evan C
- Emma H
- Lyla P

Sample student responses to the market experience:

“As I walked around the store, I’m sure that I looked a bit lost and confused. I was. The choices, the selections, and the language all made the store a bit overwhelming. But as I have said before, I love supermarkets and stores, so this made it just more fun. I say this because as I was looking around, a woman came up to me. She was older, not as old as my own grandmother, but probably a grandmother to someone. She spoke both English and Spanish, and asked if I needed help finding something. I laughed. I told her that I thought I was pretending not to be confused and that it was working. She smiled and asked why I was here. So I gave a brief explanation of our Neuroscience class, and that I had to make Rajas Con Queso Oaxaca. I don’t think I have ever seen someone’s face light up as fast as hers did. She quickly shuffled around me and encouraged me to follow her with a slight wave of her arm. As she walked very fast, she told me that that dish was one of her favorite things and that her husband was from Oaxaca, so her mother-in-law had taught her how to make the dish. She helped me find everything while explaining that her favorite part was how easy the dish was. I asked her if she had a recipe she loved using or was a family one - she laughed.
“Dear, I don’t use a recipe. Ask any Oaxcan if they use a recipe for that dish, and the answer will be no.” I smiled, instantly reminded of my own parents and their love of just going with it, never

needing to see the measurements but reading a recipe once to see the contents of a dish which they would then make their own. “

“People were talking to each other in both English and Spanish, and the atmosphere felt warm and community-focused. A particularly representative moment occurred when Emma and I needed help finding the right cheese for our recipe. Unsure of where the Oaxaca cheese was located, we approached a nearby employee. She smiled warmly and led us directly to the refrigerated section, pointing out a few different brands and explaining which one melts best. Her guidance felt personal and encouraging. I appreciated that she didn’t just point and leave, she took a moment to help us understand the difference between the cheeses. Emma and I looked at the labels together, thanked her, and grabbed the one she recommended.”

“The market appeared as a go-to grocery store for many families as they appeared to be picking up ingredients for dishes that they would make throughout the week after their work or other obligations. I saw many people that were perusing the aisles, looking for familiar ingredients as well as those I had never seen before. One particular aisle that was fascinating was the lining up of dried peppers, chiles, and spices/seasonings that were in bins and you could take as much or as little as you needed. I had seen this before in the Chinese grocery store 99 Ranch that my family frequents in regard to fish balls that are put in hot pots or soups in Chinese cuisine, but I found it super interesting to see how other cultures also implemented similar concepts.”

“After a long day, I was not in the best emotional mood when setting off on this market visit, and after finally finding a parking spot amongst a crowded hubbub of busy shoppers and eager cars, I was somewhat impatient to start this experience. However, from the first moments I stepped into the market, a smile returned to my face. The walls draped with pinatas brought up fond memories of family parties and the delicious dishes accompanying them. I immediately grabbed a bottle of fresh Horchata, excited for the sweet refresh, and headed into the produce aisle. I was shopping with my mom, who was very familiar with the market so I had no trouble locating the fresh peppers. Although after closer inspection I realised that there were no specifically labeled Pobalno chiles. After a short conversation it was clear: Pasilla chiles were also commonly called Poblano chiles. We made our way throughout the store collecting all ingredients and even dancing through the aisle to the Mexican dance songs floating down through the speakers.”

Sample student responses about the cooking experience:

“While my mom accompanied me to the market, I prepared the dish entirely on my own. I started by halving the recipe then adjusting the measurements slightly: using 2 large peppers instead of 5, and one half brown onion instead of 2. The recipe had not specified which type of onion to use, but I had often seen my grandmother cooking with brown/yellow onions at home.

Though Korean cuisine is very different from Latin American, I felt more familiar with the brown onion having seen my grandmother use it in my memories of my weekly dinners.

I roasted the peppers on a pan-- something I nor my family had ever really done before. I used the ziploc bag steam hack to peel the charred skin off and then sliced the peppers into strips after removing the seeds. This specific step was very new to me and I was shocked by how efficient and effective it was. I had not cooked with chicken stock/granules before so I opted out of this step in the recipe. I was excited to try the Oaxacan cheese which seemed similar in texture to mozzarella. I noted that the recipe said they were interchangeable.

One aspect I wanted to research further from this recipe was the historical significance of the corn tortilla. Growing up, my mom had always bought flour tortillas for our quesadillas, and at restaurants, I'd learned to follow her example by requesting my tacos on flour tortillas. This preference was not one I had investigated on my own, but through the Rajas con Queso recipe's specific note for corn tortillas, I became curious. According to El Pollo Norteño, a small chain of authentic Mexican restaurants, corn tortillas were the first type of tortilla and are known as the most traditional.[1] Similar to the African American Experiential report on Grits, corn was and still is an integral part of each respective cuisine and had origins rooted in indigenous civilizations in early North America. "

"I picked up the ingredients around the store based on the recipe. I actually already had corn oil at home due to its high smoke point making it very versatile for frying and cooking. The other ingredients included the poblanos, which are actually also labeled as pasillas, the onions, Oaxacan cheese, sour cream, chicken bouillon, and tortillas to eat it with. We also made some carne asada that we had to pair with the rajas con queso.

I decided to roast the chiles directly on the open fire, which was a really simple but effective process to get them charred and blackened. After, they were wrapped in a paper towel and placed in a zip lock bag to steam; while they steamed, we prepared cutting onions. Then, we used a paper towel to rub the blackened portions off of the chiles to reveal the soft flesh. To cut it into strips, we first discarded the top and then sliced the pepper down the middle to discard the seeds and ribs before slicing it. Combining it with the onions in a saucepan with the oil, we sauteed them down into soft. We decided to switch it into a larger stockpot to prevent spillage, especially after we added the liquids of sour cream and oaxacan cheese (and the bouillon).

To serve, we decided to heat up the tortillas with a similar method as the peppers, flipping them quickly around on the open fire. The rajas con queso was very comforting and warming; the combined creamy texture that came from the soft vegetables and dairy products made a smooth texture that paired well with the hot tortilla, and it just felt very reassuring overall."

"Though I had heard of using the open fire to roast the peppers before, I had never actually tried it. I think this experience was very valuable to me as it provided me with a new cooking technique that I can also apply to other recipes I use in my daily life. I think it was actually very efficient and provided a unique depth of flavor that could not be achieved otherwise. For

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example, I envision doing the same thing with bell peppers or even baked goods in things like tinfoil.

I had also not tried Oaxacan cheese before this, and I think it provided a very good texture to the dish overall; its properties are very similar to that of mozzarella cheese, but I think the firmer texture actually allows it to absorb/be a foundation to more flavor, and it balances out the savoriness of the dish well with a slight tartness that fits with the sour cream.

I also conducted a little bit of research on the differences between poblano peppers and pasilla peppers since I noticed that they were marked the same in the grocery store at the checkout stand. It turns out that they are not the same type of pepper. Poblanos refer to a type of fresh pepper, and pasillas are a type of dried pepper, but they aren't actually the same. The dried version of poblanos are actually known as "anchos" while the fresh version of pasillas are "chilacas." They similar marking comes from their similar properties in how they look and taste, but it is important to note their technical differences."