



EXPLORING THE MYTH OF MATA ORTIZ

By Lynne Doyle

Lynne Doyle is a frequent contributor to Mexico File, with a number of book reviews and accounts of her searches for Mexican folk art. She hails from Maine.

I have never been a big fan of Mata Ortiz pottery. Its primarily neutral colors and meticulously even geometric designs don't say "Mexico" to me and I have been skeptical of paying such extremely high prices for pottery that I don't much like, even if it is great art. However, as a lifelong student as well as a teacher of university-level courses on the indigenous arts of Mexico, I know that you can't just dismiss a genre that represents perhaps one of the best-known art forms to come out of Mexico. So, I acquired a couple of minor pieces of Mata Ortiz and some books and videos for my students and let it go at that. Until now.

This past fall, my husband and I drove from Tucson on a kind of wandering tour of the northwestern states of Mexico (Sonora, Chihuahua and Sinaloa) just for the experience of it. The only set goal we had was to see the Copper Canyon, but when we discovered that in order to get back to Arizona from Chihuahua, we would have to pass Casas Grandes, we decided to add a peek at Mata Ortiz to our itinerary.

We drove from the capital city of Chihuahua northwest to Casas Grandes and found the very nice Hotel Hacienda in Nuevo Casas Grandes. Supposedly, there is a hotel right in the village of Mata Ortiz called The Adobe Inn that has about ten rooms. However, I did not see this place, and I was told that when the villagers wanted to take showers, they visited relatives in Casas Grandes, so I wasn't



A splendid collection of Mata Ortiz pottery

much prompted to look for it. Because of the extreme heat and humidity in this area of the country, even in September, we were looking for a hotel with a pool along with our usual requirements of hot water with decent pressure and AC that worked. I can't say enough good things about this hotel way out in the middle of nowhere. The grounds are lovely and well tended, the large pool is clean and cool, and the restaurant



The lovely Hotel Hacienda is an oasis of tranquility in the summer of northwestern Mexico and has a particularly delightful ambiance at night.

is surprisingly good (although not inexpensive). The hotel staff was beyond accommodating and helpful. We were in a part of Mexico we knew little about and without the help and guidance of the desk staff and the various people they summoned to show

us around, we would have been lost. Once they learned of our interest in Mata Ortiz, they took our education in hand and made sure that by the time we left, we knew all there was to know about the village, the pottery, and the surrounding towns of Casas Grandes and Nuevo Casas Grandes, as well as the ancient site of Paquime, where the whole legend of Mata Ortiz began.

The towns of Casas Grandes and Nuevo Casas Grandes are 5,000 feet above sea level and are separated by Rio Casas Grandes. Casas Grandes was established by Franciscan missionaries in the late 1500's and today is an industrial little town with a population of 20,000, many of whom are employed in American maquiladoras. Nuevo Casas Grandes was originally one of twelve Mormon settlements founded in the 1890's during the presidency of Porfirio Diaz. Under an agreement with Diaz, the Mormons purchased land at a premium with the understanding that there would be no practice of polygamy and that they would share their superior farming technologies with the Mexican farmers in the area. The Mormon groups introduced the commercialized apple industry to Mexico and

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The talk show echo chamber's latest outrage has been about a little comic-book style, 31-page pamphlet published by the Mexican government that translates as "Guide for the Mexican Migrant." The pundits and their dazed, lemming followers wail and hand-wring, asserting that the Mexican feds have no right telling their citizens how to stay alive and out of trouble as they travel long distances to find the back-breaking work that will enable them to feed their families.

The book contains seditious passages, such as "some practical advice that could be useful if you have made the difficult decision to seek new labor opportunities outside your country," and this: "The safe way to enter another country is to obtain your passport from the Mexican Foreign Ministry, and a visa from the embassy or consulate of the country to which you wish to travel." Yeah, this is some dangerous stuff, all right.

The guide goes on to give advice regarding dangers that might be encountered, like walking in the desert in the heat of the day instead of at night, using train tracks or trails as guides if lost, warnings about working with unscrupulous "coyotes," advice not to use false documents in trying to enter another country, and not to resist arrest if apprehended. The nerve of these guys, huh?

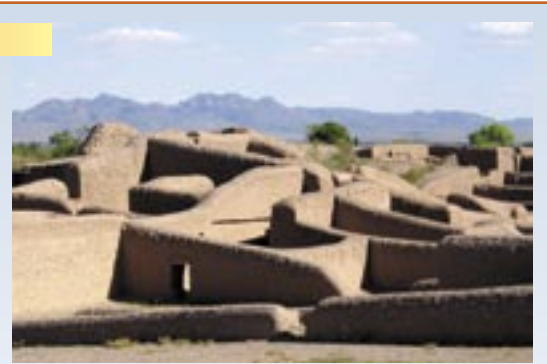
The truth of the matter is that "they" will come as long as there is work, and there will be work as long as the U.S. government chooses not to punish those who hire the workers. It is that transparently simple. Major manufacturing, farming, restaurant and construction lobbyists spend millions of dollars a year to keep the cheap labor force flowing north, and as long as they do, nothing will change. As Caesar noted "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves...."

Mata Ortiz *Continued*

also raised turkeys, apricots, peaches and pecans. They left during the Revolution and went to El Paso, but most came back when the war ended and intermarried with the Mexicans. Today both towns are clean and prosperous, with many of the residents speaking English and traveling regularly across the border to shop for clothes and groceries. Some of them even keep post office boxes in the US because mail delivery is easier and more reliable.

The very affluent Mormon barrio of Colonia Juarez (pop. 5,000) with its ornate temple exists happily side by side with its neighbors, populated by many blonde, non-Mexican appearing people. It has a Catholic church but no bars or liquor stores and many very American-looking two-story and Victorian houses with front porches. Unlike the Mennonite communicantes of Northwestern Mexico, the Mormons of the area are very involved in Mexican society and politics and work hard to improve the lot of Mexicans around them. Their excellent bilingual elementary and secondary schools are open to Mexican children, as are their many and varied after-school programs in the arts and athletics. A Mormon politician from this district by the name of Federico Jones is said to be a powerhouse in the Mexican Federal Congress and was singularly responsible for the new highway connecting Casas Grandes and Mata Ortiz, thereby making the village more accessible to prospective buyers passing through the area.

Lying about fifteen minutes northeast of Casas Grandes, the ruins at Paquime (meaning "big house") were discovered and named by Francisco Ibarra in the late 1500's and today is a restored site unlike any other we have seen in Mexico. It is a series of roofless reconstructed clay structures snuggled into the mountainside that frankly is not terribly interesting. Obviously a much less sophisticated society than the southern Mayan, Aztec, Mixtec and Zapotec groups, the people of this pueblo created no elaborate architecture, intricate carvings or remarkable structures to tell us about their way of life. The city supposedly had a population of 2,000 people, 200 of whom were royalty, although it is totally beyond me how archeologists have been able to determine this. According to research, the city was built near a hot springs water source in the mountains and there are vestiges of an



The ancient settlement of Paquime lies in the blistering sun in the foothills of the Sierra Madres. It is unique among the ruins of Mexico in its simplicity, but has an impressive museum to interpret its history.

aqueduct system and storage pools that apparently supplied its needs, although the spring are dried up now due to volcanic activity. Our guide identified tiny structures within larger structures that he said had housed parrots, determined because archeologists found feathers. Otherwise, I can't say much about the site other than it was extremely hot and humid and infested with very aggressive insects. One should not visit here without equally aggressive repellent.

One marvelous positive to this site is a small air conditioned museum depicting the excavation and restoration of Paquime, as well as exhibiting original ceramic artifacts found there. One particularly large impressive piece has been crudely reassembled and from it, one can totally see where the inspiration for the pottery of Mata Ortiz came from. Additionally, there is a very nice gift shop that ships pottery to the states, and a great life-saving ice cream stand. However, I have to add that most of the exhibits were incomprehensible to me -- how anyone could tell what the people of Paquime wore from the mounds of dirt found at the site remains a mystery to me, particularly as neither the pottery or mounds found include any depiction of people or structures. However, the pottery shards are said to be authentic and are the root of the story of Mata Ortiz.

The founding father of Mata Ortiz pottery is the now 62-year old Juan Quezada. As a young man in the 1960's, Juan worked gathering wood in the mountains surrounding Casas Grandes and happened to find himself in the ruins of the village of Paquime. He found many shards of pottery believed to have been created and used by the people who lived there, and began to try to figure out how the original

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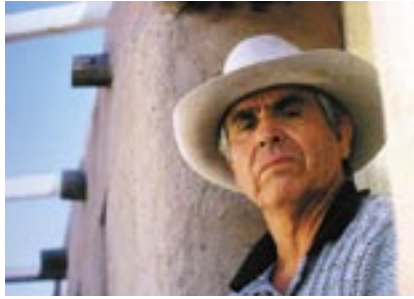
vessels had been created. Collecting many varieties and colors of clay from the surrounding hills, he experimented with techniques, tools and firing methods and eventually came up with a system by which he could recreate the same pottery textures. Fitting together the shards he found, he began to duplicate the intricate designs and patterns of the original pottery.

Unable to market his work in his own village, Quezada asked an American salesman passing through Casas Grandes to take some of his unsigned pots to the United States and try to sell them there. The man placed them in a small gift shop in New Mexico where they were seen by archeologist Spencer McCallum, who had worked on the restoration of Paquime and recognized the patterns and designs as reproductions of shards found there. He went looking for the artist responsible, assuming for some reason that it was a woman. Eventually he found Quezada and offered him \$100 a month to devote all his time to making the pots. At the same time, Quezada began to teach his techniques to his children, family members and other village artisans. At some point, he noticed the discrepancy between what he was receiving from McCallum and what the pots were selling for in the US and demanded more. Today his pieces sell for as much as \$3,500.

The town of Mata Ortiz was built in 1907 by a railroad magnate named Pearson (who



One of the most important exhibits at Paquime is this reconstructed artifact of an original olla. It is easy to correlate this 400-year-old 16" tall piece with those done today in Mata Ortiz.



Juan Quezada outside his home in Mata Ortiz, Mexico.

named it after himself), at a time when the burgeoning fruit industry in the area needed speedy, reliable shipping. In the 1950's the railroad moved and the town lost its economy and eventually renamed itself to honor renowned soldier Captain Juan Mata Ortiz. Today the tracks remain, although they are unused, and Quezada is single-handedly responsible both for saving the village and equipping its inhabitants with a way to provide for themselves.

As we crested the hill above the village on the new highway from Casas Grandes, I was stunned at the run-down main street, abandoned railroad station, and shabby little structure identified by our driver Raul as the home of Juan Quezada. Because Juan himself was in Chicago on the day that we arrived, Raul took us to the home of an American woman named Debbie Bugarini. Debbie is married to Enrique, a native of Mata Ortiz, and together they have built an addition onto their home where village potters can display and sell their work to passing visitors. Debbie also arranges demonstrations of pottery-making and serves lunches to tour groups in an effort to encourage guides to bring them to the village, which otherwise has no restaurants or public restrooms. In order to make these arrangements, Debbie and Enrique sacrificed their yard but theirs is also the only



A striking example of Mata Ortiz pottery, this 15-inch tall olla by Mureya Quezada sells for \$350 from the artist and probably double that from a dealer.

home in the village to have two modern bathrooms.

Debbie introduced us to Juan's daughter Mureya, an enormously talented artist in her own right whose pots command prices in excess of several hundred dollars each. She is the third of Juan's eight children, five of whom are involved in the pottery business, and she and her husband Andreas agreed to show us the process. When I commented on the relative humble appearance of Juan's home, she explained that he spends most of his money buying land in the mountains surrounding the area in an effort to protect both the town's clay deposits as well as to preserve the many archeological sites still unexcavated there. He also prefers to spend his time searching the hills for new clays and traveling to demonstrate and publicize the pottery, so is working only minimally as a potter now.



Another incredible creation on display at Debbie Bugarini's home gallery, this piece is 11 inches tall and the price on it is \$475.

Mureya escorted us through her yard into a small area covered by a tarp to provide some shade. There she proceeded to explain and demonstrate the process of creating a piece of Mata Ortiz pottery. She began with a short rope of clay about one inch thick, which she twisted into a circle inside a shallow plaster saucer, explaining as she worked that the potters of Mata Ortiz use no wheels in creating their pieces. The plaster saucer is a duplicate of pieces found in Paquime and helps to shape the round bottom of the piece. All work is done by hand with minimal hand tools and no speeding up of the process.

The base of the piece is formed in the saucer (Mata Ortiz pottery also does not stand straight by itself – each piece needs



Dos Restaurantes

Lynne Doyle is a longtime Mexico File subscriber and contributing editor from Maine. The object of the *Las Joyas de Mexico* feature is to highlight for MF readers some of the lesser-known but most rewarding of Mexico's geographic, human and artistic treasures. Lynne can be contacted at LinfordD@aol.com.

I don't go to Mexico for the food. I love it, but most of it doesn't love me, so where and what I eat when I'm traveling in Mexico is way down on my list of important considerations. Generally, I'm heavily dependent on Coke Light and happy if whatever I've eaten doesn't make me sick. However, just as the country is full of wonderful surprises with regard to everything else found there – like hotels, ruins, art, museums, and beaches – there are, here and there, some special restaurants that stand out above all the rest for one reason or another.



The open air patio at the rear of Casa de las Hotcakes is crowded and nothing matches anything else, but the atmosphere is friendly as the occupants of each table converse with each other, and the service is always pleasant and efficient in spite of the movement difficulties of the wait staff.

Two of my favorites could barely be more different from each other, nor could they be much further apart geographically, but they are nonetheless

special for very similar reasons. First of all – the atmosphere of friendliness and welcome Mexico is so famous for and that always speaks to me so deeply, and secondly – well, maybe firstly for most people – the simply great food they serve.



Part of the wonderful ambiance of Casa de las Hotcakes comes from the lush flowers and jungle plantlife cascading down the high walls surrounding the patio and the soothing sounds of the small mounted fountain that trickles above the heads of the diners.

On the Pacific coast, in the city of Puerto Vallarta – in Viejo Vallarta (not the new part of Vallarta that looks a lot like Cancun) – there is a little place called Memo's Casa de los Hotcakes. This little hole in the wall is located on Calle Basilio Badillo 289, very near Lucy's CuCu Cabana, maybe four or five blocks back from the beach. When you enter, it looks very unimposing -- sort of like a small sandwich bar -- except for the always long lines waiting to be seated. But once you get in, there is a small open area of closely-arranged umbrella tables placed around jungle vegetation growing on the high walls surrounding the little patio. About evenly populated by tourists and locals, this reasonably-priced little joint is a hidden treasure in a town filled with wallet-stretching gourmet restaurants owned by foreigners. Memo Barroso, the smiling Mexican owner, serves fresh-squeezed orange juice in large glasses, terrific coffee, and best of

all, every different kind of pancake known to man – all cooked to perfection and featuring fruit, sauces, soft butter and real maple syrup.

I have to be honest – left to my own devices, I probably never would have ventured into this place, but my husband – who definitely does travel on his stomach – decided just from the cooking smells he picked up on the sidewalk that it was worth the wait to investigate. In line for about twenty minutes before we got seated (another confession – lines make me very grouchy), I still wasn't convinced, but Bill was, just from watching the orders of other diners going by as we waited. However, once seated with coffee in front of me, I was a convert. I don't usually have great luck finding coffee hot enough for me in Mexico but when I do, my pleasure is all out of proportion. That first day, my husband ordered banana pancakes and I – not a big pancake person – ordered strawberries over the top of mine. Memo corrected me and pointed out the difference between toppings and true strawberry pancakes, and I can't say enough about the breakfast we were served, complete with bacon cooked thoroughly (also somewhat rare in Mexico).

Perhaps the best thing I can say about Casa de los Hotcakes is that for the rest of our three-week stay in PV, at Bill's prompting, everything we did had to be scheduled around time to get there at least once a day. Also, I have recommended this restaurant to many friends and acquaintances visiting PV and all have come back raving about it. And I probably should add that there is not much in this world that can compare with Memo's chocolate pancakes.

In the city of Oaxaca, on the corner of Calle Garcia Virgil and Calle Humboldt, is another



The windows of Maria Bonita are open to the street and are decorated with intricate wrought iron and colorful blooming plants. Ceiling fans keep the tiny rooms comfortable year round.



During the annual Day of the Dead festival, Maria Bonita always has an offrenda and is illuminated by dimmed light highlighting the art on the walls and candles on the tables.

little hole in the wall restaurant called Maria Bonita. I don't know the name of the man who owns this neat little place, but he is fun and friendly and speaks almost perfect English. A friend brought me to Maria Bonita one night several years ago and I got into a discussion with the owner about the correct way to order lime in a drink so that I could get a section with juice instead of a twist. After much joking and laughing, he taught me what he felt would be a surefire Spanish phrase and made me the best gin and tonic I've ever had anywhere, not that this is such a tricky feat. (Incidentally, his phrase seldom works but I've learned to just hang on – in Mexico, almost everything is served with a plate of lime sections, so you can use those if in spite of your best efforts, you get a twist in your drink.)

Since that first visit, I have returned to Maria Bonita faithfully, bringing many friends and everyone has loved it. It is very small – the three tiny rooms can accommodate at most maybe 30 people at one time – but the rest rooms, although very tight, are clean and neat, and there is always an impressive exhibit of the work of some local artist featured on the walls. I cannot speak directly to most of the food because I always have the same thing – Maria's unsurpassed chicken consume and my personal favorite, chicken filets served with a mushroom sauce over rice – which is always excellent, but friends have ordered many other dishes and I have never heard a complaint. Perhaps the most praised is the Oaxacan sampler, a large platter

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Mata Ortiz *Continued*

a circular ring upon which to balance) and the rest is created by placing one ring of clay on top of another and working them to build the sides and top of the piece. Using her fingers and hands, Mureya works the piece and once it is shaped, the sides are smoothed out and dried in the sun for two or three days. At this point, the saucer is removed from the bottom and sand paper is used to polish and smooth the vessel, which is then wet down with cooking oils to further refine its surface. To get a pearly finish, the piece is then rubbed with deer bone or a smooth stone; if a shiny surface is not desired, the vessel is either patterned with small indentations or left as is.

After another short period of sun drying, the desired design is drawn by the artist in pencil on the piece, although oftentimes a totally geometric pattern is done freehand. A pattern depicting four cycles of the sun is a common theme, as is a design of crosses that refer to solstices. Also a favorite is the marbling effect created by blending together different colored clays. Popular depictions on Mata Ortiz pottery are snakes, lizards, birds, bats, butterflies and deer.

After the design is painted on, the vessel is again burnished to set the design and then is preheated in a regular kitchen oven to prevent breakage during firing. The colors of rust, beige, white and black are natural colors, in most cases resulting from the kind of clay used, but also sometimes created from walnuts and soils mixed with water. Pieces of these colors can be fired at relatively low temperatures for short times. The colors of blue, gray, red and green are not natural and the minerals used to achieve them are hard to obtain and need much higher temperatures to



fire. Higher temperatures require a kiln, which most of the potters of Mata Ortiz do not have; therefore few artists use these colors. Also, colors other than earth tones and the use of kilns were allegedly not part of the original Paquime tradition and some purist dealers and collectors are very against their use in Mata Ortiz pottery, feeling that they put the authenticity of the pottery in question. American art dealers in particular want the work to be entirely handmade of all natural materials in order to justify the prices and feel very strongly about "commercializing" the pottery with colors. However, the second generation of potters now working are experimenting with what I feel are remarkable results and I personally am thankful that they are, as I much prefer the more colorful pieces.



These tiny brushes made of human hair are used to paint designs on Mata Ortiz pottery -- the smaller one on the left makes lines, the other is used to fill in the patterns.

Once the vessels are completed, they are placed on metal holders with larger clay vessels placed over them with space at the bottom for air to circulate. Pine, mesquite or cottonwood bark is then stacked in double layers around and over the larger vessel, tied with wire and doused with kerosene, and then lit on fire. When the wood is burnt to ash, usually in half to three-quarters of an hour, the ashes are raked away and the large covering vessel, once cooled, is lifted off and the finished pieces emerge. Gray/black clay once fired becomes white, dark brown clay cools to shades of rust. Marbled clays retain their distinct differentiations of color while often reversing from dark to light.

So, here is the story of the creation of Mata Ortiz pottery, as told to me by people who should know, positioned side by side with the inconsistencies of

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Mureya Quezada demonstrating a pot being built from the bottom up, using a crude knife to form the opening. She explained that usually, four out of five pots attempted are lost to collapse or breakage during the process.

Book Review

By Gale Randall



Enchanted Vagabonds

by Dana Lamb, in collaboration with June Cleveland
Long Riders' Guild Press,
\$25, 448 pages

I first encountered Dana Lamb's spellbinding adventure classic *Enchanted Vagabonds* in a library edition I'd read years ago. Assuming the narrative to be long out of print, I was delighted to discover a new paperback edition while browsing Amazon.com recently. What a find!

Enchanted Vagabonds chronicles Dana and his wife Ginger Lamb's groundbreaking 1930s voyage from Southern California along the west coast of Mexico and Central America all the way south to Panama. Friends since childhood and married only a year, the Santa Ana couple spend two years planning their adventure – gathering provisions, hardening their bodies, and building the 16-foot Vagabunda, a “mongrel boat, a sort of cross between an Eskimo kayak, a surfboat and a sailboat with canoe.” In a prelude to the narrative, Lamb admits that he and Ginger had talked of sailing “the whole distance to Panama.” But if the trip became too difficult or the craft unseaworthy, they'd agreed to explore only the coast of Lower California and the waters of the Gulf of California and “call it a day.”

Setting off Oct 9, 1933, to much fanfare, and with a minimum of provisions and less than \$5 between them, the couple get off to an inauspicious start, spending their first night on a sand spit at the southern end of San Diego Harbor. But three years and some 16,000 miles later the Lambs do reach Panama – exhausted, disheveled and more than a little world

weary, having experienced enough adventures to last a lifetime. En route they'd sailed through enormous waves and shark-infested waters, survived numerous wrecks and battled flesh-eating insects and malaria, met Indians both hostile and friendly, been stalked by jaguar and searched for lost cities in the jungle, and camped on fabled islands. One of the most intriguing episodes concerns their search for a legendary city in the Jalisco interior that seemed to emit an eerie drumbeat sound as the Lambs approached and which they couldn't quite identify. Were the explorers losing it at this point in their expedition or did the area actually give off such a sound? I'd love to know the identity of this ruined city. The Lambs later explore another jungle when they reach the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, trekking into the so-called Forbidden Land of Chiapas, an area they return to in a later expedition, and resulting in their equally fascinating book, *Quest for the Lost City*. Like *Enchanted Vagabonds*, *Quest for the Lost City* is again in print and available through Long Riders' Guild Press and Amazon.com (\$22). Beautifully written and with fascinating photos and maps, *Enchanted Vagabonds* and *Quest for the Lost City* are great reads you just won't be able to put down until you've lived with the Lambs through their very last adventure.

Book Review

by David Simmonds

The Salvation of La Purísima.

By T.M. Spooner. ISBN: 0-915745-55-0.
Florincanto Press.

Narrated by anthropology student, Paul Westin, this serious story of fiction grabs the reader instantly in describing a conversation among a group of illegal immigrants who are discussing a recent border crossing where one of their friends has died. As we learn more about the lives and characters of the shadowy figures who have become common fixtures in the daily lives of many Americans, the barriers that we put between “them” and “us” begin to melt. Author Spooner has a keen eye and

ear for Mexico, without glamorizing or admonishing the country or its people. His many years of Mexico travel to the less touristy destinations produce a work of unvarnished authenticity.

The story takes us to the small, interior village of La Purísima, a town much like many in Mexico, where the only males who remain are young, old or infirm. The unexpected turns and plot twists, as well as the villager's actions, keep the story fresh and forward-moving without resorting to demeaning caricatures. The human quest for survival and the techniques used to attain it are universal, on a large and small scale. We do what we have to do and then hope for the best.

This book should be read by anyone who not only travels to Mexico, but to those who live north of the border in areas where much of the hard work is performed, in the shadows, by a group of people who are not so different from you or me.

Todd Spooner is currently completing a story, his second novel, set along the shores of Lake Chapala, where he has been a frequent visitor. He lives near Chicago with his Mexican-born wife and two daughters.



My very favorite piece -- a 12" tall vase by Isidro Ortiz, rich with color and intricate design. This piece cost me \$280 including the ring.



Another Mata Ortiz piece, included as part of the article by Lynne Doyle

the Mata Ortiz legend. There is one big mystery that – for me – remains unsolved. In other ancient civilizations in Mexico, the vessels discovered were determined to have been used for cooking, food storage, carrying water and religious observances, rather than simply for display. It is apparent in the many shards found at Paquime that the original pottery found there had survived centuries of weather, which indicates to me that this original pottery was primarily for use also. However, the pottery now made in Mata Ortiz, although authentic in its design, is a burnished product that because of its low firing temperatures, not only cannot hold any liquid without dissolving, but also cannot even be wiped with a damp cloth without disturbing the pattern. It also does not break when dropped but rather shatters into dust. Therefore, I remain confused as to where the techniques and/or materials have differed -- no one I spoke to could tell me.

Some people have theorized that Juan was only ever looking to duplicate the designs of the Paquime pottery, while at the same time creating a product that was possible for the people of his village to produce without a massive outlay of cash for kilns. Others have suggested that in making his pottery essentially useless, Juan has insured that it would be unique for its delicacy as well as for its singular design patterns – if you don't count the Oaxacan black pottery of San Bartolo de Coyotepec. Mureya Quezada, speaking for her father, insists the pottery is an exact replica of the ancient material of Paquime and does not refer to the water issue.

I personally have always felt that Juan Quezada must be a marketing genius. He has somehow managed to attach an unmistakable cachet to his pottery that no other product coming out of Mexico shares, and he has accomplished this in a

relatively short time. Since its discovery by McCallum, the potters of Mata Ortiz have always signed their work, a small detail adding to its value that many artists in Mexico have yet to catch onto. Is the extravagant price tag of Mata Ortiz pottery a result of the unrivaled cachet, or does the cachet stem from the extravagant price tag?

Another mystery: I have traveled to a great many artisans' villages in my never-ending



Mureya's husband Andreas carefully places a terra cotta planter over the top of two small vessels in preparation for firing them.

quest for the indigenous arts of Mexico and as a general rule, the relative prosperity of the village is in direct correlation to the popularity of the art produced there. Anyone who has observed the large modern schools and neatly painted homes in the weaving village of Teotilan de Valle in Oaxaca can make the connection between the welfare of the town and the impressive success of the artisans who live and work there. However, one would never guess upon visiting the village of Mata Ortiz that the famous very costly pottery of the same name originates here.

A hypothesis put forth to me by a business person in Casas Grandes (and readily agreed

to by my ever skeptical husband) is that Quezada – once again using his marketing genius – encourages the shabby aspect of the town in order to impress prospective buyers with the urgent need for the exorbitant prices, but I'm not so sure. In discussion with Debbie, I learned that while potters do a brisk business most of the year, in summer – because of the excessive heat and humidity – the buyers do not come. The few that have ventured through have been able to purchase pieces for very little because the potters do not save and need the money, particularly at the end of summer after not earning much for two or three months. Some distributors from the US have figured this out, so now make it a point to come in the summer, and Debbie is frustrated by this, since as a woman and an American, her insight is not readily accepted by the village artisans. If Quezada has factored in the appearance of his town, how is it that he has not considered the seasonality of his product – or is he simply unable to control all of the artisans in the village?



After stacking two layers of wood around the planter, Andreas pours kerosene on it and ignites it. It will need to burn until all the wood has turned to ash in order to completely fire the vessels.

One last interesting item: as we were leaving Mureya's home, several women approached us on the street offering pots for sale. One thrust a very beautiful 6" marbled vase into my hands and when I asked her the price, told me \$200. I respectfully declined. On the way out of the village, Raul went past the zocalo, a small mud-caked square with a dilapidated gazebo in its center. Several women with plastic laundry baskets lounged on the steps and as we drew near, began to remove pots from the baskets and stack them. Most were unremarkable to me, except for one

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About Mexico

The Mezcal Worm

Mezcal, the tequila-like liquor made from the same agave plant, will no longer have the infamous worm that many a macho male has gagged down after a few shooters. Mexican officials believe that the worms release little globules of fat into the alcohol that doesn't conform to new regulations designed to improve the back-yard production reputation that mezcal has enjoyed for decades. The new law is to take effect on February 10, unless a growing opposition can stop the madness.

Tourism to Rise

Mexico has expectations to realize \$11.5 billion US from tourism in 2005, an increase of 11 percent from 2004. Continued world-wide terrorism concerns as well as a weakening peso are expected to keep U.S. travelers close to home. International tourism is Mexico's third-largest money generator after oil and money sent home from relatives. The Mexican peso has weakened against the U.S. dollar by 4.3 percent and 13 percent against the Canadian dollar in the past year.

Minimum Wage Increase

Mexico's daily minimum wage will get a small increase next year. Urban wages will rise about 3.5 percent to 47 pesos per day (about \$4.15) up from 45 pesos per day a year ago. That is a day, not an hour.

Subcommander Marcos Published

The first chapter of a novel written by Mexican rebel Subcommander Marcos has been published in the leftist newspaper, *La Jornada*. The work in progress is a fiction story set in Chiapas, where Marcos and his followers first took up arms against the government in 1994. The book is titled *Muertos Incomodos*, or *Awkward Deaths*. Marcos is still in hiding, most likely in the Chiapas jungle.



Dos Restaurantes *Continued*

of all kinds of Oaxaca specialties, including guacamole, Oaxacan cheese, and fried grasshoppers. Bill, always my most reliable food critic, particularly favors Maria Bonita's interpretation of *arrachera*, a thin beef filet marinated and grilled to perfection, served with rice, vegetables and warm bread. While I have not personally sampled all the entrees offered, I know that portions are always generous, the food is served piping hot, service is prompt and always gracious, and prices are very affordable.

An especially nice time to visit this restaurant is during the Day of the Dead festival. Always a very big deal

in Oaxaca, this festival is observed absolutely everywhere, including bars and restaurants. At this time, Maria Bonita removes one of their tiny tables to make room for a small offrenda dedicated to the owner's parents and parents-in-law, and lit by candlelight, Maria Bonita is even lovelier and more atmospheric than usual.

I can assure you that whatever your dining preferences, if you give these two little restaurants a try, you will always be rewarded with plenty of excellent food at very good prices – no one I have ever sent to either place has ever reported even an "iffy" experience. I promise.



Mata Ortiz *Continued*

olla of black, rust and green done in a simple but beautifully-executed geometric design. She indicated to me that the price of the piece, 8" tall and 11" around, was \$10 with an extra \$2 for the base ring. Needless to say, I grabbed it.

At the end of this very illuminating journey, I have come away with a new appreciation for Mata Ortiz pottery. While in the village, I saw many extraordinarily beautiful pieces that I would love to own. I was happily amazed at the many striking variations that can be achieved with those dull earth tones and the many shapes created by these remarkable artisans. But I also left with almost as many unanswered questions as answered ones. I don't know what to think of Juan Quezada and the mystique he has built around his pottery. There is no question but that he

has been a godsend to the people of the village of Mata Ortiz, or that he has created a magnificent expression of Mexican ingenuity and skill, or that he has somehow achieved a level of retailing brilliance unrivaled in the world of Mexican folk art. The enigma lies in how he has constructed this legendary tradition, and how he keeps it alive.



The top of a dramatic white seed pot from my collection showing a butterfly motif with a geometric pattern of indentations and painted dots. 2 1/2 inches tall, this piece by Avelina Corona cost \$45 from the artist.



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