

Food for a community

Milpa Alta is a region of twelve villages and towns to the south of Mexico City. In Milpa Alta, traditions are still very important and one of the most famous traditional events is a community meal. It takes place every Christmas and is called *La Rejunta*. More than a meal, it's a feast, where about sixty thousand tamales and fifteen thousand litres of hot chocolate are made and consumed. Tamales are made from corn. They are typical of the region: the name Milpa Alta means 'High cornfield'. The feast is offered to the people who go on the long walk to *El Señor de Chalma* about 80 kilometres away. It's an important event on the religious calendar for local people and as many as 20,000 people take part.

The planning and organisation of *La Rejunta* takes the whole year. Every year, different people are given the job of *majordomo*, which means they're responsible for organising the meal. There's a waiting list for the opportunity to do this and currently the next available year is 2046. This year's *majordomos* are Virginia Meza Torres and her husband Fermín Lara Jiménez, who put their names on the list 14 years ago.

One year before the meal, men go to the forest and collect wood that they store near the home of the *majordomo*. It has to be dry when it's used to make the cooking fires. Local farmers grow most of the corn, meat and vegetables that are needed as ingredients. In the week before the feast, hundreds of volunteers arrive to help with the preparation and the cooking. No instant or ready-made foods are allowed. Amazingly, everyone seems to know what they have to do. On the day of the feast, the *majordomos* and others have stayed up all night cooking. Fermin is in charge of the numbers – making sure there are enough tamales for everyone.

For the people of Milpa Alta, eating together is one of their most important traditions. One woman, Josefina García Jiménez, explains that sitting together at the table is like a glue that keeps people together. 'It feels like I am passing down a tradition, and when they are adults, they will remember what I have done. Here we have time to cook, time to think about the

ingredients, time to show our kids through cooking that we love them.' The time that everybody stays at the table after the meal has finished is just as important as the food. They talk, tell stories and laugh together. At Christmas, *La Rejunta* is a giant version of a family meal.

glossary

feast (n) a large, special meal

glue (n) a sticky substance used to stick things together

instant (adj) made quickly by adding hot water

tamales (n) a type of food made from corn with different fillings