

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A bit about an early Christmas in Monterey as related in fascinating language and story by Bernardo Soberanes might not be amiss today. Mr. Soberanes was the son of Don Ezekial Soberanes, who acquired the property on Pacific Street where Casa Soberanes now stands in 1860.

The Californian of the days when most of the adobes in Monterey were the center of the social life lived to partake of good food. He labored for the reward of a happy gathering of relatives and friends. It might be a fiesta de milsanto (a feast on the saint's day of their namesake) celebrated to soft music, dignified dance, and a boda (banquet). They sat down to heavily laden tables of savory food which had taken many days to prepare, and it was of these things that Mr. Soberanes talked when he called one day to see the house of his boyhood.

The calendar of the church was filled with feast days and gave every good reason for the loyal to gather within the sacred walls. None was more important than la noche Buena (the holy night when Christ was born). Los Pastores, as described by Mr. Soberanes, was a play presented by a selected few in costume of shepherds holding their glorified flowery and beribboned staffs, led by a guardian angel with fluttering wings and taunted by two fiery satans. Scornfully los Pastores brushed aside the tempters. Singing praises to the young king, they traveled from the door of the church to adobe after adobe, then out onto the highway. Winding their way, they were invited to enter and feast at every rancho. For 15 joyous days los Californias ate well prepared food and sang toasts to the host's aromatic angelica.

La fiesta de los tres reyes, feast of the three kings or Twelfth Night, January 6, terminated the merry-making. This ushered in the season for serious labor, el rodeo and la matanza, at the end of which there was again a rewarding feast and fiesta for the rancho.

For weeks before the Christmas season the Soberanes family, as did other old Spanish families in Monterey, sat before the fireplace in the sala and snipped and snipped at bits of colored paper with which they filled eggs to make cascarones and had barrel after barrel ready when the fiesta season began.

At midnight on Christmas Eve the entire family wended their way to Mission San Carlos to attend midnight mass. They had fasted all day in order to be prepared for the service of Holy Communion. After the mass the feast began and all partook of all the rich and well-prepared food which the women of the families had been busy for weeks preparing.

Bunuelos or fried sweet tortillas, came with la Noche Buena, For days before Christmas Eve the women had patted out cora after cora of crisp bunuelos. These were a Christmas dainty. It took three cups of flour, 1 teaspoon of sugar, one half teaspoon of salt, 1 teaspoon of baking powder, one egg, one half cup of milk and two cups of fat, to make a sufficient amount of bunuelos for the family and friends.

The flour was sifted with salt baking powder and sugar into a bowl. Then the well-beaten egg and milk was added, a little at a time. This was kneaded until elastic. Then the dough was divided into two-inch balls and rolled out into five-inch round cakes and pricked with a fork. One at a time they were fired in deep fat. Great excitement was shown as the balls turned to a deep golden brown.

A sauce for the hot bunuelos was made of one cup sugar, two cups of water and two teaspoons of anise seed.

An old Spanish custom according to Mr. Soberanes, was to burn oak wood the day before making the bunuelos, collect the ashes to the amount of 4 tablespoons, let this stand in a pint of water. Before using strain through a fine cloth and use this to make the sauce. According to an old Spanish tradition the ashes help to digest the tortillas, which have been fried in so much fat.

Mrs. Soberanes, the mother of Bernardo, used to dry tomatoes in the back garden of her home. She would cut the tomatoes in half and dry them in the sun, taking them in each night and putting them out again each morning until the process was complete. They had a grand flavor, her son reported.

The Soberanes family were the first of the early settlers to make California cheese. A Portuguese whaler taught them to salt the cheese.

For a time Mr. Soberanes resided in Monterey with his nephew Herbert Slate. He passed away a few years ago in Oakland.