The Spirits of Huepac

One thing I love about the rural Rio Sonora valley in mid-summer is this: you absolutely know you are in another country. There is nothing like it in the USA. Life is slower, quieter, and muy contento. The lush, green countryside, the mountains and valleys, and the tiny villages with their plazas and central church are uniquely Mexico. I felt like I was on a movie set.

We were a motley group of ten adventurous travelers bouncing along the curving mountain roads of the Sierra Madre on our way to Huepac and their annual Fiesta de San Lorenzo. It was early August, and the skies were filled with the drama of monsoon cumulus clouds and distant thunder. Arriving in the small village of Huepac after dark, we were just in time for the fiesta procession. Hundreds gathered along the streets surrounding the town plaza, and a man carrying a fluffy red confection of silky fabric shaped like a hoop skirt on a stick led the parade. The locals call this red confection the “Marmota,” and when asked why this odd display of crimson silk is leading the parade, most said, “because we always do it this way.” No one seemed to know quite what the display meant, or what “Marmota” means, but the red translucent fabric swaying to the music looked a bit like flames from a fire.

Following closely behind was a tiny statue of San Lorenzo, with a cooking grill hanging from his right wrist. It turns out that San Lorenzo gave money from the church to the poor of his village, and the clergy did not approve of this act of mercy toward those in need. So Lorenzo was burned at the stake. In the midst of his torture, he looked the clerics in the eye and asked to be “turned over so I am cooked on the other side.” Hence, San Lorenzo is the patron saint of cooks and comedians.

The Rio Sonora valley is known for its local brew, a drink called “bacanora.” One of the fiesta booths on the plaza was selling a sampling of bacanora, and so I bought a glass and shared it with my traveling compadres. It has a smooth, complex flavor, more interesting and mellow than tequila or mescal. It is definitely a drink to be savored and sipped.

The spirits of bacanora, the Marmota, and the brave martyr, San Lorenzo, stayed with our group for three days of adventure and exploration. This was a joyous celebration, and I think San Lorenzo would have approved.