

IN GOOD TASTE

# A Taste of Mexico

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BY REBECA PICCARDO

THE FLAVORS OF MEXICO ARE AS RICH —  
AND DIVERSE — AS ITS CULTURE.



COCHINITA PIBIL TACOS



**M**exico’s prosperous culinary history began more than 9,000 years ago with the Mayans and Aztecs cultivating corn, beans, and chile peppers. These ancient customs evolved when the Spaniards, along with other civilizations, arrived with new ingredients (such as meat and dairy) and influenced the tribes’ local diet, resulting in the considerably different provincial dishes across the country.

Today, Mexico’s gastronomy is as varied as its landscapes — an infusion of flavors carrying traces of its indigenous heritage, which can’t be paralleled. So much so that Mexican cuisine was recognized in 2010 by UNESCO when it was added to its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Here, we give you a taste of Mexico’s most prominent regional cuisines for the next time Interval takes you south of the U.S. border.

### **BAJA CALIFORNIA: EVERYTHING UNDER THE OCEAN**

With about 2,000 miles of coastline, it’s no wonder that the Baja California Peninsula is known for seafood — from its famous batter-fried fish tacos to octopus tostadas.

Dig deeper and you’ll find towns that stand out for a particular culinary specialty. Puerto Nuevo, just 20 minutes south of Rosarito Beach in North Baja, is Mexico’s lobster capital. Here, you can feast on succulent, buttery lobster, typically fried and served with rice, beans, and tortillas. The town hosts an annual lobster festival in October to mark the beginning of the harvesting season.

In South Baja, Loreto is one of the only places in the world where, due to strict export regulations, you can get *almejas chocolatas* — a type of clam that can reach up to 6 inches in width. On the southernmost tip of the peninsula, Los Cabos is a world-renowned destination for catching — and eating — fish. There are about 900 species in the

waters around Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo, and there are a number of restaurants where you can take your catch of the day and have a meal prepared with it.

Another unique aspect to Baja cuisine: Its microclimate allows for wine grapes to thrive in the region. Referred to as Mexico’s own Napa Valley, the Valle de Guadalupe wine country is only about an hour drive from Rosarito Beach. Book a tour to visit some of the wineries along La Ruta del Vino wine route and take home a bottle of red.

### **NAYARIT: SUN, SAND, AND SEA**

Nestled between the Sierra Madre mountains and the Pacific Ocean, Riviera Nayarit is known for its incredible seaside cuisine with beachy flair. Thanks to its fertile soils and tropical climate, Nayarit is one of the few places where you can drink straight from a coconut while eating shrimp tamales — a local twist on a national dish.



In fact, shrimp is featured heavily here, from stews to pâté; but you simply cannot miss eating *camarones a la cucaracha*: fried shell-on shrimp seasoned with Nayarit's Huichol hot sauce. For something lighter, dig into a fresh *aguachile*, a variation of ceviche — with a kick. It's prepared with shrimp, onions, cucumbers, and avocado slices in a lime-juice-and-chile sauce. However, the crown jewel of Nayarit's gastronomy is the *pescado zarandeado*, butterflied snapper marinated with chile, lime, and soy sauce, and grilled over a fire. The dish is garnished with red onion, tomato, and cucumber.

### JALISCO: QUINTESSENTIALLY MEXICAN

The birthplace of mariachi music, sombreros, and tequila, Jalisco is the closest you'll get to most people's idea of Mexico. About an hour northwest of Guadalajara, you can see the iconic landscape of the blue agave plantations surrounding the town of Tequila, where the country's most famous spirit is made. Government regulations dictate that tequila can be produced only from blue agave, which primarily grows here. Learn about the production process while on a tasting tour of the distilleries along Jalisco's Tequila Trail. You can drive there or take the Tequila Express or Jose Cuervo Express trains, which are an experience of their own.

Jalisco also has a long history of ranching and is one of Mexico's top beef producers. Needless to say, there's plenty of *barbacoa* (slow-braised meat) to be savored here, but you'll also find some tasty dishes you may have never heard of before. For one, the *torta ahogada* (drowned sandwich) is an absolute must-try snack. The sub is made with *birote* bread (a type of baguette, typically baked in a stone oven) that is filled with fried pork and doused with a red sauce made from *chile de árbol*. A less-spicy version of this platter uses a tomato-based sauce with chile. Another Jalisco specialty, *birria de chivo* (goat stew) is hailed as a powerful hangover remedy — perfect after a day of tequila tasting.



### OAXACA: HOLY MOLE

Oaxacan cuisine is revered because of the wealth of ingredients that grow here, including extremely rare chile varieties, and the diverse culinary traditions found within its borders. Oaxaca's exemplary dish, mole, has countless variations — despite the region's nickname as the Land of the Seven Moles. The most notable, *mole negro*, is a rich sauce made with as many as 30 ingredients, including Oaxacan dark chocolate, nuts, dried fruit, aromatic herbs, and various types of dried chiles. Many eateries in Oaxaca City have a whole section dedicated to moles on their menus. The sauce is typically poured over chicken, pork, or turkey, and served with a side of rice. Also try Oaxacan tamales, smothered in mole and wrapped in banana leaves instead of cornhusks, and *enmoladas* (enchiladas with mole).

Once you've tasted a few different moles, venture over to the bustling Mercado 20 de Noviembre to sample another specialty: *tlayuda*. Also known as Oaxacan pizza, this is a large, thin tortilla topped with refried beans, grilled meat, tomato, avocado, *quesillo* (a Oaxacan

cheese similar to mozzarella), and salsa. Another treat you'll come across in Oaxaca's street stalls are *chapulines* (roasted grasshoppers), which were an important source of protein for Mesoamerican natives before the Europeans arrived with cattle. The grasshoppers are seasoned with chile, lime, and garlic, and served on a taco or *tlayuda*, or eaten on their own — like munching on roasted peanuts. Myth has it that if you eat *chapulines*, you'll return to Oaxaca someday.

This bountiful region was also blessed with the elixir of the gods: *mezcal*. This powerful spirit made from various types of agave plants is mainly produced in Oaxaca state and, unlike its Jalisco-based cousin, *tequila*, has a more complex and old-school distillation process. Although it's not impossible to take *mezcal* back home, enjoy a tasting at one of the area's artisanal distilleries, called *palenques*.

### YUCATÁN: LAND OF THE ANCIENT MAYANS

Driven by its Mayan roots, mixed with European flavors and Caribbean spices, the cuisine in the Yucatán Peninsula was isolated from the rest of Mexico until about the 1950s. Ingredients such as *achiote* (annatto seed) and bitter orange (from Seville, Spain) are more common here than anywhere else in the country, and many of the emblematic meals come from Mayan recipes.

Just as Oaxaca has its moles, Yucatecan cuisine has its *recados*, or seasoning pastes. Two of the most famous dishes in the region, *cochinita pibil* (slow-roasted pork) and *tikin xic* (roasted fish), are marinated with *recado rojo* (a red paste with *achiote* and bitter orange juice) and cooked wrapped in a banana leaf. The most complex marinade is *recado negro*, a blackened-chile paste used to make *relleno negro* (black broth with turkey, sausage, and hard-boiled egg).

These specialties are found throughout the peninsula, so look for them on the dinner menu, whether you're in Playa del Carmen or Cancún. And if you're in Mérida, visit the Museo de la Gastronomía Yucateca, a museum and restaurant that pays homage to ancient culinary traditions, and features a replica of a Mayan village. ■

## AS REAL AS IT GETS

As of 2017, there were close to 60,000 Mexican restaurants in the U.S. — with nearly one in 10 eateries having Mexican menus. And while Taco Bell was voted best Mexican restaurant in America last year, the Mexican food landscape is not all *chapultas* and *tacos* — if you know where to look. Add these restaurants to your must-try list, all within Interval vacation areas:

### San Francisco, California

**Cala** and **Tacos Cala** by Mexico City chef Gabriela Cámara | [calarestaurant.com](http://calarestaurant.com)

### Chicago, Illinois

**Frontera Grill** and **Topolobampo** by celebrity chef Rick Bayless | [rickbayless.com/restaurants](http://rickbayless.com/restaurants)

### Los Angeles, California

**Guelaguetza Restaurante**, a family-owned Oaxacan eatery, and **Broken Spanish** by chef Ray Garcia | [ilovemole.com](http://ilovemole.com); [brokenspanish.com](http://brokenspanish.com)

### New York City, New York

**Cosme** and **Atla**, co-owned by world-renowned chef Enrique Olvera and run by chef Daniela Soto-Innes | [cosmenyc.com](http://cosmenyc.com); [atlanyc.com](http://atlanyc.com)

### Phoenix, Arizona

**Barrio Café** and **Barrio Café Gran Reserva** by chef Silvana Salcido Esparza | [barriocafe.com](http://barriocafe.com)

### Washington, D.C., Area

**Urbano 116**, run by Mexico City chef Alam Méndez Florián, and **Amparo Fondita** by chef Christian Iribién | [urbano116.com](http://urbano116.com); [amparofondita.com](http://amparofondita.com)

## MAKE YOUR OWN

After tasting the flavors of Mexico, bring them to life in your resort unit's kitchen with this recipe from chef Daniela Vallejo Serrano of Azul Beach Resort Riviera Cancun by Karisma in Riviera Maya.



### Kastakán (Pork Rind) and Octopus Ceviche

3 ounces tender, cooked, and diced octopus  
 2 ounces diced pork rinds  
 2 ounces fresh-squeezed lemon juice  
 1 ounce cubed tomatoes  
 1 ounce finely chopped cilantro  
 2 teaspoons cubed white onions  
 2 teaspoons avocado cream  
 1 teaspoon finely sliced serrano pepper  
 1 teaspoon sliced spring onions  
 1 teaspoon finely sliced radishes (in halves)  
 1/4 teaspoon cilantro microgreens  
 Sea salt and black ground pepper (as needed)

Mix the octopus, pork rinds, lemon juice, tomatoes, cilantro, and white onions, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Set on a plate. Add avocado cream, serrano pepper, spring onions, and radishes, and finish with microgreens. Serve chilled.

Courtesy of Karisma Hotels & Resorts