



Photos Courtesy

By Jeff Becker Photography by Joseph Burgess

Yucatán



Alejandro Dimakis | Mision Guadalupe

ften, the best part about studying history is the moment when one finds a shard of brightness among all the dark ugly things that have happened. Occasionally, the history of food lends just such a glimmer of hope. Take Mexico, for example. Colonized by the Spanish who warred with and killed off many of the quite civilized Aztecs, Mayans, Toltecs, and Olmecs (to name a few), the current problems of this country are reflected in how it came about in the first place. Yet, the heart of Mexican cuisine lies in this very history and as such offers a much more hopeful vision of coexistence, commingling, and, uh,...comida (this means “food” in Spanish). When Mexico was “discovered,” the colonizers brought with them a variety of new meats, wine, garlic and onions. Some of these foods, spices, and cooking methods reflect the influence of Middle Eastern culture on Spain (which was invaded by the Moors), and these foodstuffs made their way to Mexico with the Spanish. However, the pre-Columbians already had with them a great host of wonderful foods. Namely, chocolate, corn, tomato, vanilla, avocado, papaya, pineapple, a wide variety of chiles, beans, squash, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and turkey. One can already see the magic of this merger waiting to happen. As the native peoples were forced into the kitchens, the monasteries, and the other dwellings of the conquerors, they mixed these foods together. Blending pre-Hispanic and Hispanic influences and ingredients, the end result is a cuisine that is as varied in textures, tastes, and styles as any in the world. Humanity, unfortunately, rarely folds in so well.

Alejandro Dimakis, executive chef of Mision Guadalupe, one of Juarez’s finest restaurants, is quick to point out the versatility of Mexican cuisine. While it typically brings to mind the combination plates of New Mexican food, Mexican cuisine is better associated with haute cuisine (literally “high cooking” in French) than with flauta plates (not to knock flautas. I love them, too, but you see my point). As a Chef, Dimakis learned the intricacies of the trade the old way—by working in restaurants and kitchens since his boyhood. His skills took him across his home country of Mexico (and also parts of Europe and the US) allowing him to learn and master the regional styles of cooking. His food, and Mision Guadalupe, has earned wide-spread acclaim, recently appearing in the New York Times. Mexican food varies by region.



Photos Courtesy of Mexican Tourism Board



PANUCHOS DE CAMARÓN (ACHIOTE SHRIMP APPETIZER)

SERVING SIZE: 8

- 1 lb peeled small shrimp cut in small pieces
- 8 oz refried black beans
- 1 medium red onion, thinly sliced
- 4 Habanero peppers, thinly sliced
- 1/2 lb fresh masa corn dough
- 1/2 cup red wine vinegar
- 2 tbs of olive oil
- Pinch of oregano
- Pinch of salt

For the shrimp

- 4 oz. achiote paste
- 1 pinch of oregano
- 1 pinch of cumin
- 1 pinch of pepper
- 1 pinch of salt
- 1 tbs of white vinegar
- 1/2 cup of orange juice
- 1 tbs of sugar

Blend all together.

1. Place the shrimp in a bowl and mix together with the achiote. Heat a pan with a drizzle of olive oil and cook the shrimp. Do not overcook.
2. With the fresh masa make 3-inch round tortillas, make them a little thick.
3. Spread the black beans on the tortillas and put one tablespoon of the cooked shrimp.

Garnish: Mix the vinegar with the onion, the salt and the oregano. Place some onions on top of the shrimp. Slice the Habanero and use carefully (remember Habanero peppers are very hot).

The Yucatán, this issue's featured locale, is marked by several interesting ingredients. Achiote or annatto seeds are used widely in this region, usually in achiote paste. This is made by grinding the seeds and mixing them with vinegar, water, and/or other herbs. It has a slightly bitter, earthy flavor and has a brilliant deep-red color. These seeds, it should be noted, are used today as a coloring agent for butter, margarine, and cheese. Natives of Central and South America used the seeds to make body paint and lipstick. Another ingredient particular to this region is Sevilla (Seville) Oranges. This citrus is very tart and acidic, and is used to make marinades that help tenderize meats while giving them a sour taste. The oranges are also naturally high in pectin, which makes them wonderful for marmalades and jellies. Many foods are eaten with tortillas or rice, and pickled red onions called *Ichne Pek*.

It is in the Yucatán that we find Panuchos, masa corn dough stuffed with beans, seafood, or meat. Our recipe includes achiote marinated shrimp. The *Pescado Tikin Xic* is Red Snapper filets marinated in achiote, and served in a sauce of achiote and orange juice. In Richard Rodriguez's *Once Upon A Time in Mexico*, the character Sheldon Jeffrey Sands, played by Johnny Depp, is so in love with *Cochinita Pibil* that he kills every cook he finds that makes it too well. *Cochinita* refers to a whole suckling pig that was originally used to make this dish, but now refers to pork marinated in Sevilla orange juice and slow-cooked in banana leaves. Typically it is served with beans, tortillas (to make tacos) and *Inche Pek*.

Each of these uses Achiote, which gives them their vibrant color and each is well-worth trying at home.



PESCADO TIKIN XIC

SERVING SIZE: 6

"This is a traditional Mayan recipe that has been used since before the Spanish came to Mexico. In the traditional method the fish is cooked on open fire and they use the whole fish. In our case we can use a grill, and this is the reason we are using skin on fish to protect the flesh."—Alejandro Dimakis, Executive Chef Mision Guadalupe

- 6 Red Snapper filets (10 to 12 oz each), skin on..
- 6 cups of white rice fully cooked
- 3 avocados
- Pickled red onions
(same method as the shrimp panuchos)

For marinating:

- 4 oz achiote paste
 - 1 pinch oregano
 - 1 pinch cumin
 - 1 pinch pepper
 - 1 pinch salt
 - 1 tbsp white vinegar
 - 1/2 cup orange juice
 - 1 tbsp sugar
1. Place the 6 filets in a sealable container with the achiote mixture and let them marinate for 6 hours.
 2. Preheat your grill and spray some nonstick spray on it. Place the Red Snapper filets skin side down on the grill and put a cookie sheet on top so they will smoke for 10 minutes.
 3. Turn the fish and let cook for 5 more minutes without the sheet.
 4. The remaining of the marinating juice needs to be cooked in a frying pan so you kill the fish bacteria and it can be drizzled over the fish.
 5. Place 1 cup of rice in a plate and put your fish on top. Garnish with the red onions, the Habanero and sliced avocado.



COCHINITA PIBIL

SERVING SIZE: 6

ONE DAY AHEAD:

- 3 1/2 lbs (to 4-1/2) pork, preferably end of loin, untrimmed
- 2 tsp salt
- 2 tbsp Seville orange juice (see note)
- 1 tbsp achiote seeds (or 8 oz. of achiote paste)

- 1/4 tsp cumin seeds
- 1/4 tsp oregano
- 12 peppercorns
- 3 whole allspice
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled
- 1/8 tsp powdered dry chile (may substitute hot paprika)
- 1 tsp of salt
- 3 tbsp Seville orange juice or Mild white vinegar
- 2 large pieces banana leaf

SERVING DAY:

- A Dutch oven
- The wrapped Pork (see below)
- 1/2 cup cold water

SALSA:

- 1/2 cup onion – very finely chopped.
- 3 chiles Habaneros – very finely chopped
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 2/3 cup Seville orange juice

THE DAY BEFORE:

1. Pierce the pork all over and rub in the 2 teaspoons salt and 2 tablespoons orange juice. Set aside while you prepare the seasoning paste.
2. Grind the achiote seeds, cumin, oregano, peppercorns and allspice together to a fine powder.
3. Crush the garlic together with the chile, salt and 3 table- spoons Seville orange juice and mix with other powdered spices. The mixture should be a thick paste. Coat the pork with the paste.
4. Lightly sear the banana leaves over a bare flame to make them more flexible. Wrap the meat up in them and leave to season in the refrigerator for at least six hours or overnight. [You may want to first line your Dutch oven with the leaves and wrap the pork in there, so you don't have to transfer it.]

ON SERVING DAY:

1. Preheat oven to 325°. Place a rack at the bottom of the Dutch oven [if you haven't done so, add the pork wrapped in the banana leaves] and cover the dish with a tight fitting lid. Cook for 2 1/2 hours. Turn the meat and baste it well with the juices at the bottom of the pot. Cook for another 2 1/2 hours, or until the meat is soft and falling off the bone.
2. Meanwhile, prepare the salsa: mix all ingredients together. Set aside to season for about 2 hours. Serve in a separate dish.
3. After cooking, shred the meat roughly. Pour the fat and juices from the pan over it. Serve hot, with tortillas and the sauce so that each person can make his or her own tacos.

NOTE: A rough approximation of Seville orange juice may be attained through the following: For 1/2 cup blended juice, combine 1 teaspoon finely grated grapefruit rind, 3 table- spoons orange juice, 3 tablespoons grapefruit juice and 2 tablespoons lemon juice. *