The Eye

Beach, Village + Urban Living in Mexico
August-September 2025
Issue 150
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From Pad to Product:
The Rise of Cactus Leather

Kosher Restaurants in Mexico

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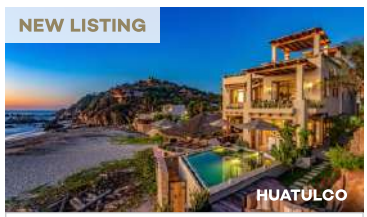

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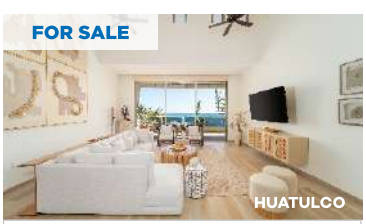

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Editor's Letter

"True happiness comes from the joy of deeds well done, the zest of creating things new."
– Antoine de Saint-Exupery

How much food do you have at your immediate disposal? How long could you avoid going to the store for? One of the things I loved about Mexican village life when I first moved here was the self-sufficiency of those around me. Having been raised in a city, I was quite clueless about how to forage beyond a trip to the supermarket.

While in the summer my father collected mushrooms and we caught the occasional fish from the lake, I wasn't instilled with any real survival skills. Even my summer camp canoe trip provisioned us with cans of tuna and Spam.

So, last month I gave myself a challenge: to take a break from the stock-up trips that overflowed my fridge and countertops with an endless possibility of meals. I would still pick up a couple of tomatoes or bananas from my corner store, but before I bought anything, I would ask myself, "Could I make a meal with what I have at home without buying anything?" The answer was almost always a resounding yes.

I made it through the dried goods. I even made homemade English muffins when I was craving bread, and almond milk when I ran out of cow's milk—I'm still not sure why I had so many almonds. I paid more attention to the sad herbs in my garden and was even more appreciative when my neighbour gifted me a watermelon.

Rather than inwardly cringe knowing how much space it would take up in my fridge, I made a clear plan for its use.
Day one: a perfect afternoon snack—sprinkled with some of my homemade chile salt.
Day two: chop it into a salad of tomato, onion, and chile.
Day three: add it to a gazpacho. And of course, a constant flow of *agua de sandía* that—with a handful of ice, a lime from my tree, and a shot of tequila that's been living in my cupboard for years—is suddenly a margarita.

When I ran out of cookies, I had jam on crackers, and it was delicious. My fridge suddenly had space. My cupboards were easy to navigate. Cooking had become fun again—a challenge. I was excited to make a meal. I had created my own version of *Chopped*, which led me to make my own pasta, add a tin of artichoke hearts to a casserole of leftovers, and use olive brine in salad dressing.

This experiment made me realize something deeper.

People thrive when challenged. Convenience is the death of creativity. The human spirit is easily crushed when everything is handed to us—and we're living in a time when our days are filled with more convenience than any other era in history. Is it any wonder we seek out conflict and challenges elsewhere?

While for me it was cooking meals without shopping, there are other playful limitations you could try. For example, give up your car for a week. This would force you to walk, ride a bike, take public transport (read a book on the bus instead of scrolling), or even connect with a co-worker to carpool. Try it for a week—approach it with curiosity rather than frustration.

Or try turning off your home internet for a week. This may sound impossible, but it's not. You would find yourself doing tasks with more intention, lose less time, and your nervous system would be grateful. What if there's an emergency? Let people know to call you.

What if limitations aren't obstacles but invitations? Invitations to experiment, to reconnect, to use the things (and skills) we forgot we had. You don't need to go off-grid—just try turning the dial down. You might be surprised by how much you already have.

See you in October,

Jane

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In This Issue

Kosher Restaurants in Mexico

By Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken

The Jewish population of Mexico is estimated to be somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 people, the fourteenth largest Jewish population in the world. It is not surprising, then, that a large number of kosher restaurants are located in Mexico City, where most of those Jews live. A few other kosher restaurants are scattered around the country – especially in Guadalajara and resort areas catering to Jewish tourists.

The term "kosher" is often misunderstood as meaning "clean." It does not mean "clean," nor does it refer to foods that are stereotypically Jewish, such as bagels or hot pastrami sandwiches on rye bread. In fact, some bagels and hot pastrami sandwiches are not kosher. To be accepted as kosher, the source and preparation of the food must adhere to Jewish law. Here are some of the major laws and their implications for Mexican restaurants.

Mixing meat and dairy products is strictly forbidden. No cheese and meat tacos or enchiladas can be kosher (unless the "meat" is plant based). To make sure this mixing does not occur, kosher restaurants are either "meat" restaurants with no dairy products on the premises or "dairy" restaurants with no meat on the premises. Often the type of restaurant can be deduced from the name, such as "Gaucho Grill" in Polanco, "Milk" on Reforma de Bosques, or "Burger House" on Las Palmas. If the menu in a kosher meat restaurant has "leche" (milk) for coffee or "helado" (ice cream) on the menu – you can be sure both are nondairy substitutes. Many of the kosher restaurants in Mexico serve meat. And a relatively large number of kosher dairy restaurants are pizzerias; there you can find pizzas with tomato sauce, cheese, mushrooms, olives and a variety of other vegetables – but not any meat.

Hotels in Mexican resorts with kosher restaurants that serve both meat dishes and dairy dishes never serve both at the same time in the same venue. These include NIZUC in Cancun and Grand Velas Riviera Maya. We frequently stayed at Grand Hotel Acapulco where guests actually voted on whether they would all have a meat dinner or a dairy dinner the next day. The tablecloths, napkins, cutlery and dishes used for serving meat dishes are exclusively used for meat meals. And similar items used for dairy meals are also exclusively used for dairy. The kitchens are under rabbinic supervision to assure this separation. Chefs in a kosher restaurant know that a spoon previously used to stir elote (corn) with melted butter cannot be later used to stir chicken soup – the whole batch of chicken soup would then not be kosher.

Meat in kosher restaurants must be from domesticated fowl or animals that have split hooves and chew their cud. Fortunately, this includes meat that is found all over Mexico, including chicken, duck, Cornish hen, beef, goat, lamb and venison. However, the birds and animals must be **ritually slaughtered**, using procedures that were developed thousands of years ago to cause minimal pain to the animal. Some of the animals that are considered staples in Mexico – such as pork products or delicacies such as iguana – are prohibited in kosher restaurants.

Fish is an example of a class of food (called parve or pareve) that is neither meat or dairy and can be served in either type of restaurant. But fish served in kosher restaurants must have both fins and scales. Nothing else from the sea is allowed. Although there are many "fish" restaurants in Mexico that do not have meat on their menus, most are not kosher since they also serve mariscos, which could be *camarones* (shrimp), *pulpo* (octopus), *calamares* (squid) or other seafood with shells. Aside from fish, other foods that are considered parve and are served in both meat and dairy establishments include baked goods with no dairy ingredients, eggs and virtually all types of fruits and vegetables – inspected to be sure they are free of impermissible contaminants.

Strictly **vegan** and vegetarian restaurants are increasingly found in urban areas all around Mexico. Many people who observe kashrut (Jewish dietary laws) happily chow down in these places knowing that there will be no mixing of meat and milk, nor any chance of eating nonkosher meat or seafood. But very observant Jews are likely to stick to restaurants that are certified kosher and supervised by rabbis. In Mexico quite a few organizations are recognized for certifying restaurants as well as bakeries and grocery stores as providing kosher meals and products. Some are local to Mexico, such as Kosher Maguen David, and others are international, such as Orthodox Union. The symbols of certification look like little designs for the uninitiated. But for those who care about observing kashrut, seeing their preferred symbols on the window of a restaurant or stamped on products in Mexican stores means "you can shop here" or "you can eat this."

Just as Jews in Mexico have immigrated here from countries all over the world, kosher restaurants reflect the backgrounds of their owners. Some Jewish restaurant owners are from families that have lived in Mexico for generations and their menus are not very different from nonkosher restaurants. But, in addition to kosher pizza, kosher Mexico restaurants variously serve Argentine parrillas (grilled meats), Russian style borscht and other dishes, Israeli falafel and salads, chicken soup with matzoh balls, and, yes, of course, bagels, lox and cream cheese. You needn't be Jewish to eat in a kosher Mexican restaurant. But don't expect to go there on Friday night or daylight hours on Saturday, and don't ask for bread and butter to eat with your steak.

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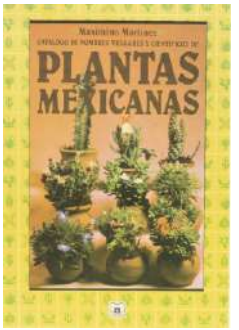
Cactus Fruits

By Julie Etra



For starters, let's be clear: *all* cacti flower and produce fruit if their flowers are pollinated. But that doesn't mean all cactus fruits are edible — or tasty by human standards. And there are *a lot* of cactus species (family *Cactaceae*) in Mexico and the southwestern United States.

Tuna

The most common edible cactus fruit comes from the nopal cactus (*Opuntia ficus-indica*), known in Mexico as "tuna" — no relation to the fish (*atún*). In English, they're called prickly pear cactus, and yes, they are spiny. The nopal is the most widely distributed and economically important cactus in Mexico and appears symbolically on the Mexican flag: a golden eagle perched on a nopal pad (*penca*). Its tender shoots and fruits are eaten throughout the country.

It's also a common genus in the southwestern U.S., including the Mojave and Sonoran deserts and the Great Basin. There are numerous varieties of nopal; one source suggests 220 species of *Opuntia*, with 60–90 in Mexico. In *Plantas Mexicanas: Catálogo de nombres vulgares y científicos* (Martínez, M. 1979. Fondo de Cultura Económica), I counted 31 species of *Opuntia*. I didn't research how many, beyond *O. ficus-indica*, are widely consumed in Mexico.

The red and white prickly pear fruits are the most popular, with white tuna being the most recognized nationwide. They grow throughout much of central and northern Mexico, flowering and fruiting from April to October. Both red and white varieties are loaded with seeds — making prickly pear jam a true labor of love (I've done it exactly once!). Look for delicious *tuna nieves* (ices) and *aguas* (fruit drinks) at the Mercado Orgánico de Huatulco and elsewhere. Prickly pear candy is another product, and in Arizona, you can even find a lollipop shaped like a prickly pear.

By the way, *nopal pencas* have been a staple of the Mexican diet for centuries. The plant has been bred so that cultivated varieties have fewer spines; farms around Huatulco commonly grow these. Walk by Los Parados along Carrizal in the morning, or elsewhere in La Crucecita, and you'll see people peeling and slicing the pads for salsas and tacos. They're highly nutritious.

Xoconostle

Another edible cactus fruit is the *xoconostle* (*Opuntia joconostle*), whose name comes from Náhuatl: "xococ" means sour or bitter, and "nochtli" is the word for the fruit (*tuna*). True to its name, it's distinctly bitter and commonly used in stews, sauces, and moles. The taxonomy can get confusing, as I discovered in *Plantas Mexicanas*.

Pitaya

This fruit is known in English as dragon fruit, and in Mexico as *pitaya*, *pitayas*, or *pitahayas*. The word derives from an Antillean (Caribbean) language meaning "scaly." The plant itself is a large, candelabra-like, drooping cactus with thick, fleshy branches.

Pitaya refers to the fruit rather than the specific plant; there are 23 entries for *pitaya* in *Plantas Mexicanas*. The main species are *Selenicereus undatus* and *Stenocereus queretaroensis* (the genus was formerly *Hylocereus*). Unlike nopal, this cactus is spineless. It's native to southern Mexico, Guatemala's Pacific coast, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.

The flesh is rich in vitamin C, iron, calcium, phosphorus, and fructose. *Pitaya* is versatile — used in smoothies, juices, and jams.

Biznaga

Biznaga is the common name for barrel cacti, and there are 26 references to it in *Plantas Mexicanas*. These squat, round, barrel-shaped cacti get their name from the Náhuatl "huitznáhuac" (surrounded by spines), which became "biznaga" when adopted into Spanish (and yes, the Spanish struggled with Náhuatl pronunciation — as do I).

There's more than one genus of *biznaga*, and the edible species is most likely *Ferocactus wislizenii* (fishhook cactus), which produces small pineapple-like fruits called *guamiche* — known as the "drunken" fruit because they can ferment naturally as they ripen. Native to northern Mexico and the southwestern U.S., they're quite distinctive.

Another notable barrel cactus is *Echinocactus platyacanthus*, known as the giant barrel cactus, golden barrel cactus, giant *viznaga*, or *biznaga de dulce*. Its Náhuatl name is *huitzli nahual*. Native to central Mexico and the Chihuahuan desert, its spongy pith is boiled and crystallized to make *acitrón*, a traditional Mexican candy.

However, due to overexploitation, *biznagas* are now endangered, and it's illegal to harvest them — plus, their preparation is complicated. Like most cacti, they grow extremely slowly: young plants can grow about an inch per year, but growth slows with age.

The red *biznaga* (*Ferocactus histrix*), also called *acitrón barrel cactus* (*biznaga barril de acitrón*), yields a delicacy called *cabuches* (aka *chilitos*) — tender buds of the fruit, collected at precisely the right moment. These buds, found in the highlands of San Luis Potosí and near Matehuala, look like colorful asparagus tips and taste a bit like tiny artichokes. Needless to say, they're hard to collect thanks to the long protective spines.

A third, less common barrel cactus genus is *Melocactus*, known as the Turk's cap cactus. Its tiny fruits aren't significant in the Mexican diet or culture, but they resemble *chiltepin* peppers — the wild chiles found throughout Mexico — though they aren't spicy.

Garambullo

There are nine references to *garambullo* in *Plantas Mexicanas*. The *garambullo* cactus most associated with edible fruits is likely *Myrtillocactus schenckii*, native to Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Puebla, or *M. geometrizans*. The small, sweet red or purple fruits can be juiced for *aguas*, jams, and *nieves*. While it makes an effective dye, processing it in quantity is tedious.

Zapotitlán Salinas, a pueblo in Puebla, is renowned for its alcoholic beverage made from macerated *M. geometrizans* fruits. Small quantities of the fruit are found in local markets in Mexico's arid regions, where they're said to taste like blueberries.

Whether enjoyed fresh, candied, juiced, or preserved, cactus fruits are deeply woven into Mexico's culinary and cultural landscape. Their diversity reflects the country's rich biodiversity and traditions — a reminder that even the most unassuming plants hold surprising flavors, stories, and significance.

Can Desalination Quench Huatulco's Thirst?

By Randy Jackson

Check into a luxury resort in Huatulco, and you'll find cascading pools and long, powerful showers. Water feels abundant. Yet just down the road, a neighbourhood may be waiting days for a water truck to arrive. Between the blue Pacific and the green forested mountains, this idyllic destination hides a growing imbalance: Huatulco's potable water supply is no longer keeping pace with the demands of an expanding resort and its surrounding communities.

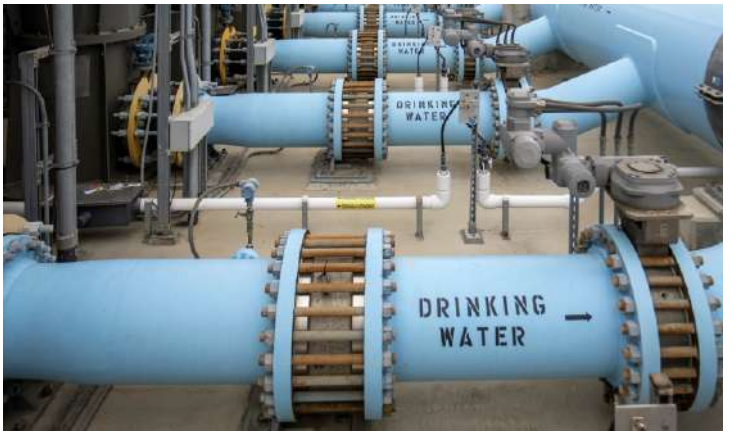
This struggle mirrors water issues found across Mexico. While long-term infrastructure investment remains essential, relying solely on public funding may no longer be realistic. To meet the growing needs of Huatulco, it's time to consider new approaches, ones that combine modern water technologies, public-private partnerships, and conservation. There is no silver bullet, but with the right vision, Huatulco could become a model for sustainable water management across Mexico and beyond.

Huatulco's Water Situation

Huatulco's water infrastructure was planned and built by Mexico's national tourism agency, FONATUR (*Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo*), in the 1990s as part of the original development blueprint for the resort. The system draws from eight semi-deep wells in the Copalita River watershed, feeding into 16 storage tanks along a 12-kilometre distribution main line. While still operational, the system is showing its age. In 2022, CONAGUA (Comisión Nacional del Agua) classified the Copalita aquifer as having medium availability but noted that the downstream infrastructure was increasingly outdated. A year later, the Secretariat of Infrastructure, Communications and Transportation (SICT) confirmed the need for major upgrades.

Today, over 50% of Huatulco's potable water goes to the tourism and hotel sector. Per capita use is heavily skewed, with oceanside hotels and condominiums consuming a disproportionate share. Meanwhile, population growth has steadily increased overall demand, straining both supply and delivery. Much of this concentrated water use takes place within the tourism corridor, a relatively compact stretch of just four bays and eight kilometres of coastline. Inland neighbourhoods, in contrast, often face shortages and delays.

This imbalance, while problematic, may also represent an opportunity. Could the tourism sector pilot a localized, sustainable solution, one that draws from the very ocean it overlooks?



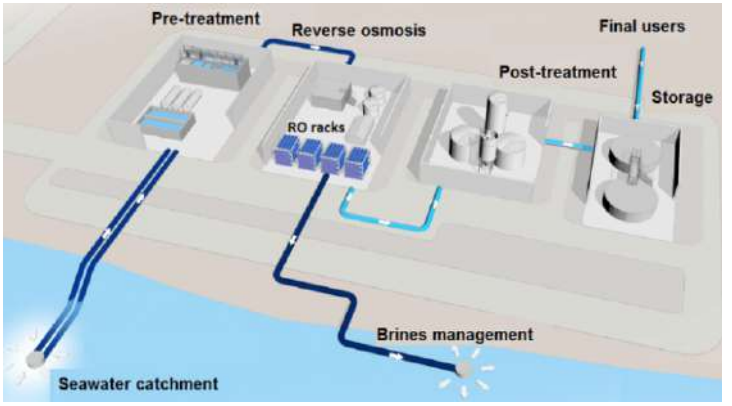
Modern Desalination Technology

In the 1967 film *The Graduate*, Dustin Hoffman's character, Benjamin Braddock, receives career advice in an iconic exchange. A friend of his father says, “I just want to say one word to you. Just one word: plastics.” It was sound advice for the industrial boom of the 1960s. Today, if I had just one word to offer, it would be **desalination**.

As climate change alters rainfall patterns and droughts become more frequent, desalination is no longer an experimental method; it's a proven way to convert seawater into drinking water. Countries like Israel and Saudi Arabia now rely on it for the majority of their potable water. In Israel, up to 80% of the drinking supply comes from desalination. Mexico, too, is investing in the technology. Across the country, some 350 plants are currently processing around 750,000 cubic meters (198 million gallons) of water per day. For context, Huatulco's wells produce about 11,000 cubic meters daily, a small fraction by comparison.

There are two primary methods for removing salt from seawater. The older method is thermal desalination, where water is boiled, the steam is condensed, and you're left with fresh water. It's effective but expensive and energy intensive. The more common method today is reverse osmosis (RO), where seawater is forced through a semi-permeable membrane that filters out the salt. Thermal plants, such as the one built in Rosarito, Baja California, in the 1960s, have largely given way to RO systems due to their lower energy demands and reduced environmental impact. Today, nearly all new and planned desalination projects in Mexico and worldwide use RO technology.

Several small to mid-scale RO projects are now being implemented in coastal communities, some driven by necessity, others by innovation. A closer look at a few of these projects may offer valuable insights for Huatulco.



Some Innovative Public-Private Projects

The municipality of Los Cabos, Baja California, requires major new developments, especially luxury resorts, to install their own desalination plants. There are now between 25 and 30 such facilities in the region, many of which are privately or community-operated, often located within gated developments. One notable example is Pedregal, a high-end residential community perched above the blue Pacific in Cabo San Lucas. Its privately operated desalination plant supplies water to the development, but soon it will do more. Pedregal is set to become the first private desalination facility in Baja California Sur to sell potable water to the public system. Construction is expected to begin in 2024-25 on the infrastructure necessary to connect the existing plant to the municipal network, demonstrating how the public and private sectors can collaborate to address local water needs.

A very different kind of project is taking shape in the city of Fort Bragg on the northern coast of California. The city is piloting a small-scale desalination system powered entirely by ocean waves. The unit, developed by Oneka, a Canadian water technology firm, is tethered offshore and utilizes the motion of waves to generate pressure. That pressure drives seawater through reverse osmosis filters, producing fresh water that's piped back to shore. The pilot will begin with a single “iceberg-class” unit capable of producing about 50 cubic meters (13,000 gallons) per day. More units can be added to increase capacity as needed. Though modest in scale, the project demonstrates how renewable energy and desalination can be combined to meet local needs.

Thinking beyond the wells, such examples are worth considering for Huatulco, especially since the tourism zone is just eight kilometres long and accounts for a large share of overall water use while inland neighbourhoods face periodic shortages. With the town's freshwater supply already stretched and the distribution system in need of repair, Huatulco will need to look beyond conventional solutions. Could a small-scale desalination plant focused on the tourism corridor provide the necessary stability to ease shortfalls and support continued growth?

What If?

What if the leaders of Huatulco's resort development, the all-inclusive hotel operators, and officials from FIDELO (Oaxaca's state-level development commission), FONATUR and CONAGUA sat down together in the spirit of Mexico's new National Water Plan, which covers 2024-30? Could they envision a shared solution, such as a small-scale desalination plant serving the tourism zone, that would relieve pressure on the existing water system? Could that, in turn, free up more of the town's limited freshwater supply for inland neighbourhoods that suffer water shortages? Might it also allow public resources to focus on repairing leaks and upgrading infrastructure rather than drilling more wells?

It wouldn't solve everything. But it could be a first step, concrete, local, and scalable. And perhaps, if done thoughtfully and transparently, Huatulco could become not just a resort town managing a water crisis but a model for how public and private interests can come together to build a more sustainable and equitable future.

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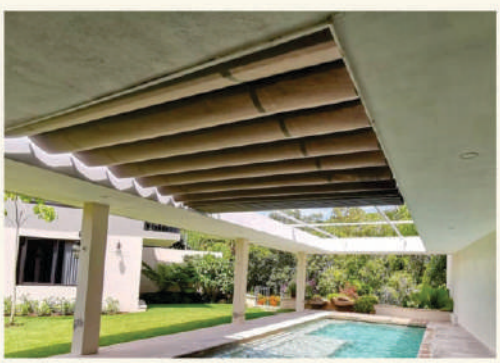

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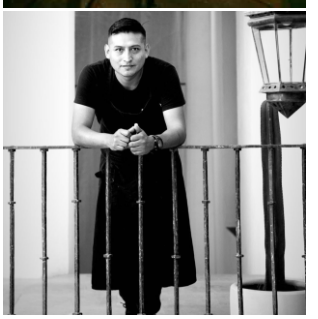
A French Touch in the Heart of Oaxaca: Chef Israel Loyola's Culinary Dialogue

By Jane Bauer



Culture is not static—it is always transforming. As much as we might wish to preserve certain traditions and claim them as part of our identity—especially in times of nationalism and cultural divide—food reminds us that nothing remains fixed. Many people take comfort in declaring a certain dish, ingredient, or way of living as "theirs," drawing boundaries between themselves and others, whether based on class, religion, or geography. But cuisine has always been porous. Before colonization, the diet in North America centered around the "three sisters" of agriculture—corn, beans, and squash—foods still essential in many parts of Mexico today. And yet, what we now think of as Mexican cuisine has evolved through centuries of influence: German, Chinese, Lebanese—and perhaps most significantly, French.

One chef who embodies this interplay is Chef Israel Loyola. For him, cooking isn't just about technique—it's about people. "A cook can't just be a cook," he says. "A chef has to be the sum of everything—kitchen, service, dishwashing, even working the register. It includes the people who arrive early to prep before the restaurant opens. It's a team effort, and that's what we try to reflect in every dish."

That spirit of collective craftsmanship lies at the heart of *El Parián Atelier*, Loyola's restaurant in the center of Oaxaca City. Located just steps from the rhythm of daily life, the space feels both elegant and grounded, welcoming locals and visitors alike to experience thoughtful cuisine shaped by memory, migration, and collaboration.

The name *Parián* is more than a nod to historic Mexican markets. It honors a nearly abandoned Mixtec town once known as the "port of the Mixteca," a place that flourished during the railway boom of the Porfiriato but all but disappeared after privatization in the 1990s. Today, the original Parián has fewer than ten inhabitants—mostly memories and nostalgia. That emotion infuses Loyola's cooking. *Atelier*, the French word for workshop, completes the name and reflects the constant creative process behind every plate.

His team, like his menu, brings together diverse roots. Half are from Oaxaca, the rest from across Mexico. "Many came to Oaxaca to grow—culturally, yes, but professionally, too," he says. Many have formal culinary training, often in the French tradition.

That French influence in the kitchen is no accident. During the Porfiriato, the long presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911), French culture was consciously adopted as a model of modernity and refinement. Díaz himself was famously Francophile, and under his rule, Parisian aesthetics permeated architecture, fashion, and especially cuisine. French chefs were invited to Mexico to cook for the elite, and French cooking techniques became the standard in upper-class kitchens and newly formed culinary academies.

Sauces such as béchamel and velouté began to appear alongside traditional Mexican moles, and pâtisserie methods influenced everything from breadmaking to wedding cakes. Table service became more formal, plating more intentional, and an appreciation for technique—mise en place, precise knife work, structured courses—began to define what it meant to be a "professional" cook.

Even in the world of drinks, the Porfiriato left its mark: two foundational books on distillation and cocktail-making were published during this era. "We inherited a whole structure of formality from that time," says Loyola. "The way we plate, the way we move through the kitchen—it still carries echoes of that period."

After the Porfiriato ended, much of that French culinary refinement faded from everyday food culture, and traditional Mexican mixology—particularly *curados*, or infused spirits—was nearly forgotten. But today, Loyola sees a revival. "All of that is coming back," he says. "We're not just following global cocktail trends. We're reclaiming what was already ours."

At *El Parián Atelier*, every element—from the name to the ingredients to the way the team works together—tells a story. "We're not just making food," Loyola says. "We're making something living. Something that speaks to memory, migration, and the ever-changing shape of culture itself."

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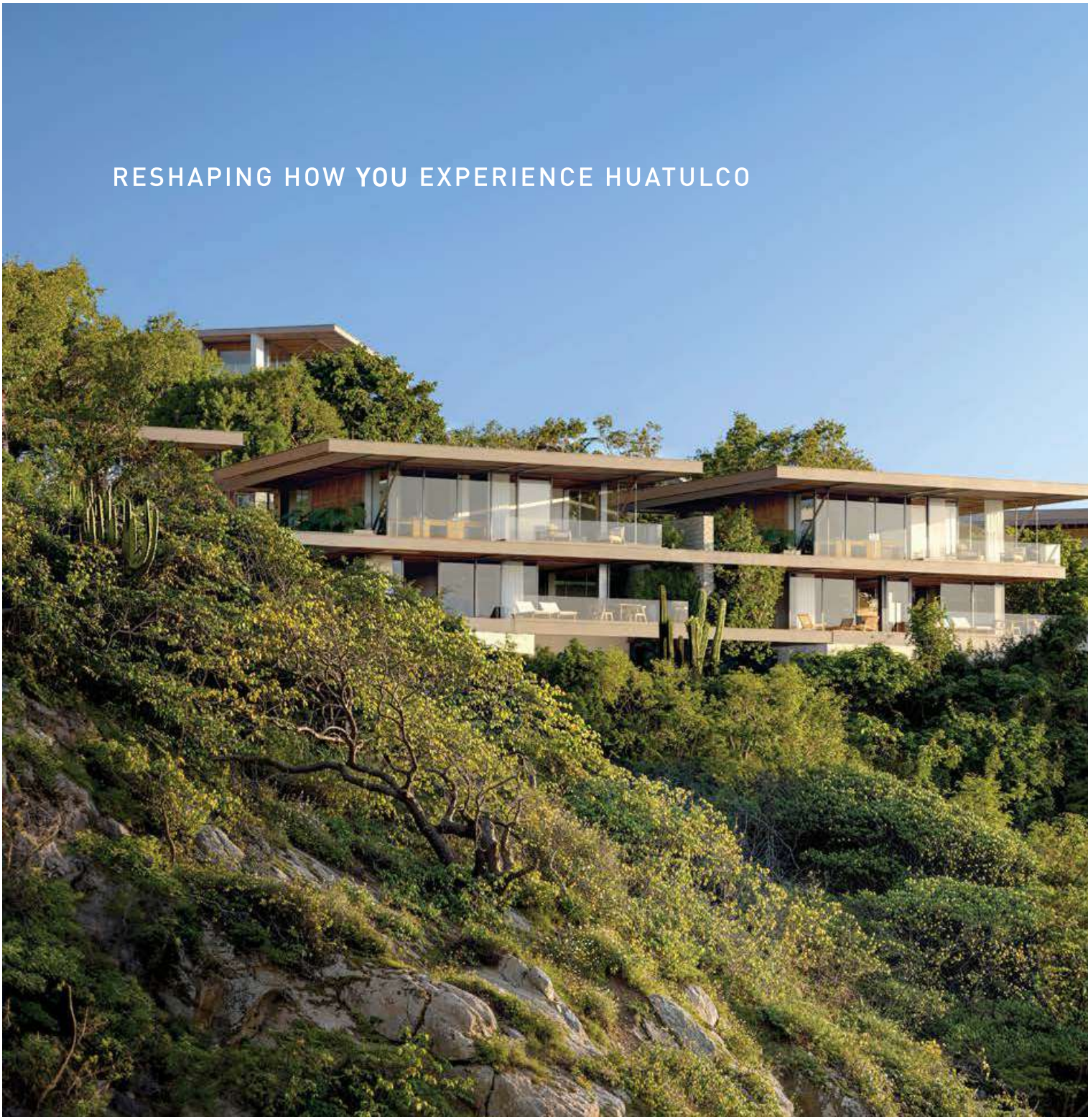

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From Ant Eggs to Corn Smut with Three Under 30: Strolling, Savoring, and Snacking through the Streets of CDMX

By Carole Reedy

Two Welshmen and a Scot, all under 30, were my guests for a week last month in my adopted home, Mexico City. Seeing the city and the Mexican experience through their eyes brought me a fresh perspective. Neither age nor country-of-origin were barriers when it comes to culture or gastronomy.

Come with us on an abridged version of our discoveries …

First Impressions and Surprises

Mexico City's population of 23,000,000, when compared to the 3,000,000 in all of Wales, was the first shock. The Welshmen (Kadun and Callum) are proud people, so the number of large Mexican flags that fly throughout the city positively impressed them, as well as the kind and welcoming attitudes of the locals.

Kadun remared, "I only wish they knew where Wales was located. We got weird looks after saying "*Soy de Galés*" (I am from Wales).

Their biggest compliment was simply "We could've stayed another week."

Tamales and Chilaquiles

We began planning our week over morning cocktails and tamales on my sunny balcony in the trendy *colonia* (neighborhood) of Roma Sur. The young men chose Aperol spritzes and Bloody Marys, followed by tequilas.

The tamales come from a corner street vendor (at Bajío and Tlacotalpan, Roma Sur), who offers the traditional *maíz* as well as the Oaxaqueña style (wrapped in banana leaves) of tamales every weekday from 8 am to noon. We chose a tasting, buying the *verde* (green), mole, sweet, and raja (pepper strips) tamales. The green chiles proved to be the favorites. The spice level varies daily, and that day's were plenty spicy without burning the mouth.

The hours flew while we planned the rest of their week, trying to fit as much as possible into the schedule, considering traffic, protest marches, and other exigencies of living in this grand metropolis.

Soon it was time for *comida* (informal food, often lunch). I had also purchased from the same friendly vendor a true Mexican delight and favorite of all: *chilaquiles* – corn chips (*totopos*) simmered in red or green sauce, often with other toppings. The vendor alternates the red and green flavors every other day. These were green and among the best I've ever had.

Chilaquiles are among the top favorite foods of Mexicans, traditionally served New Years Day as a hangover cure for, but offered year-round. Aside from assuaging a hangover, they are mighty tasty, consisting simply of chicken, green or red chile sauce, and onions served over corn chips and topped with *crema.*

Add a Victoria Mexican beer and all is right with the world.

Rediscovering Old Favorites: Cafe Tacuba and El Mayor

A full day in Centro Histórico is a must for all travelers. We started our day at Bellas Artes, the stunning Art Deco wonder and home of Mexico City's Opera House as well as the most significant murals of Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco. We also appreciated some Impressionist works in a recently opened special exhibit.

All that activity whetted our appetites, so we picked up speed, turned down Calle Tacuba, walked by the equally magnificent Art Deco post office, and ended up at #12 Tacuba, home of the renowned restaurant, Café Tacuba.

While Sor Juana, Mexico's most renowned poet/nun, peeked over our shoulders from her dominant place on the wall, we dined on three of the ten different styles of enchiladas (tortilla-wrapped fillings covered with sauce), traditional *sopa azteca* (tomato-chile broth over tortilla strips, with a variety of toppings), and a tasty *horchata* (a rice and cinnamon drink). The entire menu is filled with traditional Mexican specialties.

Café Tacuba opened in 1912. The building was once a 17th-century palatial home and is decorated with colonial style art. Calle Tacuba is the oldest street in the Americas.

Several years ago, I was served a disappointing meal that had not been heated sufficiently – it was served lukewarm on the surface and cold inside. I hesitated to return, but, because I always like to take visitors to traditional Mexican places, I crossed my fingers and entered. I was happy we returned because everything we ate was just perfect this time. A lesson learned: don't judge a restaurant by one bad experience.

Frappes at El Mayor

Well-sated, we strolled to the *zócalo* (main square) where the Templo Mayor, the heart of the Aztec Empire, dominated. Here the largest of the pyramids stood, the place where lives were sacrificed to the gods.

This temple was discovered quite by accident. In 1978 electricians hard at work discovered a giant monolith close to the cathedral, which spurred a five-year investigation that unearthed the Templo Mayor. Imagine what else lies beneath the Cathedral (built in 1578) and other structures in the area. Think of this as you walk on the cement sidewalks of Mexico City.

Parched and tired, we fortunately knew help was just a few blocks away at the Terrace of El Mayor, a lovely cafe overlooking the ruins of the Templo Mayor. You enter through the Porrúa bookstore at República de Argentina 15 (cross street is Donceles) and take the elevator to the restaurant/cafe level. We all ordered chocolate coffee frappes at the cafe. Nothing ever tasted so good. The adjacent restaurant serves breakfast and lunch.

Turibus and Cervecerías

"Watch the wires and branches: Duck!" These are the instructions I give visitors who join me on one of the most pleasant rides available to tourists. Turibus, the double-decker bus, follows several routes and stops, but my favorite by far is the *Centro Histórico* route. You will ride through the home of the Aztecs and experience the 500-year historical progress of the nation's independence from Spain and the equally lengthy and inexplicable Mexican Revolution.

You will be treated to a ride down the city's most beautiful street: Reforma. If you are fortunate enough to visit in February or March, the purple flowers of the *jacaranda* trees will carpet your route. A short ride through Condesa gives one a glimpse into this popular colonia.

A good place to end the Turibus tour is the *Cibeles* fountain, a replica of the fountain found in Madrid and a gift from Spain to Mexico. The stop is in the trendy colonia Roma at Medellin and Oaxaca streets. There you will encounter many bars, *cervecerías* (brewpubs) and restaurants in a beautiful setting. Recently friends of mine rented an apartment in a floor-to-ceiling windowed high rise on Calle Medellin, across from the Turibus stop: the views of the mountains to the south of the city were spectacular!

Azul Condesa Celebration and Tequila Tour

A special day deserves a special restaurant for the 28th birthday of our visitor from Scotland, my grandson Joe. After a full day at the pyramids at Teotihuacán, we dined at one of the renowned Azul restaurants, *Azul Condesa*.

The men were adventurous and chose to start with *escamoles* (ant eggs), a delicacy often known as "Mexican caviar." I chose the traditional fungal corn smut, *huitlacoche*. A variety of wines from the very complete list graced our table, as well as the ever-traditional *margaritas*. Service was impeccable and our main meals of meat, fish and duck were most satisfying.

My young visitors still had energy to go on to the famous Plaza Garibaldi (known for its *mariachis*). There they did a complete tequila tasting tour at the Museo del Tequila y el Mezcal, and their glowing report raved that the tour "offered big pours and a complete explanation of the process of creating Mexico's most famous beverage."

The next day we said goodbye and the three went on to the beaches of Puerto Vallarta. A few days later, we all met in Puerto Peñasco, Sonora, for our triennial Reedy family reunion, a perfect ending to the Mexican Adventure.

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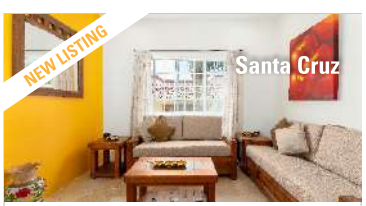

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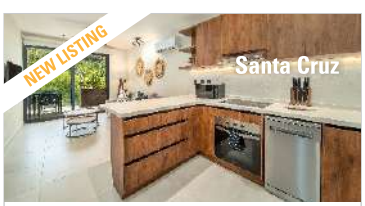

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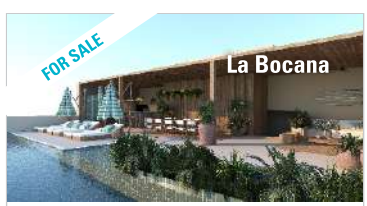

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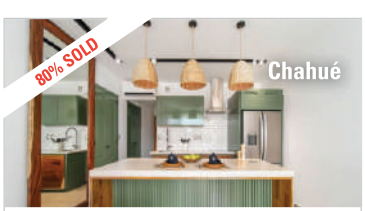

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Skip the Supplement and Order the Mole

By Kary Vannice

When in Mexico, a mention that you're suffering from some sort of ailment will almost immediately be met with a recommendation for a local herbal remedy. It seems every Mexican abuela has an encyclopedic knowledge of natural cures, especially if they're derived from plants. But here, you don't have to venture into the forest or even the health food store to find many of these remedies, because they're often served right on your dinner plate.

Unlike most meals in the US or Canada, which may include a sprinkle of dried herbs or rely heavily on processed seasonings, traditional Mexican cuisine leans into the use of fresh herbs and spices that not only make food taste fresh and flavorful, but also have curative properties.

Their ancestors knew that food was about more than flavor. To them, it was also medicine. Cultures that incorporate fresh herbs and spices into their diets are healthier for a reason. So, why not tap into the healing power on your plate?

Here are some of the most common healing herbs and spices used in Mexican cooking, the ailments they can help with, and what you can order if you want a natural dose of plant medicine with your meal:

Got gut health issues like inflammation, parasites, or bloating?

Reach for the **Epazote**, a long, jagged, deep green leaf, somewhat resembling dandelion. Health Perks**:** Eases digestive discomfort, supports gut health, aids nutrient absorption, and strengthens immunity. Order off the menu: *Frijoles de la olla* (beans cooked with epazote), or tamales flavored with epazote layered in with fillings like beans or squash blossoms.

Dealing with respiratory issues, cramps, or headaches?

Hoja Santa to the rescue. This large, "sacred" heart-shaped leaf infuses meals with natural remedies, promoting healing with every bite.
Health Perks: Alleviates colic, cramps, asthma, and respiratory issues. Acts as an expectorant for coughs, colds, and bronchitis.
Order off the menu: *Pescado Envuelto en Hoja Santa* (fish wrapped in the leaf), or green or yellow mole made Oaxacan-style, often with hoja santa blended into the sauce.

On a detox kick, trying to repair your gut health or reduce your anxiety?

Load up on the **Cilantro!** This bright, leafy herb does more than make food pretty. It's rich in antioxidants and helps the body flush out heavy metals while supporting digestion and calming the nervous system. Health Perks: Lowers blood sugar and triglycerides, reduces inflammation, and eases anxiety. Order off the menu: *Tacos al pastor*, *ceviche de pescado*, or *salsa verde* loaded with fresh cilantro.

Dealing with a cold or needing immune support?

Mexican Oregano will get you back on your feet fast! Its leaf is larger, fuzzier, and stronger than the Italian oregano you're familiar with, and it's loaded with antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory compounds. Health Perks: Helps fight bacteria and viruses, calms inflammation, and supports respiratory and immune health.
Order off the menu: *Pozole rojo* or *birria*. It's also found in many marinades and chili-based dishes.

Got circulation issues, chronic inflammation, or need a metabolism boost?

Bring on the **Chiles.** Peppers do more than just add heat, they're loaded with capsaicin, a compound that has serious health benefits. And the hotter the pepper, the stronger the benefit (if your stomach can handle it). Health Perks: Improves blood flow, reduces inflammation and relieves pain. Also supports weight management by boosting your metabolism.
Order off the menu: *Enchiladas rojas*, *salsa macha*, anything made with *mole*, or simply ask for the "salsa de la casa" and add some punch to your meal.

Battling blood sugar spikes or high cholesterol?

Call in the **Cumin.** This earthy spice comes from the seed of a parsley plant and doesn't just taste amazing, it also keeps your digestion running smoothly and is especially beneficial after carb-heavy meals.
Health Perks: Supports blood sugar regulation, improves insulin sensitivity, reduces cholesterol, and supports weight management.
Order off the menu: *Mexican lentil soup*, *mole poblano*, *chorizo*, or *tinga de pollo*.

Need an immune boost or suffering from inflammation?

Look for **Papalo.** This bold, peppery herb has thick, spade-shaped leaves with a soft, blue-green hue. Sometimes called "the cilantro of the Sierra," it's often overlooked, but packed with healing power.

Health Perks: A powerhouse of antioxidants, it helps calm inflammation, supports cellular repair, and boosts immunity.

Order off the menu: *Cemita poblana* (a classic Pueblan sandwich) or *tacos árabes* with a papalo garnish.

Turns out, the secret to better health might not be in a pill bottle, but in a taco. So, the next time you're enjoying a meal in Mexico, remember, every bite might be doing more than just satisfying your taste buds. Herbs and spices like these have been passed down through generations not just for their flavor, but for their power to heal. With centuries of plant wisdom tucked into tamales, salsas, and stews, Mexican food isn't just delicious, it's actually functional medicine in disguise.

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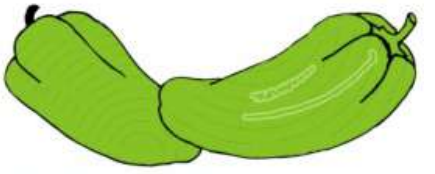

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From Pad to Product: The Rise of Cactus Leather

By Ximena Collado

Have you heard of cactus "leather"? Cactus leather is an innovative, sustainable alternative to traditional leather—plant-based, low-impact, and 100% vegan. This unique material represents an exciting shift toward greener and more responsible products.

Mexico is home to over 3 million hectares of cultivated nopal cactus, making it one of the country's most important and versatile crops. Beyond its culinary and cultural value, nopal is now proving to be a sustainable powerhouse in materials innovation. Cactus leather production uses up to 99.9% less water than animal leather—around 20 liters per square meter compared to 33,000 liters—and relies solely on rain-fed plants that thrive in arid conditions without pesticides or herbicides. The harvesting process is regenerative, allowing mature pads to be removed every few months without damaging the plant. What's more, the leftover cactus pulp is repurposed, creating a zero-waste, circular system. With significantly lower carbon emissions and no toxic chemicals used in processing, cactus leather represents a meaningful shift toward more ethical and environmentally responsible alternatives.

The process of making cactus leather starts with harvesting mature pads from the prickly pear cactus without harming the plant. The pads are carefully cleaned and sun-dried for several days to remove moisture naturally. Once dried, they are ground into a fine powder and blended with bio-based resins and natural pigments to form a flexible, eco-friendly material. This mixture is then pressed onto a textile backing to create durable, leather-like sheets that are soft, breathable, and sustainable.

The result is a high-performance, partially biodegradable vegan material celebrated for its strength, elegance, and minimal environmental footprint.

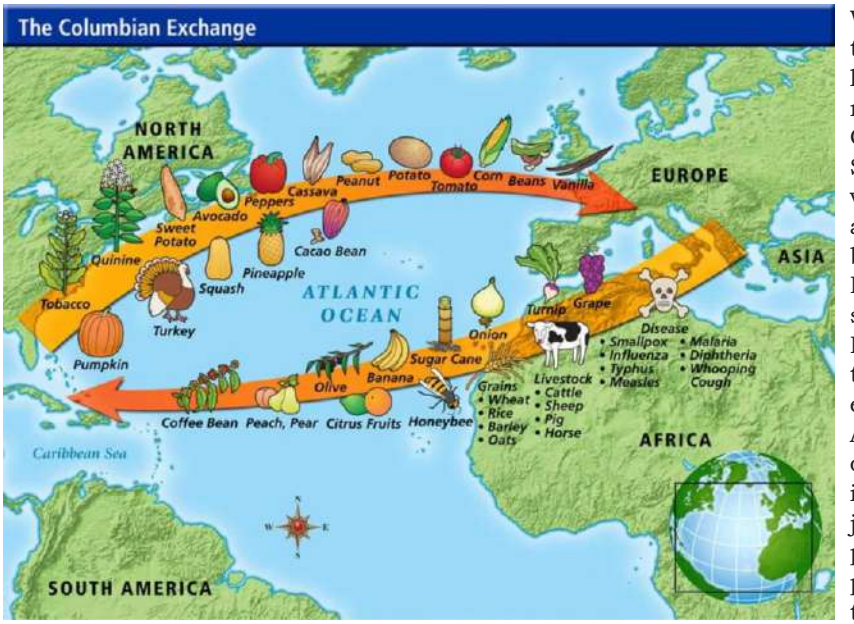
One of the companies leading the way is Amikoo, which creates eco-conscious pet accessories crafted in Guanajuato. Amikoo offers collars and bandanas in a wide range of colors and sizes, blending contemporary design with a commitment to social impact. Their mission goes beyond sustainability: the company actively supports Mexican indigenous communities and promotes conscious, ethical production. Through their non-profit association, Xana Artesanías, Amikoo raises funds for vital initiatives, including health campaigns for indigenous women and sterilization programs for stray dogs in rural areas.

Want to make a difference with your next pet accessory? Treat your dog to a beautiful, eco-friendly collar or bandana by visiting www.ami-koo.com or finding Amikoo's collection on Amazon. Every purchase supports sustainability and helps empower local communities.

How Mexican Is Mexican Cuisine? Very, But ...

By Deborah Van Hoewyk

When, in 1519, Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortés met Aztec emperor Moctezuma II, he also met a frothy drink reputed to be an aphrodisiac – *xocolatl*, or chocolate. Unknown elsewhere in the world, traces of cacao preparation and use go back to nearly 4000 BCE in Ecuador. At first, cacao produced a bitter drink used in various rituals. By the time Moctezuma was drinking xocolatl, it was flavored with spices and thought to have medicinal and spiritual properties. The Spanish, as they did with most "new" things they encountered in Mexico, took it back to Europe, where it met sugar – anyone for a Godiva?



When Columbus landed in the Americas in 1492 – he landed in the Bahamas, renaming the island of Guanahani as San Salvador, then moved on to what are now called Cuba and Hispaniola (divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic) – he started the "Columbian Exchange." The term refers to the widespread exchange between the Americas and Europe, and once slavery became part of it, West Africa as well, of just about everything: people and their cultures, plants and animals, technology and ideas, and disease. The Exchange would shape agriculture, ecology, and society on both sides of the Atlantic, if not around the world; it also killed an estimated 45 to 100 million indigenous people through exposure to diseases not found in the Americas (smallpox, cholera, bubonic plague, typhoid fever, diphtheria, the flu, measles).

The Columbian Exchange

Before the arrival of Old World explorers – in particular the Spanish conquistadores – the ancient (Aztec, Mayan, and Olmec) indigenous cuisines were basically vegetarian. The famous *milpa* system intercropped corn, beans, and squash; the beans climbed the corn stalks, and the squash leaves sheltered the roots of all three. The milpa system used crop rotation and fallowing (letting land lie unplanted), which promoted sustainable production and biodiversity, ensuring that the system was successful for the long term.

Pre-Columbian agriculture also produced chili peppers, tomatoes, avocados, and cacao; condiments included salt, honey, and edible flowers and insects. The history of tortillas goes back to nearly 10,000 BCE, when ancient corn was domesticated from a grain called *teosinte*. The grains, which over time became more like the corn kernels we know today, were soaked in an alkaline solution to break them down enough to create the dough (*masa*) for the tortillas (the process is called "nixtamalization").

The indigenous diet was not totally vegetarian, though – the vegetable base was supplemented with domesticated turkeys and ducks, possibly dogs, and wild-caught game (deer, rabbits, wild birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and seafood).

Cooking techniques included open fires, pit fires where ingredients were wrapped in leaves to steam in their own juices, and the creation of "spice powders" by grinding dried ingredients into powders for flavoring. Stewed vegetable dishes and moles were cooked in *cazuelas*, shallow round earthenware cook pots positioned over a fire.

The Spanish Conquest of Mexico's Foodways

For Mexico, conquered by the Spanish in 1521, the changes to foodways were profound. The Conquest brought new ingredients – saliently, larger meat animals (cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats) and more poultry in addition to the native turkeys. The Spanish also brought wheat and rice (the latter arrived with Africans brought as slaves to work in the New World). Olive oil and wine, essential to Spanish cuisine, came over in large earthenware jars; new fruits (stone fruits like peaches, figs, and melons), and nuts and beans (chickpeas, or *garbanzos*, field peas, almonds).

The fact that Spain had lived under Arabic rule for several centuries – North African Arabs held sway in southern Spain (Al Andalus) from 711 to 1492 CE – also shaped the foods and cooking techniques that made their way west. The flavors of new herbs and spices – garlic, cumin, coriander, and cinnamon especially are all redolent of north African and Middle Eastern cuisine.

Perhaps the most popular, and widely available today, Arab dish is *tacos al pastor* (shepherd's tacos), or *Tacos Árabes*, a variation of Middle Eastern *shawarma*. You can see it from afar, as restaurant staff slice marinated pork or mixed meats (originally they were made with lamb or goat) off a vertical roast on a spit, filling up flour tortillas, and topping the meat with onions and sauce. *Arroz con leche* (rice pudding) is also considered a Middle Eastern treat that arrived in Mexico via Spain.

Spanish cooking also brought new cooking methods, frying – made possible by the Spanish contributions of olive oil and lard (*manteca*) - and baking. With the Spanish introduction of wheat, baking the wide range of *pan dulces* (sweet breads – great for breakfast) got started. The Spanish brought their baking techniques with them and began incorporating Mexican ingredients along with their wheat.

French Influence:

In the wake of the War of Independence, when Mexico threw off Spanish rule, the French tried to replace the Spanish. The "French Intervention," followed by the Second Mexican Empire, was short – 1862-67 – but it served to expand Mexico's baking repertoire. *Bolillos* are considered the Mexican "French Bread."

French crêpes were incorporated in Mexican dishes, the crêpes stuffed with fillings like *huitlacoche* (corn smut) or poblano peppers, the whole thing covered with sauce – the cream sauces are a French contribution.

The French also contributed water-bath cooking techniques (e.g., the *bain-marie*), which refined Mexican custards and flans.

Lebanese Influence

While many credit tacos al pastor to the Lebanese, they did not start immigrating in any great numbers until the 1880s, after one or another version of tacos el pastor had appeared. The Lebanese first arrived in the Yucatán peninsula as the Ottoman Empire reached its oppressive height. More Lebanese arrived during the Israel-Lebanon War of 1948, when Mexico made haste to admit them. The Lebanese also brought a dish called "kibbeh," small fritters of ground beef, bulgur wheat, onion, and spices. *Taquitos de parra* (little tacos of grape leaves) are stuffed with ground meat, rice, garlic, and maybe some cinnamon; many Mexicans make them bigger than taquitos, and use cabbage leaves in place of grape leaves. If you buy *jocoque*, a thick yogurt used for sauces or dips, that's a Lebanese creation as well.

Mexican Influences on Mexican Cuisine

Other culinary traditions have influenced Mexican cuisine; African, Caribbean, Chinese, Portuguese and Philipino dishes can all be found in Mexico, but the greatest influence on Mexican cuisine is the different regional variations in the flavors, ingredients, cultural practices, and special dishes across the country. (See Brooke O'Connor's article, "Seven Regions of Mexican Flavors," in the August 2023 issue of *The Eye*.)

Northern Mexico offers grilled meats – we've passed many a *barbacoa* establishment coming south through Monterrey and Querétaro; the closer you are to the border and "Tex-Mex" land, the more frequently you'll eat flour tortillas. And here in Oaxaca, have you had *chapulines* drowning in cheese? Salt and crunch can't beat it!

Saving Money at the Grocery Store Is Still Possible—Even with Inflation

By Sheryl Rothert

If we want to spend less at the grocery store, **we must change the way we shop**. High prices aren't going away anytime soon. Even with inflation down in some countries, prices continue to rise. That means we need new strategies—and a plan. I realized this when I wanted more control over my spending. I developed a monthly system I could follow consistently, and it made a big difference. I even noticed improvements in my family's health.

Here are three simple strategies that formed the foundation of that plan:

1. Take a List

Not just a running tally of what you've run out of—but an organized list, grouped by category. I now keep mine on my phone, and I plan meals ahead to reduce waste and save money. The more you do this, the easier it gets. You'll shop with purpose and waste less food.

2. Pay with Cash (or Debit)

Set a spending limit and stick to it. Cash keeps you accountable. Before heading to the store, estimate your total. Shopping online? Use the digital cart to check totals and adjust. You can even do a practice run online to get a sense of real costs before you go in person.

3. Shop Early in the Day

Fresh items are stocked in the morning. If you wait until evening, your first choices may be gone or overpriced. Shopping early means better quality and fewer impulsive purchases.

These strategies work wherever you are—from Cairo to Huatulco to Chilliwack. Even when traveling, I plan meals, keep a list, store food properly, and use leftovers. Eating out is great, but staying in saves money—and often, it's just as enjoyable.

Smart shopping isn't just about saving dollars—it's about supporting your health and freeing up time for the things you love.

Sheryl Rothert, B.Sc., B.Ed., is the author of *Found: Health, Wealth and Time in a Grocery Bag*.

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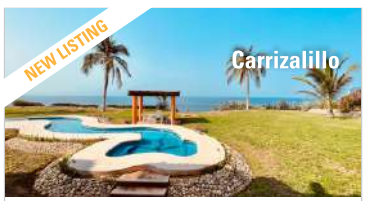

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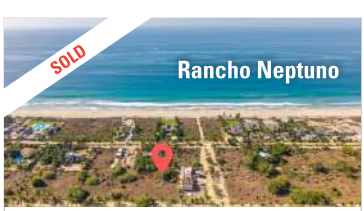

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5 Restaurants You Shouldn't Miss in Mexico City

By Frances López

Mexico City has firmly established itself as one of the world's most dynamic culinary capitals. With deep traditions the city offers a rich and layered dining scene. Here are five restaurants that stand out for their quality, perspective, and sense of place.

1. Maizajo
Fernando Montes de Oca 113, Condesa

At Maizajo, everything begins with corn — specifically, native heirloom varieties sourced from across Mexico. Their commitment to traditional nixtamalization gives depth and authenticity to every tortilla, tamal, and masa-based dish they serve. The concept is split into two levels. Downstairs, the taquería offers a more informal experience where guests enjoy guisado tacos and antojitos while standing at the counter — reminiscent of traditional market dining. Upstairs, the full-service restaurant presents a refined interpretation of classic Mexican dishes, grounded in memory but reimagined with creativity and care. It's a thoughtful homage to Mexico's most essential ingredient.

2. Voraz
Aguascalientes 93, Roma Sur

Housed in a former auto repair shop, Voraz is an example of Mexico City's culinary reinvention: relaxed in spirit, but serious about flavor. Chef Emiliano Padilla brings a northern Mexican perspective to seafood, working with bold salsas, smoked elements, and seasonal produce. The menu balances familiarity and innovation. Dishes such as the tuna tostada with salsa macha or sweet corn uchepo with cheese foam reflect both tradition and technique. With a strong focus on mezcal, natural wines, and inventive cocktails, Voraz makes a compelling case for contemporary Mexican dining in a casual, stylish setting.

3. Ultramarinos de Fran
Carlos Dickens 33, Polanco

A quieter counterpart to the popular Barra de Fran, Ultramarinos de Fran captures the essence of a classic Spanish taberna. Located on a tree-lined street in Polanco, the restaurant offers both indoor seating and a few sidewalk tables. Here, you'll find expertly prepared tapas — tortilla española, jamón ibérico, boquerones — alongside a concise, well-curated wine list. It's also a small shop with imported Spanish products, perfect for those who want to take a taste of the experience home.

4. Oly
Alfonso Reyes 120, Condesa

Oly is a neighborhood restaurant with a Mediterranean soul and a quiet sophistication. The menu draws inspiration from the broader region — dishes like lamb kofta, scallops, or housemade pastas — while integrating seasonal Mexican ingredients with restraint and elegance. A few standouts: the sourdough bread (baked in-house daily), a beautifully balanced capellini with lemon, and the richly flavored short rib with polenta and roasted eggplant. The ambiance is warm but refined. Ideal for those who appreciate thoughtful cooking in an unpretentious setting.

5. Ticuchi
Petrarca 254, Polanco

Ticuchi, from celebrated chef Enrique Olvera, is a quiet yet striking exploration of Oaxacan cuisine through a contemporary lens. The setting is dimly lit and intimate, with a minimalist design that puts the focus squarely on the food. The menu showcases vegetables and maíz as central elements, with inventive preparations such as tamales with goat cheese, tacos de piña al pastor, or chintextle with toasted seeds and chapulines. The beverages lean heavily into artisanal mezcals.

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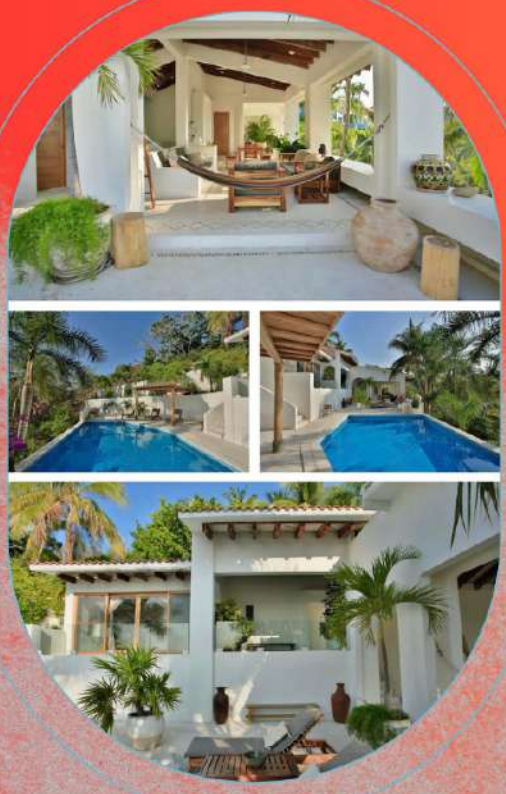

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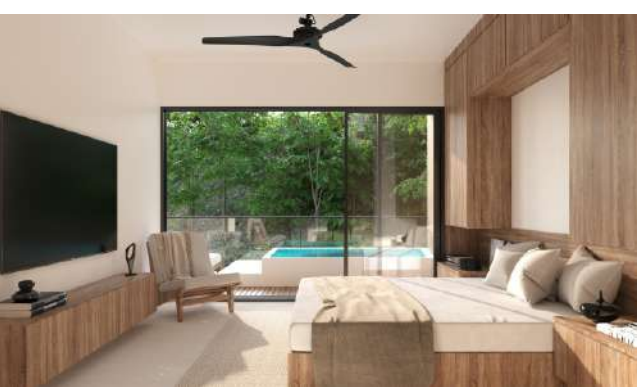

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