

# Real Mexican Cuisine: So Much More than Enchiladas and Tacos

Fri, Oct 29, 2010

North America, eating & drinking



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Day of the Dead is just around the corner and feast preparations will be in full swing. On 1st and 2nd November, Mexicans remember friends and family who have passed away but the event is supposed to be one of celebration and that means food. Guest blogger **Barbara Weibel** from **Cultural Travel with Hole In The Donut** takes a look at Mexican cuisine, but perhaps not as we know it...

"I ordered a taco. This isn't a taco. I mean, this is Mexico, ain't it? Ya'll oughta know how to make a taco, right?"

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The perplexed waiter stammered back in broken English. "Jes, is taco." But the cruise ship day-tripper persisted. "Tacos got a hard shell, honey. This here is soft." The owner of the restaurant sighed and got up from my table to resolve the misunderstanding. "Happens all the time," he whispered upon returning. "They're used to Taco Bell, but in Mexico there's no such thing as a taco in a hard shell. We've got a new cook; I explained what she wants and hopefully he understands..."

Although I found the woman's concept of Mexican food amusing, I could relate to her distress. Seafood is the only meat I will eat, and finding appropriate food when I travel is often difficult. Northern Mexico had been especially challenging, since its simple cuisine consisted primarily of meat and tortillas. After a month I thought I would hurl if I had to look at another cheese taco or bean enchilada. But as I travelled further into Mexico's heartland, fortunately, the cuisine began to change.



## Soups & Salads

In **Zacatecas** I was introduced to Azteca Soup (also called Tortilla Soup), which has a rich tomato base laced with onions, garlic, and Worcestershire sauce that is poured over tortilla strips and avocado slices then topped with sour cream and crumbled ranch-style cheese. Soup has quickly become a favourite; I sampled all the vegetarian varieties: cream of cucumber; Yucatecan squash blossom, fat corn chowder and poblano chiles cooked in evaporated milk until it attains the consistency

of thick cream; and a rich roasted red pepper over tortilla chips. Fresh salad options were just as impressive, ranging from traditional Caesar salads to roasted Nopal cactus pads (minus the spines) topped with Panela cheese and smothered in green sauce.

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# Street Food

On days when I wasn't really hungry, I hit the street vendors where I filled up on snacks. Roasted corn on the cob, rolled in mayonnaise and grated cheese, topped with hot sauce – delicious! Burnt milk sweets poured over coconut stacks – heavenly. Tall plastic glasses of sliced mango, sprinkled with sweet hot chili powder...but I passed on fried grasshoppers spritzed with lime.

# Vegetarian

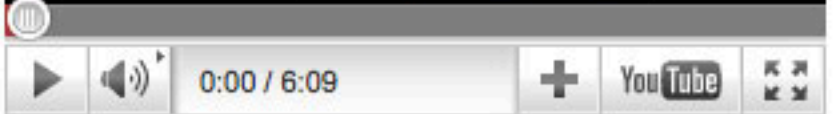
In the Yucatan, fresh natural ingredients were in abundance and I was in vegetarian heaven. In **Merida** I discovered Amaro, a famous vegetarian restaurant near the central plaza, where I was introduced to chaya, a dark green leaf used to make creamy soups and slightly tart, refreshing smoothies. In a typical Mayan restaurant in Valladolid I was served six bowls of appetizers prior to my entrée. By the time I had finished snacking on fresh Jicama; chunks of cucumber; a tomato, onion and cilantro salsa; refried beans; and a slightly spicy green sauce with tortilla chips, I could hardly eat a bite of my entree. At a remote beach resort on the Riviera Maya I devoured an entire fish that had been smothered in tomatoes and onions, wrapped in banana leaves, and slow-roasted in aluminum foil.



The highlight of my culinary exploration was Casa de Piedra Restaurant at Hacienda Xcanatun. Built in the 18th century to cultivate corn and raise horses, the property was converted to a sisal-growing and processing hacienda in the mid-19th century. When synthetics began replacing sisal the hacienda fell into decline, until it was finally abandoned in the mid 80s. Some years ago a local visionary bought and restored the property for use as an exclusive resort and today the hacienda is known as much for its gourmet restaurant as its stunning suites. People come from miles away to sample the chef's creations, which the

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resort describes as a fusion of French technique with fresh Caribbean and local ingredients. My exquisite meal began with a salad of mixed greens and paper-thin radish slices layered over fresh roasted beets, followed by a generous portion of fresh Cobia on a bed of grilled potato and chaya, garnished with vinaigrette of sun-dried tomato. To finish I chose a pastry horn filled with custard and fresh sliced fruit, drizzled with kiwi and chocolate sauces.



After four months of sampling the rich variety of regional foods available throughout Mexico, I had forgotten about my earlier disappointment – until the day I overheard the southern belle complain about her taco. Curious about the outcome, I munched on fresh shrimp and kept an eye on the kitchen door. Before long, the cook emerged from the kitchen with her replacement meal, a plate of deep fried flautas. She looked silently down at her food for a few seconds before resuming her tirade. "Why can't you people understand? I want tacos, Mexican tacos..."

Thanks to Barbara Weibe, [Anitakhart](#) and [Porky\\_Jupp](#) for the images off Flickr!

If after reading this article you have a sudden craving for Mexican food, book [hostels in Mexio](#) and explore the cuisine for yourself!



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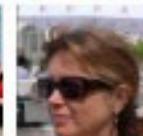
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**Anis Salvesen Says:**

**October 29th, 2010 at 5:13 pm**

Yum! This blog post made me hungry.

Barbara hit on one of my favorite ways to explore a culture – exploring their cuisine.

And I had a good laugh at the woman demanding "real" tacos. Maybe the restaurant should keep some Old El Paso taco shells on hand and then list "Mexican tacos" and "American tacos" on the menu.



**Randy(BeersnBeans) Says:**

**October 30th, 2010 at 6:26 pm**

Great article Barbara! Your post has got me clamoring to get back to Mexico. Beth and I haven't been to the Yucatan yet, but it has now become a priority, especially since they have such great vegetarian options. If you are ever in San Diego, there is a great authentic mexican restaurant called Mama Testa that serves up excellent regional cuisine from all over Mexico, including Yucatan.

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