



Yummy Yucatan

CASPAR VAN VARK COOKS UP A MEXICAN MEAL WITH A DIFFERENCE

IT'S MID-MORNING ON A HOT FRIDAY, AND I'M squeezing my way through Mérida's central covered market. Big city markets often have a sweaty, chaotic feel, and this one is no exception. I'm looking for the differences – the clues that tell me not just that I'm in Mexico, but specifically on the Yucatan peninsula.

The evidence is all around. There are mountains of *habaneros*, the small green chiles which are officially the hottest in the world and a staple of Yucatecan cuisine. They don't look that dangerous – rather like mini bell peppers – but they are to be treated with respect.

tomatoes, bananas, chiles, and the red *achiote* seed – used both as a spice and as a dye.

Then the Europeans arrived – first the Spanish conquistadors in the 1500s, and then others, including the French and Dutch. The Mayans had far more contact with these uninvited visitors than they did with the rest of Mexico, and the Europeans left their influence on the local cuisine. Spain brought pigs and cattle, for example, which has resulted in the classic Yucatecan *cochinilla pibil* – suckling pig wrapped in banana leaves and cooked slowly in a pit. On a second visit to the market the next day, I ate it stuffed in

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I spot deep baskets of pumpkin seeds, and fat bunches of coriander, the roots still damp. There are avocados, of course – they're almost as big as the melons here. Tiny yellow mangoes are arranged into precarious pyramids, like Mayan temples, and stray sour oranges get squashed underfoot. I want to dig my hands into the open sacks of beans – not the pinto beans found elsewhere in Mexico, but black beans.

Then there's the totally unfamiliar stuff: what are all those slabs of red and black paste? One stall has deep-fried morsels for sale – they turn out to be fish fins. And what about that sinister-looking black soup that people are greedily mopping up with tortillas?

"It's *pavo en relleno negro*," explains David Sterling, a chef and manager of the Los Dos cooking school, where I'm taking a one-day class in Yucatecan cuisine. "Turkey in a black broth. The blackness comes from that black spice paste we saw. It doesn't look great, I admit – but it tastes fantastic."

Earlier that morning, in the kitchen of his restored nineteenth-century colonial house, we'd sipped *jamaica* – a ruby-red chilled infusion of dried hibiscus flowers – while David used a map of Mexico to explain why Yucatan has its own distinct cuisine. The peninsula is flat, and juts out into the Caribbean. Mérida is closer to Havana than it is to Mexico City, and the whole of Yucatan is virtually cut off from the rest of Mexico by mountainous terrain to the south.

This is the land of the Mayans, who for hundreds of years lived here on a staple diet of turkey, game, pumpkins,

a soft roll with crackling. If not for the searingly hot chile *tamulado* salsa drizzled on top, I might have been at Borough Market in London.

The French, meanwhile, left behind their pastries and meringues, while red balls of Dutch Edam cheese are today used to create *queso relleno*. A whole cheese is hollowed out and filled with ground meat, raisins, olives, almonds and spices, with a hard-boiled egg at the centre. The cheese is wrapped in banana leaves and cloth, then steamed and served in slices.

Back in David's kitchen after our trip to the market, I learn more about the red and black pastes we saw at the market. It turns out that these are a cornerstone of Yucatecan cuisine.

"The paste is called a *recado*, and it's an early convenience food from the Mayas," says David. "Spices and chiles are roasted and ground to make the paste. The *achiote* seed is used for the red version. The black is similar, but with charred spices. You pinch off a bit and dilute it with the juice of *naranja agria*, the bitter oranges. It's then used to tenderise and marinate meats, or to flavour stews and broths."

Recados are not the same as the famous *moles* of central and western Mexico. They are much more pungent and aromatic, and they are a seasoning, while *mole* is more of a meal.

After this crash course in Yucatecan culinary history, I'm put to work. First we go out into the sun-dappled courtyard, where we find Diana, a Yucatecan friend of David's, busy making *tortillas*. She speaks no English, and I no



Opposite: A Yucatecan dish of chicken, rice and salad. Above: Students from the Los Dos cooking school in Mérida shop for ingredients among the crowds at a busy local food market. Below: A local speciality, stuffed green *habanero* chiles.



Spanish, but within minutes she has me flattening *masa* – cornmeal dough, flecked with ground limestone – against the palm of my left hand and draping my *tortillas* onto a hot *comal*, the traditional griddle, where they quickly puff and develop scorch marks.

We're making *panuchos*. When the *tortillas* are cooked, we ease them open to make pockets and fill them with *frijoles refritos* (pureed and fried beans). The stuffed *tortillas* are then topped with shredded turkey, lettuce, avocado, tomato, cucumber, and shockingly pink *cebollas encurtidas* (pickled sliced onions).

Back inside, I learn how to make that fiery *chile tamulado* salsa which turns up on every Yucatecan table. I put ten green *chiles habaneros* on a couple of metal skewers, and char them over a flame until they're black and blistered. While they cool, I squeeze *naranja agria* oranges until I have about a cup of the sour juice. Then I cut off the tops of the *habaneros*, and whizz them in a blender with the juice and a pinch of salt.

David warns me not to inhale over the blender when I take off the lid, but when he's not looking I do it anyway. I should have listened – the potent fumes make my head spin. The salsa, when finished, is bright green with black specks. "I used to think the black specks were dirt," says David, "before I understood that they come from the charred skin."

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We move on to what turns out to be my favourite dish – *sikil pak*. It's a dip of roasted tomatoes, chiles and toasted pumpkin seeds. I toast two cups of the seeds in a heavy frying pan, and process them into a thick powder. Then I char another one of those green *habaneros*, along with four tomatoes. These are blended with eight cloves of charred garlic and a slosh of chicken stock, and the resulting mixture goes into a bowl with pumpkin seed powder. I mix it all together, adding a little more stock to get the consistency of a thick mayonnaise. The dip is finished off with chopped onions, coriander, and a pinch of cinnamon.

David and I crack open a couple of beers as we wolf down our *panuchos* with a few drops of the salsa, and dip tortilla chips into the *sikil pak*. A few weeks earlier, I thought Mexican food was a *chimichanga* washed down with several strawberry *margaritas*. I didn't even know there was such a thing as Yucatecan cuisine. Many visitors to Yucatan arrive as I did, and leave with a whole new understanding.

“When I first moved to Merida years ago, friends suggested going out for Mexican food, like it was foreign,” says David. “It seemed a strange thing to say, but I soon understood. The isolation of the peninsula has given the cuisine some unique flavours – and it continues to evolve.”



Above: Chef David Sterling searing some green *habanero* chiles.
Below: Students at the Los Dos cooking school plan their next dish.

