



Rubén Vázquez

Tabasco's Cuisine A Deluge of Aromas, Colors And Flavors

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Mexican cuisine is recognized the world over for its broad variety of regional dishes rooted in ancient, diverse cultures. However, some regional cuisines enjoy well-

deserved fame while others remain practically unknown. This is Tabasco's case, despite its rich variety of dishes made with local products, ingredients that are truly exotic for the non-native.

Tabasco's cuisine is based on the sage integration of indigenous and Spanish cooking, enriched by the creativity of our grandmothers, who, when they lacked certain spices and condiments, substituted what Nature provided around them.

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We thank Mexico City's Club France restaurant for allowing us to photograph the dishes it prepared during Tabasco Week.

Among Tabasco's edible vegetables, in addition to those introduced by the Spaniards, are yucca, the sweet potato and *macal*; *chaya* or Mayan spinach, avocados, *chinín*, squash and *chayote* squash; plus corn, used to make different foods and drinks. As seasoning, nature has also provided spices like *malagueta* pepper and various aromatic herbs like *chipilín* (from a legume), *momo* (elsewhere known as *acuyo* or *hoja santa* [holy leaf]), *muste*, parsley and *epazote* or pigweed.

The varieties of game and fish are practically infinite: there are the mammals like deer, wild boar and pig, *tepezcuintle* or agouti paca, armadillo and *manatí*; fowl, like the mountain turkey, the *chachalaca*, the *hoco* pheasant, the *cocopato*, the *pijije* or whistling duck, and the Canadian duck; the fish include the snook, the *pejelagarto* (alligator-head fish), the wreck fish, the *topén*, *guabina*, baby shark and the delicious *castarrica*, *paleta*, *tenguayaca*, *zacatera* and *colorada* two-banded bream. As if that were not enough, Tabascans also eat reptiles like the iguana and the *azpoque*, as well as the crocodile or lizard, a very important part of the Chontal indigenous diet; tortoises and turtles like the Central American river turtle; the Mesoamerican slider, a freshwater turtle; the *guao* and the *chiquiguo*, two varieties of musk turtle; and snapping turtles.



Amashito chile pepper sauce is a must on the Tabasco table.

They have also always eaten shellfish like crab, mollusks like *shote* and oysters, and crustaceans like shrimp and *pigua*.

With all these meats and vegetables, how could they not develop a varied, delectable cuisine. And if we add to this the immense profusion of products that have come to Tabasco from across the sea, we find that the number of dishes offered in this humid, tropical corner of Mexico has multiplied enormously.

Authentically native dishes, true delights for the most demanding palate, include *ulich* or *uliche* (an indigenous word with the root *ulum*, meaning turkey, and *ich*, or chile pepper or *ají*, the dish's main ingredients). Another is *maneas*, a kind of tamale, traditional during November festivities honoring the spirits, and served during patron saint celebrations. Old books mention these dishes, saying that during Chontal Day of the Dead celebrations no one could refuse to eat *ulich* (also known as *caldu benditu*, or "blessed broth") without running the risk of angering the spirits, who would avenge themselves on the offender, visiting upon him/her a disease the doctors would not know how to cure. *Ulich* is a simple, healthy, delicious food, made solely of turkey broth thickened with corn meal and seasoned with garlic, onion, cumin and salt.

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Alligator-head fish salad, an up-to-date recipe for a traditional ingredient.

Another excellent, unique Tabascan food is called *verde*, or “green”, used to dress pork, *pejelagarto*, turtle, Mesoamerican slider, alligator snapping turtle or *mondongo*, another name for beef stomach. *Verde* is made with ground *chipilín* and Mayan spinach (*chaya*) leaves and *amashito* chile pepper, which are then beaten with water or beef broth cooked with garlic. This mixture is strained through a cloth, seasoned with salt, onion and sweet chile peppers, thickened with green plantain and then added to the meat to cook.

Chirmol is one of the most common dishes in Tabasco’s indigenous and rural areas, although it is eaten by people from every social class throughout the state. It can be prepared with different kinds of meat like *pejelagarto* or crab, but it is usually made with duck or beef, to which corn meal, toasted tortillas, *achiote* (annatto) paste, *epazote*, garlic, tomatoes and onion are added.

Tabasco’s extreme climate forced its inhabitants to find the best way to preserve game, domestically-raised meat and fish: salting the flesh was the solution. This means that Tabasco’s cook-

We could not leave out tamales. They come in different colors, forms, consistencies and flavors.



Alligator-head fish is one of Tabasco’s most common dishes.



Tabasco meringues are a real treat.

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ery includes dishes with salted beef or pork, wreck fish and other fish, numbering among them black beans with salted beef or pork, a dish called “little face beans with salted pork.”

The wide variety of vegetables offers good color and delicious flavour to both *puchero* and *mondongo* (cooked beef stomach). Both dishes include pieces of *chayote* squash, squash, yucca, *macal*, corn, ripe plantain, sweet potato and, sometimes, “soup bread,” the fruit of the bread tree, brought to Tabasco during colonial times.

White turtle, now an endangered species, was a luxury dish for many years for Tabascans, cooked in *verde*, stew or in blood. White turtle cooked in blood is one of Tabasco’s most delicious dishes, its distinctive flavor stemming from two basic ingredients: green plantain cut in rounds and parsley, flavored with tomatoes, onion, sweet chile peppers, garlic, oregano, cloves, Castile pepper and cinnamon.

Many dishes are recreations of Spanish or Central Mexican fare, like stews made of turtle, turkey, hen or chicken, flavored with garlic, onion, tomatoes, salt, cinnamon sticks, olives, capers, almonds and raisins. Tabasco enchiladas are filled with equal parts of cooked, finely minced pork and beef and fried with garlic, onion, tomatoes, raisins, olives and almonds. After tortillas are cooked on a grill, they are passed through very hot lard or oil, but not fried; then they are soaked in a sauce made with liquified, drained *ancho* and *pasilla* chile peppers, tomatoes, garlic and onion, and fried; the tortilla is then filled, rolled up and covered with a spoonful of sauce, dusted with Tabasco-made cream cheese and garnished with rounds of sliced purple onions, blanched in hot water.

We could not leave out tamales. They come in different colors, forms, consistencies and flavors, from the “lordly-prey-in-the-middle” tamale, made from cornmeal dough strained through a cloth with a “prey” or piece of turkey, hen or pork in the middle, and accompanied by a special sauce that gives it a delicious flavor, to the humble, pre-

Hispanic *manea*, unstrained cornmeal dough mixed with beef, pork, or in olden times, lizard, cooked in very little grease. Little *chipilín* tamales are the most popular: they are prepared with strained cornmeal dough, *chipilín*

leaves and pork lard, and bathed in a tomato, garlic and *amashito* chile pepper sauce. One variety of these little tamales has shredded pork. “Little road” tamales are made from strained cornmeal dough, with a strip of cooked meat down the middle. It can be beef, pork or alligator-head fish, which are a positive delight. *Chanchamitos* are round tamales made of unstrained cornmeal dough colored an orange red with *achiote* (annatto), with lots of fat and pork wrapped not in banana leaves like all the others, but in *joloche*, the Tabascan name for dried corn husks.

Although many other dishes could be listed, I will instead mention the most popular drinks. In one of his most celebrated poems, the great poet Carlos Pellicer said, “I, who am from Tabasco / with knots of Mayan blood, / where ground cacao / gave new meaning to water,” describing the birth in his homeland of the product known as Tabasco’s gift to the world: chocolate. Sweet and bitter chocolate have both been used from colonial times on in Tabasco, the first, beaten together with milk and the second, with water. Originally, the drink was prepared with water because milk was not introduced until after the conquest. Besides chocolate, the region boasts two other beverages that use cacao as an ingredient: *pozol* or *chorote* and *polvillo*. *Pozol*, or white *pozol*, a nutritious, refreshing drink, is prepared with boiled, ground corn mixed with water. When ground, toasted cacao is added, it is called *chorote* or simply *pozol*, which can be drunk fresh or fermented. *Polvillo* is made from *pinole*, or toasted corn flour, and finely ground cacao, mixed with water and sweetened; it can be served cold or hot.

The immense variety of fruits from the humid tropics (*guanábana* [custard apple], *jujo*, cacao, *ma-*



Mashed plantain stuffed with ground meat.

rañón, *pitahaya* [a variety of prickly pear], watermelon, cantaloupe, pineapple, oranges, grapefruit, limes, etc.) are the basis for dozens of refreshing beverages when mixed with water, coconut juice or even milk.

Another delicious drink is *matalí* ade, made with *matalí* leaves (from a plant known in central Mexico as “chicken grass”), beaten with water, lime juice and sugar.

Tabascan desserts, mostly made with local fruit, include coconut, *nance*, plums, red currants, coco plums, and the popular “monkey ears” (halves of wild papaya fruit soaked in dark brown sugar that gives them a blackish brown color making them look like monkey ears). Tabascan meringues are delicious; some are flavored with *guanábana*, an unparalleled treat. Among the dozens of sweets, I have to mention the fragile, delicious *panal de rosa*, made with conch rose petals, which give it a unique flavor and aroma.

Finishing up this brief sketch of Tabascan cooking is difficult. Dozens of dishes, desserts and beverages have been left out, waiting to be discovered by the curious in search of new flavors. **MM**

Tabasco’s gift to the world: chocolate was originally prepared with water because milk was not introduced until after the conquest.



Crema of Mayan spinach (*chaya*) soup.

Elsie Montiel