

The Ingredients in Yucatán Cuisine*



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Mérida's central market, a quick lesson in the basic colors and flavors of regional cooking.

One undeniable attraction of the Yucatán peninsula is its cuisine, a delicious result of the culinary pairing of European and local influences. This combination has resulted in such unparalleled, exquisite dishes, that many outsiders have become permanent aficionados of the unmistakable flavor of Yucatán cuisine. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this gastronomical

region is the fact that relatively few ingredients are needed to prepare a wide variety of dishes. Whether in a Yucatán family cupboard or the walk-in storeroom of a five-star restaurant, you will find certain basic ingredients with which housewives and great chefs prepare the dishes you will never tire of.

To start: *achiote* (annatto seed paste), used to prepare the best-known Yucatán dish, *pibil* pork, plus chicken, fish and a host of other dishes. Another basic is banana leaves, sold in any local market. No authentic Yucatán table can be without its *Habanero* chili pepper salsa—but, newcomers to chili peppers beware!—or red onions pickled in lime

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Photos of dishes by Rubén Vázquez.

juice and spices; limes, sour oranges, garlic, fines herbes and spices like cloves, black pepper, oregano, cumin, coriander and vinegar. *Chaya*, a local plant, is used to make the most delicately flavored tamales and many other dishes.

Spices are used to prepare what are called *recados* or marinating pastes: squash seed *recado*, red or *achiote recado*, black *recado*, white *recado*, *recado* for steak, pumpkin seed *recado* (*pipián*) and *recado* for tamales. The most common kind is red *recado* made with the red annatto seed paste, used in all the *pibil* dishes, like *pibil* chicken or pork and Tikin-xic fish.

If you ask a Yucatán native what his or her favorite dishes are, you risk hearing an interminable list that usually includes *papadzules* (enchiladas filled with hard-boiled egg covered in squash-seed sauce (*pepita*); *salbutes* (tortillas with pork or chicken accompanied by the invariable pickled red onion; *panuchos*, which are similar to *salbutes*, but with an open tortilla, filled with beans; *cochinita pibil* and *pollo pibil* (pork or chicken marinated in *achiote*); *brazo de reina* (a tamale filled with *chaya*, hard-boiled eggs and a special squash-seed sauce, wrapped in banana leaves and oven roasted, then cut into pieces to serve several people. And the list goes on: *relleno negro* (a mixture of hard-boiled egg, ground meat and a special black *recado*); or *poc-chuc* (roast pork marinated in sour orange juice and served with potatoes and tortillas, *Habanero* chili salsa and pickled red onions. It could continue practically *ad infinitum*: lime soup; stuffed cheese, a cheese ball filled with ground meat and hard-boiled egg seasoned with black *recado* (“ball cheese” is a kind of Gouda used very frequently in Yucatán cooking); pork and beans; *kibis*, hand-rolled cracked wheat stuffed with shrimp, beef or cheese...

The most popular beverages are made from *nanche* fruit and *chaya*, and the region boasts an anise liqueur called Ixtabentun. And there’s always room for dessert. The most popular are *machacado*, an ice slush made with pieces of fruit (peach, strawberry, cantaloupe, etc.) and condensed milk; and *marquesitas*, a kind of crepe served rolled up like a taco filled with grated cheese and goat-milk caramel sauce, Nutella hazelnut spread or chocolate. These sweets are so popular that they are sold by street vendors.

Yucatán natives are proud that their food is as delicious as it is easy to prepare. We include here three very popular recipes that will bring the real flavor of the peninsula to your table.

Lime Soup

Ingredients

- 1 chicken cut into pieces or four large chicken breasts
- 10 c. water
- 2 sprigs oregano
- 2 cloves of garlic
- 1 onion cut into quarters
- salt and pepper to taste
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 Tbsp. corn oil
- 2 tomatoes, skinned and chopped
- 1 green pepper, chopped
- 6 limes, thinly sliced
- 6 tortillas, cut into strips, deep fried and drained on paper towels



Preparation

Cook the chicken in the water together with the oregano, garlic, onion and salt to taste; once cooked, take out the chicken, let it cool and shred it. Strain the broth. Sauté the chopped onion in the corn oil until translucent; add the chopped tomatoes and green pepper and sauté well; add the broth and half the sliced limes and boil 10 minutes. Add the shredded chicken and the rest of the sliced lime; serve immediately garnished with the fried tortilla strips. Serve in deep soup dishes. The fried tortillas should be served separately so they stay crunchy when added to the soup just before eating.

Taken from: http://www.yucatan.com.mx/especiales/yucateca/sopa_de_lima.asp

Pibil Chicken

Ingredients

- 1 banana leaf
- 6 chicken legs
- 100 grams red *recado**
- 3 sour oranges**
- 2 tomatoes
- 1 sprig of *epazote*
- salt to taste
- 100 grams of lard



* Red *recado* is a marinating paste using *achiote* or annatto seeds, native to the southeast, to make it red. The annatto seeds are slightly toasted and then ground with chicken broth and different spices like bay leaves, thyme, marjoram, oregano, onion, and garlic to form a paste used to flavor fowl, fish and pork. *Achiote* is also sold in powder form that is then seasoned to taste. ** Sour oranges can be substituted by combining lemon juice with regular orange juice; this tastes quite similar. If you cannot find banana leaves in Latino markets, very often Filipino markets have them.

Preparation

Marinate the chicken pieces in the red *recado* dissolved in sour orange juice and salt until they take on the red color. Cut the onion and tomato into thin strips. Put each piece of chicken into a banana leaf with the chopped *epazote*, the onion and tomato strips and a little lard for flavor. Wrap the chicken pieces in the banana leaves and tie them with the strings taken from the leaves themselves. Steam for 45 minutes. Open up the wrapped chicken pieces and put one on each plate. Serve with *xnipec* salsa on the side.

Xnipec Salsa

- 3 Italian tomatoes, seeded and finely chopped
- 3 *Habanero* chili peppers (or to taste), finely chopped
- 1 red onion, finely chopped
- ½ c. vinegar or sour orange juice
- salt to taste

Preparation

Mix all the ingredients and serve in a clay or glass salsa dish. Taken from: http://www.yucatan.com.mx/especiales/yucateca/pollo_pibil.asp

Papadzules

Ingredients

- ground *pepita* (squash-seed paste)*
- hard-boiled eggs, cut into chunks
- *epazote*
- tortillas
- tomatoes



* *Pepita* is dried, hulled, toasted squash seed which is ground with a little water (preferably on a traditional Mexican stone mortar and pestle or *metate*) until you get a paste.

Preparation

Boil the eggs until the shells crack, peel them and put them to one side. In a separate pot, boil the water and the *epazote* until it releases its color; then remove from heat and let cool. In a bowl, add the ground *pepita* to the *epazote* water, mixing gradually until creamy. Prepare the tomato sauce: cook, peel and puree the tomatoes in the blender; fry a little chopped onion, the tomato liquid, salt and, if desired, roasted *Habanero* chili peppers in oil until the sauce thickens. Finally, fill the tortillas with chopped hard-boiled egg, and bathe them first in *pepita* sauce and on top of that, the tomato sauce. Serve the *papadzules* hot, accompanied with a roasted *Habanero* chili pepper. This is a very simple meal, easy to prepare, and most importantly, delicious!

Taken from: http://yucatan.in/revista/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=222

We would like to thank the owners of the **99.9 Restaurant**, in Mexico City, specialized in Yucatán cuisine, for their kindness in letting us take pictures of the dishes.



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