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MEXICAN CUISINE

Dining is one of the most delicious treats of any Mexico visit. The first rule for most North American visitors is to forget what you thought was Mexican food. Many of the dishes we commonly associate with Mexican cooking are either not Mexican at all (fajitas, for example), or are prepared using less than authentic techniques and ingredients (melted Cheez Whiz heaped over a dish of corn chips for nachos). Salsa has surpassed ketchup in U.S. sales.



Mexican cuisine is delightfully diverse, strongly regional and almost always bold (although not necessarily hot) in flavour. Since Mexico spans several climatic zones, the types of foodstuffs available varies greatly from region to region. Mexico's jumbled topography has limited the "homogenisation" of dishes in terms of their ingredients and preparation. What's a favourite on the coast may be unavailable further inland. Herein lies the allure of dining in Mexico.

Remember, Mexican cuisine (much like its history) has been strongly influenced by foreign countries. Spanish, French, and North American practices intermingled with the nation's century-old Pre-Columbian culinary heritage, producing a rich blend of dishes that are copied and envied around the world.

As to ingredients, the world can thank Mexico and Central America for beans, corn, squash, tomatoes, jicama, chocolate, avocado, papaya, guava, vanilla, dozens of spices, and of course, chile peppers.

DINING TIPS

Choosing a Restaurant: Use the same judgement and common sense you'd use back home- if the place is full, there's probably a good reason. Don't be afraid to venture from the hotel. Expensive doesn't always mean better.

¿Zona de no Fumar? Mexico Restaurant Assoc. has launched a pilot program to encourage members to offer No Smoking sections. Look for implementation in late '99.

Mexico has very good international dining - from Italian to Japanese to Lebanese.

Never buy food from street vendors. Most have good food at bargain prices, but one bad taco can cost you dearly.

Dining prices have risen in the last few years, but a currency devaluation in early 1995 has made dining a sound value. While resorts are more costly than inland cities, expect better values and prices than in 1994.

The typical day of meals in Mexico goes something like this: a hearty breakfast of fresh fruit, eggs, juice, pan dulce, hot chocolate or coffee whenever you roll out of bed; a satisfying lunch around 1-3pm (more like our dinner); appetisers and drinks about 8pm, followed by dinner between 9-10pm.

Meals take longer in Mexico, since service is often slower and Mexicans enjoy long, lingering meals. The check (la cuenta) is never brought until it is asked for, and then you can expect to wait a while for your change. BE PATIENT...YOU'RE ON HOLIDAY.

BEER, WINE AND ALCOHOL

Go native- Mexico arguably has the finest selection of beers (cerveza) of any country in the hemisphere. Our favourites are Bohemia, Pacífico, Noche Buena (a Christmas beer), Negra Modelo, and Superior. Domestic wine is inexpensive, and overall good, although rarely great. Try L.A. Cetto, Calafia, Monte Xanic, Domecq, Santo Tomás or Los Reyes brands. Stick to domestic brands for distilled spirits, or be prepared to pay top dollar.

TEQUILA

The national spirit of Mexico is distilled from the fermented juice of the crushed, pineapple-like base of the Agave cactus. Tequila is native to the State of Jalisco, and is believed to have first been made in the 18th century. As any Mexican will tell you, all tequila is not alike - tastes range from harsher white tequilas (known as blancos and used in mixed drinks) to darker añejos that have mellow, brandy-like qualities. Best brands: Hornitos, Herradura Reposado, Don Julio, Don Porfidio, and Tres Generaciones. Note that recent domestic shortages of Mexico's finer tequilas have driven up prices for certain brands. It's common to pay \$5-6 U.S. per shot for the good stuff!

OTHER ALCOHOL

The "margarita" cocktail made in Mexico might catch you off guard - it's stronger and less frosty than the ones made back home. Try a "sangrita," a fruit juice made from sour orange and the juice of crushed pomegranates, and sipped with a shot of tequila.

Several regions have their own distilled spirits, often concocted from plants indigenous to the area.

MEZCAL (Mess-KAHL): Produced mostly in the State of Oaxaca, this close cousin of Tequila is sometimes bottled with a small worm, and is available in several flavours.

DAMIANA: Herbal-based distilled spirit made from an herb native to Baja California and the State of Sinaloa; reputed to be an aphrodisiac.

XTABENTUN (Shta-ben-TUNE): Subtle anise-flavoured, honey based liquor made in the Yucatán region.

SOFT DRINKS

The ubiquitous Coke and Pepsi are almost everywhere, but try local beverages like Sidral, or Sangría (non-alcoholic). Mineral waters (plain or flavoured) from Peñafiel or Tehuacán are excellent. Horchata, and agua fresca de flor de jamaica or tamarindo are delicious native drinks.

Breakfast Dishes

You might be missing something special if you order the typical American breakfast in Mexico. Be adventurous and try huevos rancheros (a fried egg served on a fried tortilla smothered in spicy salsa), huevos a la mexicana (scrambled eggs with salsa), chilaquiles (tortillas cooked in a green tomato sauce and served with chicken, cheese and cream), or huevos con machaca (scrambled eggs with dried beef). Try a café de olla (coffee with cinnamon and dark brown sugar) instead of regular coffee- it's delicious.

Regional Dishes

Known as platos regionales, these dishes feature complex ingredients and preparation techniques. They often come from century-old recipes that date back to the arrival of Cortés. Some of the more savory dishes include pozole (a hominy and pork soup), mole (a delicious, dark brown sauce made from over 30 ingredients, served over chicken or turkey), tamales (corn meal stuffed with meat, cheese or vegetable and steamed in corn or banana husks), menudo (a hearty tripe stew great for hangovers, known in Mexico as una cruda).

Breads, Tortillas, and Sandwiches

Bread at a restaurant usually means a bolillo, a delicious French-style roll. Surprisingly, it can be difficult to find tortillas at some resort-area restaurants! Tasty sandwiches, known as tortas, are Mexico's answer to the hamburger.

Seafood

Known as mariscos, seafood is abundant and deliciously prepared. Try camarones al mojo de ajo (shrimp grilled in garlic and butter), filete de pescado (fish filet prepared in numerous fashions, with and without sauce), ceviche (an appetiser of conch or fish marinated in lime juice with onion, garlic, chile, and tomato).

Desserts

Top off your meal with one of these favourite postres: flan (caramel custard), mangos flameados (flambéed mangoes), pastel de queso (light, Mexican cheese cake), or helado (ice cream).

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