

GABRIELA CÁMARA

TEACHES

MEXICAN

COOKING

masterclass

INTRODUCTION

To hear Gabriela Cámara tell it, meals are about more than just eating. “I grew up in a family where food was the glue of everything,” she says. “We had important conversations at the table while eating, we made important decisions at the table while eating, important guests were offered food. I have a very direct association between important moments in life and food. Just sharing a table brings people together in a way that few things do.”

That spirit of generosity is something Gabriela now carries through to her restaurants: Contramar in Mexico City, Cala in San Francisco, and Onda in Los Angeles. “I believe that in this world, the more one can connect with people over a shared love of a delightful dish, the better off we will be,” Gabriela says.

The daughter of an Italian mother and a Mexican father who met in the United States, Gabriela grew up in Tepoztlán in an intellectual home, with a family who grew much of their own food and enjoyed sprawling multicultural meals together nightly. She planned to become a contemporary art curator but wound up opening a restaurant, Contramar, somewhat serendipitously, describing it as “an experiment so successful, I turned it into my career.”

When Contramar opened in 1998, it was unlike any other restaurant in Mexico City. The phrase “farm-to-table” was pretty much unheard of, and most restaurants were either serving traditional Mexican or contemporary European cuisine. Contramar’s food hopped across the globe in terms of flavor, but the recipes retained a distinctly Mexican point of view. The restaurant’s interior was modeled after the breezy beach palapas Gabriela loved as a child, and the menu emphasized organic produce from local farms plus fresh seafood sourced from Mexican waters.

That’s very much intentional. “Contramar has always been a place where we have been mindful of what people eat and how they eat, and the whole chain of how we eat what we eat,” Gabriela says. She thinks in terms of “what is right to do in terms of food,” describing the care she pays to sourcing ingredients as a “true commitment” rather than a passing trend. Her ethos made Contramar an immediate hit with Mexico City’s cosmopolitan locals and the city’s ever-growing international crowd—and its popularity has persisted more than 20 years later.

One of Gabriela's key decisions early on at Contramar was to make her tortillas in-house—an innovative choice in the '90s. "We wanted to be authentic not for the sake of being authentic but for the sake of flavor," Gabriela says. She soon introduced an entire masa program to the menu, nixtamalizing and milling her own corn. Fresh tortillas are now a Contramar staple, their warm aroma greeting all who enter.

That warmth is an extension of Gabriela's attitude about the power of food overall, undoubtedly influenced by her upbringing. "The connections that occur over shared meals can be so important, and they really have to do with how much care is put into the meal," she says. "You're probably cooking for somebody that you care about. So I urge you to pay attention to every bit of what you put into the dish and everything in which you serve it. Not in a neurotic, obsessive way; just in a way in which you translate your enjoyment for the act of cooking," she says.

Gabriela is a big supporter of cooking with whatever is available to you. She sees recipes as points of reference, basic guidelines, and then encourages cooks at home to improvise. "Listen to the directions, and then from there experiment—go to the farmers' market and see what's available, improvise, and taste all the time as you go," she says.

In this class, you'll learn how to make some of Gabriela's most beloved foods, from fresh corn tortillas, tacos, and tamales to tostadas *de atún* (Contramar's most famous dish). Along the way, Gabriela provides actionable advice for sourcing the best ingredients and a thoughtful expansion of her cooking philosophy.

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Want to talk more about fresh-pressed tortillas, sweet and savory tamales, and nixtamalization? Head to community.masterclass.com to meet Gabriela's other students and discuss all things Mexican cuisine.

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WHAT YOU'LL NEED TO GET COOKING

Gabriela frequently references specific pieces of cooking equipment throughout her class. If you're getting serious about your at-home Mexican cooking, you may want to invest in some or all of the tools (though it's certainly not a must); many are available at Latin markets as well as online at resources like MexGrocer and Amazon.

COMAL

A round griddle with a flat, smooth surface that's traditionally made from clay (it's also available in cast iron, carbon steel, or nonstick materials). Comals are used to char or toast ingredients, cook tortillas, sear meat, heat quesadillas, and more. They come in all different sizes—street vendors in Mexico may have comals that are several feet across, though comals between 18 and 24 inches are better suited to home cooks. A clay or cast-iron comal will heat slowly and retain heat evenly, and a well-maintained comal imparts a subtle additional flavor to food. Clean and dry a comal between uses, and season it with water and cal (if using clay) or oil (if using cast iron) for best results.

HAND-OPERATED GRINDER

A small machine with a crank that is used to turn nixtamalized corn into masa. Like pasta machines, hand-operated grinders attach easily to most kitchen countertops.

MOLCAJETE

A pre-Hispanic mortar and pestle made from volcanic stone. *Molcajetes* have two pieces: the basin/mortar and the *tejolote*, or grinder/pestle. Ingredients are ground by pressing and twisting with the *tejolote*, an action that releases the essential oils of the foods and adds depth of flavor. New *molcajetes* should be "cured" by grinding uncooked rice or rock salt in the basin to smooth out the interior and remove any grit.

TORTILLERO

A tortilla press traditionally made from wood that forms a ball of masa into a flat tortilla. It can also be made of cast iron or aluminum. The word *tortillero* can also refer to the small baskets used to keep fresh tortillas warm.

CORN AS A CANVAS

“CORN IS CENTRAL TO THE MEXICAN DIET.”

Corn is historically central to the Mexican diet and holds an important place in the social, economic, and cultural fabric of the country. It has sustained Mexican communities for generations. “In Mexico, corn has a sacred aspect to it,” Gabriela says. “In most cultures around Mesoamerica, corn is really central to the health and well-being of the people.” Celebrating the richness and depth of corn is one of the cornerstones of Gabriela’s cooking.

HEIRLOOM CORN

The diversity of corn varieties in Mexico is astonishing. The country is currently home to about 60 documented types of heirloom corn (meaning those types are native). Corn is an adaptable plant that can thrive in different climates; different types often look and taste different across Mexico.

Heirloom corn might be white, purple, red, or blue (or a mix of several colors). Every type has different levels of sugar, starch, and protein. This biodiversity translates to a bounty of recipe options, which Gabriela considers when choosing corn to cook.

“Diversity is one of the most important things to have in mind when one thinks of how to eat, because the most varied diets give you more of the nutritious elements that your body needs,” she says. Different corns are used for different preparations—starchier corns, for example, will make for a fluffier masa, while more fibrous corns lead

to a heartier masa; one corn might be better suited to an atole (a hot masa-based drink) than a tortilla.

In recent years, it has become more difficult to cultivate heirloom corn varieties in Mexico. GMO crops are taking up more farmland, which has led to an increase in the use of harmful pesticides and the development of a monoculture (the cultivation of a single crop, degrading soil and limiting biodiversity). In North America, corn is often not even eaten as corn—instead, it’s used for feeding animals, for fuel, or in high-fructose corn syrup. “I’m very opposed to the use of genetically modified corn, especially in Mexico where it’s such an intrinsic part of the population and the cultural world of our different communities,” Gabriela says. She champions the preservation of heirloom corn as an antidote to the fast food-ification of Mexico.

NIXTAMALIZING CORN

Nixtamalization is the first step in making masa, a cornmeal that is the cornerstone of tortillas, tamales, *sopes*, *huaraches*, and so much more. It's a process that was perfected by Mesoamericans centuries ago: Soak dried corn kernels in a mixture of water and cal, or calcium hydroxide, also known as slaked lime or pickling lime (readily available in many spice shops or online), until they are soft enough to grind in a mill. Cal is the mineral in limestone and gives ground corn the structure and flexibility needed to hold it together as a dough. Nixtamalization not only makes dried corn easier to work with, it also makes it more nutritious for humans to digest by releasing amino acids that transform the corn into a complete protein. It's an ancient process that is still used today.

Nixtamalizing your own corn at home is easy. To make just under 1 kilogram (2 pounds) of dried corn, Gabriela uses 10 grams (about 2 tablespoons) of cal.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat, and stir in the cal to dissolve. The water should look milky. Add the corn and cook in the boiling water until the kernels are slightly softened and you can peel back the skin of the kernel with your nail (about 25 minutes). The middle should remain hard—overcooked corn doesn't grind well and will turn into a sticky masa that's difficult to work with.

How long you boil your kernels depends on the type of corn you're using, but for the heirloom Blanco Comiteco from Oaxaca that Gabriela is using, it's 20 to 25 minutes. She allows the corn to sit off heat in the liquid until it's cool (or up to overnight), then drains it and rinses the corn clean, rubbing the kernels gently while leaving some of the skins on intact for flavor and texture.

At this point, the corn is halfway cooked—enough to be able to grind it into masa. It will finish cooking when it's made into tortillas, tamales, and so on.

LEARN MORE

What Kind of Corn Should You Buy to Make Masa, and Where Can You Find It?

Gabriela is a champion of using organic heirloom varieties of dried corn to make her masa, meaning you'll have to avoid the generic or genetically modified breeds found at most supermarkets. For truly high-quality masa, you'll need to seek out dried corn from a responsible source. **Tamoa** is a company that partners with traditional farmers in Oaxaca to grow, source, and offer the highest-quality single-origin corn; it sells a variety of colors and breeds online (try the berry-colored Blue Cónico or the slightly sweet Olotillo). **Rare Seeds** is another company that offers a number of heirloom corns grown in Mexico and the United States, including ruby-hued Papa's Red; its counterpart, Papa's Blue; and Chapalote, the oldest variety cultivated in America. Specialty grocers and/or Latin markets may also have heirloom corn. Develop a relationship with the staff at your local markets and ask questions to get the best product.



TORTILLAS DE MAÍZ/ CORN TORTILLAS

"THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A FRESHLY MADE TORTILLA."

“No tortilla that you heat up will ever be as good as homemade,” Gabriela says. Corn tortillas were the first Mexican food Gabriela learned to cook. She was only seven, and she begged her family’s housekeeper to teach her how. (Gabriela’s mother, who is Italian, appreciated fresh tortillas but wasn’t in the habit of making them at home.)

The difference between a fresh tortilla and a store-bought tortilla is evident on every level. Homemade tortillas smell sweet and earthy and have a flexible texture—and nothing compares to the pleasure of eating them hot and fresh off the stove. “Making a homemade tortilla just communicates more care into a meal that you’re going to serve,” Gabriela says. “For us Mexicans, it takes you to so many memories, because a good meal in Mexico is always accompanied by good tortillas.” Eat fresh tortillas straight, use them as a wrapper for any type of food, or treat them as a utensil (what could be better than an edible spoon?).

You can usually buy fresh masa in any Latin market in your city, typically in the refrigerated section and sold by the pound. If you can’t find fresh masa, another option is to buy masa harina, ideally from organic corn that has been nixtamalized and dried, which you can mix with water to make a dough at home. (Gabriela’s favorite masa harina is made by the company Alma Semillera. You can purchase its products online.) A third alternative is to buy high-quality tortillas and tamales made with heirloom corn wherever you can.

You can, of course, grind your own masa at home. Adjust the consistency of the corn with a bit of water until you reach your desired texture.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES 8 6-INCH TORTILLAS

260g fresh masa or masa harina

METHOD

To grind corn into masa: Set up a hand grinder and arrange a bowl beneath its mouth. Place as much corn as will fit without overflowing into the hopper. Add 1 to 2 teaspoons of water and begin grinding, gently pressing the corn down into the hopper. Test the texture of the ground masa with your fingers; you may need to adjust the grind or add another spoonful of water to make a finer masa. The ideal masa is finely ground, with a smooth, thick, and slightly sticky texture that holds together in a uniform dough when pressed.

If you're using fresh masa: Roll out the masa into 1-ounce balls and set aside on a sheet tray or plate beneath a damp towel so they don't dry out.

If you're using masa harina: Combine the masa harina and 1 cup of water in a medium bowl and mix well. Continue adding water, 1 tablespoon at a time, until the dough is smooth, thick, and slightly sticky, and holds together in a uniform dough when pressed. Roll masa into 1-ounce balls and set aside on a sheet tray or plate beneath a damp towel so they don't dry out.

Place a nonstick griddle or clay comal over medium heat on the stove.

Press the tortillas: Place a sheet of nonstick plastic on the bottom of a tortilla press. (Don't use Saran plastic wrap, as it will stick; plastic bags or even banana leaves work well.) With clean hands, place one masa ball in the middle of the press, then cover it with a second sheet of nonstick plastic. Press down firmly and evenly to flatten the dough. Open the press, remove the masa, and flip it over, pressing a second time to ensure it is even. The ideal tortilla is about $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3mm) thick.

Cook the tortillas: Gently peel the tortilla off of the plastic and, using your fingertips, place it on the hot griddle or comal. Flip the tortilla using your fingers or a spatula as soon as you see that the edges are drying and turning opaque (about 30 seconds). When the tortilla starts blistering and rising slightly, flip it again (about 45 seconds). The tortilla should puff up after 10 to 15 seconds, a sign that all of the water has evaporated out of the masa, at which point it is ready to be removed from the heat.

Repeat the pressing and cooking process with the remaining masa balls until all tortillas are done. The best way to keep tortillas warm and moist is to wrap them in a clean towel or cloth and store them in a *tortillero*. If you don't have a *tortillero*, wrap stacks of hot tortillas in cloth and place them beneath the lid of a pot, inside of a cooler, or in a closed container (ideally with a hot stone in the bottom). Store tightly sealed in the refrigerator for up to three days, or freeze (fresh tortillas can be reheated without defrosting). If reheating tortillas from the refrigerator, sprinkle with a few droplets of water before placing them on the griddle to reheat; if coming from the freezer, this step is unnecessary.

Tortillas are a repetition-based art—don't be discouraged if your first few are imperfect. Just keep practicing.



SALSA VERDE CRUDA & SALSA BRAVA/RAW SALSAS

"SALSAS ARE FUNDAMENTAL FOR MEXICANS."

In Mexico, salsas tell of specific people, places, and memories. Different salsas serve different purposes and speak to different traditions. Each region has its own speciality salsa based on the local ingredients and local palates. Salsas *crudas* are uncooked; others, like Salsa Tatemada, or “charred salsa,” rely on the deep flavor of charred vegetables (see page 33). Here, Gabriela shares the recipes for two of her favorite raw salsas, both of which are called for in dishes throughout this cookbook.

SALSA VERDE CRUDA

This raw, creamy salsa is simple to make. It packs medium heat and a lot of fragrance. You can use hearts of romaine instead of little gem lettuce here; the idea is to add freshness and crispiness to the mix. Seek out a very ripe avocado—it should offer no resistance when touched lightly from the outside and be soft enough to press a spoon into.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES ABOUT 1,200G

860g small tomatillos
20g white onion, roughly chopped
35g cilantro leaves
2g garlic cloves, cut in half
20g chiles serranos, destemmed
20g little gem lettuce
165g avocado
140ml water
Salt to taste

METHOD

Make the Salsa Verde Cruda: Add all ingredients to a blender and blend on high speed until smooth and combined. Taste for seasoning and add more salt if necessary. Serve immediately.

SALSA BRAVA

The name of this salsa translates to “fierce,” and with good reason—the raw habaneros featured are super spicy (Gabriela recommends using plastic gloves when handling them). That said, this quick-pickled salsa has a bright, fresh flavor that pairs well with seafood, tostadas, sopes, and more. Try making this with colored habaneros or onions for a more festive end result.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES ABOUT 1,100G

800g white onion
150g habanero chiles
6g salt
18g dry oregano
80ml fresh lime juice
50ml extra virgin olive oil

METHOD

Slice the onions: Remove the outer layer of the onion’s skin. Place it on a cutting board cut side down and slice it into thin half-moons. Separate the pieces with your fingers to ensure that they all marinate evenly. Place the onions in a mixing bowl.

Slice the chiles: Put on plastic gloves and slice the habanero chiles perpendicularly—stems, seeds, and all—resulting in thin slices that resemble flowers. Add the habaneros to the bowl with the onion. With the gloves still on, mix with your hands to combine.

Make the Salsa Brava: Remove the gloves. Add the salt, oregano, lime juice, and olive oil to the habanero-onion mixture. Use a spoon to combine. Allow the salsa to sit at room temperature for about 20 minutes before serving. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.



TACOS AL PASTOR/ ACHIOTE-MARINATED PORK TACOS

"THIS TACO REALLY TASTES OF MEXICO CITY."

There is perhaps no dish more closely linked with Mexico City than *tacos al pastor*. All across the city, vendors set up spinning *trompos*—a vertical rotisserie not unlike those used to make gyros—covered in *al pastor*—marinated meat (usually pork) and anchored on top and bottom with a wedge of pineapple (the juice of the fruit drips down into the meat while it cooks).

Tacos al pastor are a popular street snack, with *taqueros* dexterously slicing meat off of the spit into a warm corn tortilla and topping the taco off with a few slices of caramelized pineapple and a dusting of raw onions and cilantro. The meat is marinated in an adobo sauce featuring chiles and achiote—a bright red spice paste made of ground annatto seeds and vinegar, along with coriander seeds, oregano, cumin, garlic, and other spices—from Mexico’s tropical Yucatán region. (Achiote is available at many Latin markets and online at Amazon and MexGrocer, or you can make your own.)

“*Al pastor* is a delicious bite of sort of sweet, sour, spicy, meaty, fresh, and very bright tastes of Mexico City,” Gabriela says. And it has an interesting backstory that reflects the city’s vast international influence: Lebanese immigrants brought *al pastor* to Mexico in the early 20th century by taking the idea of their native shawarma and combining it with the Mexican ingredients available to them. It’s a true cross-cultural mashup.

For this recipe, it’s best to plan ahead; the pork needs to marinate in the refrigerator for at least 24 hours in order to soak up all of the smoky, acidic flavor of the adobo sauce. If you don’t have a *trompo*, you can still make a version of *al pastor* at home on the stovetop. Serve the delicious meat in freshly made corn tortillas.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES 16 TACOS

For the Adobo Rojo de Chiles sauce:

MAKES ABOUT 760G

30g chile cascabel, destemmed
and seeded
12g chile ancho, destemmed and seeded
9g chile guajillo, destemmed and seeded
9g chile pasilla, destemmed and seeded
1g chile de árbol, destemmed and seeded
450g roma tomatoes, roughly chopped
70g white onion, roughly chopped
12g garlic cloves, roughly chopped
3g achiote paste
12g freshly squeezed orange juice
36g grapeseed oil
Pinch of cumin
Pinch of oregano
18g sea salt, plus more for seasoning

For the pork:

910g to 1.4kg pork tenderloin, cut into
bite-size pieces
240ml Adobo Rojo de Chiles
17g sea salt
10g grapeseed oil

For the pineapple:

1 large pineapple
35g unsalted butter
0.5g sea salt

To assemble:

8 corn tortillas
100g white onion, finely minced
10g cilantro leaves, minced
Lime wedges, for serving
250g Salsa Verde Cruda
(recipe on page 14)

METHOD

Make the tortillas: Roll out golf ball–size masa balls, press, and cook according to the directions in Chapter 3: Tortillas de Maíz/ Corn Tortillas (page 10).

Make the Adobo Rojo de Chiles sauce: If possible, turn on the exhaust fan above your stove or open a window before toasting your chiles. Heat a large nonstick pan or clay comal over medium-high heat. Cook the chiles in the dry pan or on the dry comal, flipping once, until lightly toasted and aromatic, about 1 to 2 minutes.

Put the toasted chiles in a blender. Add the tomatoes, onion, and garlic. Place the achiote paste in a small bowl. Slice the orange in half and squeeze one half into the achiote paste. Stir to combine. Add the mixture to the blender, along with the juice from the other half of the orange. Add the grapeseed oil, cumin, and oregano. Blend on high until the sauce is thick but smooth, about 1 minute. Add salt to taste.

Marinate the pork: Place pork in a large mixing bowl. Add 3 tablespoons of the adobo sauce to the bowl and mix well to combine. Cover the pork and allow it to marinate in the refrigerator for at least 24 hours.

Place the remaining adobo sauce in an airtight container and refrigerate for up to three weeks. (The extra adobo sauce can be used to marinate other meats, fish, and/or vegetables.)

Cook the pineapple: With a very sharp knife, trim the top and bottom off the pineapple so it can stand up straight. Peel the pineapple by cutting the skin off in strips. Once all the skin has been removed, slice the fruit in half lengthwise. Set half aside. Slice the remaining half lengthwise once more, and set one quarter aside. Cut the fibrous heart out of the pineapple and discard. Lay the pineapple flat across the cutting board and slice into wedges lengthwise, then cut each wedge into bite-size chunks.

In a large skillet over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the pineapple, a pinch of salt, and cook, stirring often to avoid burning, until pineapple is slightly softened and translucent and all butter is absorbed, about 15 to 20 minutes. Set aside to cool.

Cook the pork: Season the pork with additional salt before cooking. In a large heavy-bottomed pan over medium-high, heat the oil until shimmering. Add the pork, decrease heat to medium, and cook, stirring often, until meat is cooked through and most of the marinade has cooked off, about 5 to 7 minutes.

Assemble: Heat a nonstick skillet or clay comal over medium heat. Reheat the tortillas for a few seconds on each side. Fill each tortilla with a few spoonfuls of warm pork and 3 pieces of warm pineapple. Top with minced white onion and cilantro. Serve with lime wedges and Salsa Verde Cruda.

LEARN MORE

A HANDY GUIDE TO THE REGIONAL TACOS OF MEXICO

Mexico's nine regions—Baja California, the Pacific Coastal Lowlands, the Mexican Plateau, the Sierra Madre Oriental, the Sierra Madre Occidental, the Cordillera Neo-Volcánica, the Gulf Coastal Plain, the Southern Highlands, and the Yucatán Peninsula—are as culinarily diverse as they are culturally diverse. That means that no matter which region you travel to, you're in for a unique experience when it comes to tacos. Here are some of the most notable tacos with local flare that you'll find in your travels around the country:

TACOS DE BARBACOA

To make these tacos found all over Mexico, meat—typically lamb but sometimes beef or goat—is wrapped in banana or agave leaves and slow-cooked over an open flame or in an underground oven lined with hot coals. The result is a tender meat that melts in your mouth. Barbacoa is typically served in taco form with a cup of consommé (a broth made from the meat drippings) on the side. Barbacoa can be found across Mexico.

TACOS DE BIRRIA

This goat-based soup hails from the state of Jalisco, though surrounding states like Michoacán, parts of Durango, and Zacatecas also make versions, including one with beef. It's typically served with tortillas, toppings, and salsas. Birria is often used to sweat out a *cruda*, or hangover.

TACOS DE CABEZA

Cabeza means “head” in Spanish, which is an apropos name for these tacos: They're made with the meat from the head of a cow and typically served braised or steamed to enhance the meat's tenderness (*cabeza* tacos can be quite supple and rich, thanks to the high fat content in the head). It shows up across many regions in Mexico.

TACOS DE CARNE ASADA

The state of Sonora in northern Mexico is cattle-raising country, and *carne asada* (grilled meat) has its roots there. The meat—most often the *ranchera*, or flap steak, from beef short loin—is marinated and grilled over charcoal, then chopped and cooked further on a flattop before it's served in a flour tortilla.

TACOS DE CARNITAS

Michoacán lays claim to carnitas, or little meats, usually made from pork shoulder that's slowly simmered in its own fat, confit-style, until the meat is tender enough to pull apart into little shards. Spoon it into a fresh tortilla and dress it as you'd like it.

TACOS DE CHAPULÍN

Chapulines—a.k.a. grasshoppers—are a common snack in Oaxaca and other southern regions of Mexico, where they're eaten on their own or as a taco filling. These specialty tacos are typically made with grasshoppers that have been dried, toasted, and seasoned with garlic, chile peppers, and lime juice.

TINGA TACOS

In the city of Puebla, the popular tinga taco, or stew taco, is often made from chicken braised in a mild chipotle-tomato sauce seasoned with garlic and a bit of piloncillo, or raw cane sugar. The meat is shredded, served in a tortilla, and topped with chopped onion, cilantro, and lime.

TACOS DE CANASTA/AL VAPOR

Common in Mexico City, *tacos de canasta* or *al vapor* refer not to a specific filling but rather to the vessel the tacos sit in after having been steamed. Tortillas are filled with anything from *tinga* (stew) to potatoes, then the whole packet is fried and held in a basket, or *canasta*, until serving.

TACOS DE PESCADO

Along Mexico's Pacific Coast, seafood is a natural choice for taco fillings. The Baja area is famed for its fried whitefish and/or shrimp tacos, often served with shredded cabbage, *pico de gallo*, and sour cream. The Mexican state of Nayarit boasts barbecued fish tacos known as *pescado zarandeado*; the northwestern state of Sinaloa has *tacos gobernador*, or shrimp with bacon and melted cheese.

TACOS DE COCHINITA PIBIL

Cochinita pibil—suckling pig marinated in citrus juice, garlic, and orange-hued achiote paste, then wrapped in banana leaves and roasted in an underground pit—is a regional delicacy in the Yucatán Peninsula. The tender, tangy meat is often served with pickled red onions and fresh tortillas.

BONUS RECIPE: SALAD TACOS

“A GOOD TORTILLA CAN HOLD ANYTHING.”

Gabriela believes that anything and everything can be a taco—even a salad.

After making this refreshing Cactus and Watercress Salad that’s one of her favorites, wrap a few spoonfuls in a fresh corn tortilla, and voilà: You’ll have a salad taco.

This recipe calls for fresh cactus paddles, also called nopales, which you can find at Latin markets and online at Amazon, MexGrocer, and Melissa’s Produce. If you can’t track down nopales, though, try substituting with summer squash.

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 4 TO 6

455g cactus paddles, dethorned
130g sea salt
100g radishes, sliced on a mandoline
120g red onion, slivered
120g watercress, rinsed, dried, and torn
into bite-size pieces
12g chopped cilantro leaves
120ml extra-virgin olive oil
120ml freshly squeezed lime juice
3g Maldon sea salt or another
finishing salt
20g to 30g grated ricotta salata
4 to 6 fresh corn tortillas, for serving

METHOD

Prepare the salad: In a large mixing bowl, combine the cactus with sea salt and set aside for 1 hour to draw out excess moisture. Rinse the cactus in a colander to remove any sliminess, then cut each paddle into ½-inch-wide (12mm) strips. Transfer the strips to a serving bowl, then add the radishes, onion, watercress, and cilantro.

Make the dressing: In a jar or a small bowl, mix together the oil, lime juice, and finishing salt. Dress the salad, and toss to coat. Spoon salad into each tortilla and top with ricotta salata. Serve within 1 hour of dressing the salad.



PESCADO A LA TALLA/ RED AND GREEN ROASTED FISH

"OUR MOST POPULAR DISH AT CONTRAMAR."

This stunning two-tone fish is the very first thing Gabriela put on the menu at Contramar when she opened the restaurant in 1998. It's inspired by a traditional grilled fish from the Mexican state of Guerrero, where fish is cooked over an open flame and served with tortillas and a variety of salsas, beans, and pickled vegetables to create a DIY taco situation.

The red and green sauces on Gabriela's version represent the two sides of her heritage: a fiery red salsa, which is a nod to her Mexican roots, and a fresh parsley-based salsa that references her Italian influences.

Ask your fishmonger for the freshest snapper-like catch of the day, and request that they butterfly it for you. When shopping for whole fish, use your senses: Fresh fish shouldn't have a noticeably "fishy" or "off" smell, the meat should feel firm to the touch, and the eyes should be clear, not cloudy. This is all part of why Gabriela encourages you to develop a relationship with a trustworthy fishmonger.

Gabriela serves her *pescado* with fresh corn tortillas and refried beans topped with Ocosingo cheese. Beans vary wildly in quality, so Gabriela recommends sourcing dried beans from the brand Rancho Gordo, a specialty vendor of heirloom beans based in Napa, California. To check if dried beans are relatively fresh (as opposed to ones that have been sitting for too long), drop them into cold water (they should sink). Discard any that float to the top. Canned beans work in a pinch, but they usually have subpar texture and flavor compared with dried beans. Ocosingo cheese is a speciality product from the highlands of Chiapas, with a natural acidity that pairs well with the earthiness of the beans, but it can be difficult to find outside of Mexico; if you're having trouble tracking it down, you can easily substitute cotija cheese or *queso fresco*.

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 4 TO 6

1 whole 1kg to 2kg whitefish
(whatever is available to you locally),
butterflied and deboned
Sea salt
240ml Green Sauce
240ml Adobo Rojo de Chiles

For the Frijoles Aguados/Soupy Beans:

MAKES ABOUT 720G

240g dried black beans,
soaked overnight, and rinsed
10g garlic cloves
1 sprig epazote or 2 avocado leaves
Salt to taste

For the Adobo Rojo de Chiles sauce:

MAKES ABOUT 760G

30g chile cascabel, destemmed
and seeded
12g chile ancho, destemmed and seeded
9g chile guajillo, destemmed
and seeded
9g chile pasilla, destemmed and seeded
1g chile de árbol, destemmed
and seeded
450g roma tomatoes, roughly chopped
70g white onion, roughly chopped
12g garlic cloves, roughly chopped
12g freshly squeezed orange juice
3g achiote paste
36g grapeseed oil
Pinch of cumin
Pinch of oregano
18g sea salt, plus more for seasoning

METHOD

Make the Frijoles Aguados: 1 day before cooking, soak the dried beans overnight in cold water (this will ensure that the beans cook faster and more evenly). The next day, rinse the beans thoroughly to remove any debris. Place the beans in a medium pot and cover with water until the beans are completely submerged and there's an extra 10 centimeters of water above them. Add the garlic and epazote (or avocado leaves). Remove any beans that float to the surface.

Bring the water to a boil, then reduce the heat to low to maintain a simmer. Cover the pot. After about 30 minutes, remove the lid, stir the beans, and add more water if needed to maintain 10 centimeters of water covering the beans. Replace the lid and simmer for another 15 minutes. After 15 minutes, taste a bean for doneness—it will likely still be firm, but check every 10 minutes from this point, stirring gently between each test and adding more water as needed. Cook the beans until soft but still whole with skin intact. Season with salt and set aside.

Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 1 week or freeze for up to 6 months. Reheat gently over low heat.

Make the Adobo Rojo de Chiles sauce: If possible, turn on the exhaust fan above your stove or open a window before toasting your chiles. Heat a large nonstick pan or clay comal over medium-high heat. Cook the chiles in the dry pan or on the comal, flipping once, until lightly toasted and aromatic, about 1 to 2 minutes.

Put the toasted chiles in a blender. Add the tomato, onion, and garlic. Place the achiote paste in a small bowl. Slice the orange in half and squeeze one half into the achiote paste. Stir to combine. Add the mixture to the blender, along with the juice from the other half of the orange. Add the grapeseed oil, cumin, and oregano. Blend on high until the sauce is thick but smooth, about 1 minute. Add the cumin and oregano, and stir. Add salt to taste.

For the Green Sauce:

MAKES ABOUT 760G

10g garlic cloves
40g parsley leaves
120ml safflower oil or grapeseed oil
Pinch of cumin
Sea salt to taste

For the Frijoles Refritos/Refried Beans:

MAKES ABOUT 480G

20g vegetable oil or lard
150g white onion, finely diced
240g Frijoles Aguados, strained
240ml reserved bean cooking liquid

To assemble:

Salsa Verde Cruda (recipe on page 14)
Salsa Tatemada (recipe on page 33)
Fresh corn tortillas, warmed
(recipe on page 10)
80g Ocosingo cheese, *queso fresco*, or
cotija cheese for serving
Lime wedges, for serving

Make the Green Sauce: Combine all ingredients in a blender (or a tall vessel if you're using an immersion blender). Blend until all ingredients are smooth and combined, about 2 to 3 minutes. Parsley can be fibrous and tricky to blend; just keep pulsing until emulsified.

Prepare the fish: Preheat the oven to 200°C (375°F). Liberally grease a baking sheet with olive oil to avoid sticking. Place the butterflied fish on the baking sheet skin side down. Salt the fish. Use a serving spoon to coat one side of the fish with the Adobo Rojo de Chiles sauce, spreading an even layer across the entire surface of the fish. Use a fresh serving spoon to coat the other side of the fish with the Green Sauce.

Once both sides are amply coated with sauce, roast the fish in the oven until the flesh is white and slightly visible from beneath the sauce, about 15 to 20 minutes. Check fish after 15 minutes to avoid overcooking.

Make the Frijoles Refritos: While the fish is cooking, prepare the Refried Beans. In a large cast-iron skillet, heat the vegetable oil or lard over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until soft and translucent, about 2 to 3 minutes. While the onions are cooking, spoon the reserved bean cooking liquid and 240 grams of the Frijoles Aguados into a blender (or a tall vessel if using an immersion blender). Blend until the beans are smooth and resemble a light yet watery paste.

Once the onions are translucent, pour the bean paste into the cast-iron skillet with the onions. Stir well with a wooden spoon to combine. The mixture should be silky smooth and not too thick—it should coat the back of a spoon but still drip off. Taste the beans for seasoning and add more salt if necessary. Set aside.

Assemble: Remove the fish from the oven and transfer it to a platter (or leave it on the baking sheet). Serve with warm tortillas, a bowl of Frijoles Refritos topped with Ocosingo, *queso fresco*, or cotija cheese, Salsa Verde Cruda, Salsa Tatemada, and fresh lime.

LEARN MORE

A HANDY GUIDE TO MEXICAN CHILES

With more than 60 types produced in Mexico, chiles are a staple crop and fundamental component of Mexican cuisine. The wide array of chiles available in the country adds complexity, depth, and, of course, heat, to countless dishes. Here's the lowdown on some of the chiles that Gabriela's recipes call for, along with a few others worth seeking out.

FRESH CHILES

Fresh chiles can be used to add color, texture, and heat to any dish. They're typically eaten raw and only need to be washed, deseeded, and destemmed before serving.

JALAPEÑO

The most recognizable of all fresh Mexican chiles, jalapeños have a smooth green or red appearance and medium spiciness. They can be eaten straight or stuffed, pickled or fried. They are often served whole and charred as an accompaniment to tacos.

SERRANO

Smooth, green serranos originated in the mountainous regions of Puebla and Hidalgo. Like jalapeños, they have a bright, fresh kick with a medium to medium-hot spice level that varies depending on their size. While serranos can serve as a flavorful garnish for a variety of dishes, they are primarily sliced up and mixed into salsa, *pico de gallo*, and guacamole.

HABANERO

Small, round, and orange or red upon maturity, habaneros pack a serious punch in terms of heat, so use them wisely and take precautions (i.e., wear plastic gloves) when preparing them. While habaneros originated in the Amazon, Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula is the modern world's largest producer of habaneros. The spicy pepper is most commonly used in salsas and sauces.

POBLANO

This large green or red pepper hails from the city of Puebla. Poblanos are typically mild, though spice levels can vary widely (the ripe reddish version tends to be the hottest). They're most often stuffed to make *chile rellenos*, but try adding them to guacamole or soups.

DRIED CHILES

Dried chiles bring the most to a dish when they're toasted on a griddle or comal, deseeded, and destemmed. They also need to be soaked in hot water for about half an hour before being used in a recipe.

ANCHO

The dried version of ripe, red poblano chiles. Ancho chiles vary in spiciness, but they are generally mild to medium and have a lightly smoky, fruity flavor that's well-suited to marinades as part of an adobo, or chile paste.

CASCABEL

Also known as the "rattle chile," cascabels take their name from the sound they make when shaken (the seeds rattle around inside of the shell). Mild and earthy, they can be added to sauces, stews, and more; in salsas, they pair particularly well with tomatillos.

GUAJILLO

These large, thin chiles have bright red skin and a mild kick with some natural sweetness and a touch of earthy flavor. They are frequently used in pastes and rubs.

PASILLA

Pasilla, which translates to "little raisin," boasts—true to its name—dark wrinkly skin and a deeply sweet dried-fruit flavor. Thanks to a heat that isn't overpowering, it's often used in Oaxacan moles and other complex sauces.

ÁRBOL

Bright-red chiles de árbol are long and slender, and they're often used to make decorative wreaths or garnishes. In cooking, they bring a serious cayenne-like spice and earthiness to salsas and sauces. Toast and fry them before rehydrating them to intensify their heat and nuttiness.



DESAYUNO: HUEVOS RANCHEROS/ FRIED EGGS WITH TWO SALSAS

"THIS, FOR ME, IS A PERFECT BREAKFAST."

Huevos rancheros are one of the most iconic Mexican breakfasts, and a great way to use up day-old tortillas. In this case, Gabriela is choosing to make huevos rancheros *divorciados* (Spanish for “divorced”), which for this dish references the use of two different salsas. Gabriela’s preferred Huevos Rancheros *Divorciados* are made with fresh Salsa Roja and Salsa Verde, but you can use any two salsas you’d like.

If you’re making salsa verde from scratch, it’s important for the tomatillos to be fresh—canned versions tend to lack the bright acidity necessary to make the sauce shine. If you don’t have access to fresh tomatillos (commonly available at Latin or farmers’ markets, or online at Whole Foods and Amazon) or they’re not in season, Gabriela recommends making salsa roja instead, which can be done with canned tomatoes if necessary (though fresh are preferable).

If you’re cooking for a crowd, have a stack of fried tortillas ready to go and kept warm in a low oven or covered container; cook the eggs to order, and serve immediately while everything is warm.

INGREDIENTS

For the Salsa Roja Ranchera:

MAKES 800G

170g white onion
 30g garlic
 16g chile serrano
 800g plum tomato
 200ml water
 3g epazote
 Sea salt to taste

For the Salsa Verde Ranchera:

MAKES 625G

170g white onion
 30g garlic
 16g chile serrano
 550g tomatillos
 200ml water
 10g cilantro
 3g epazote
 Sea salt to taste

For the Huevos Rancheros:

SERVES 4 TO 6

10g grapeseed oil
 8 to 12 corn tortillas,
 leftover or already cooked
 200g refried beans (recipe on page 26)
 10g olive oil
 8 to 12 eggs
 Salsa Roja Ranchera
 Salsa Verde Ranchera
 Sea salt
 120g crumbled cheese such as cotija,
 panela, or queso fresco

METHOD

Make the Salsa Roja Ranchera: Roughly chop the onion, then cut the garlic and serrano chiles in half. Place the tomatoes, onion, garlic, serranos, and water in a dutch oven or other covered pot. Set the dutch oven or covered pot over medium-low heat, and cook until all ingredients are slightly softened, about 20 to 25 minutes. (Alternatively, you could place all of the ingredients on a sheet tray, sprinkle them with water to allow them to steam, and cover them with aluminum foil. Roast in an oven that has been preheated to 180°C, or 275°F, until cooked through, about 30 minutes.)

Once the vegetables are cooked through, remove the dutch oven or covered pot from the stove and allow to cool for 10 minutes. Once cooled, transfer all the ingredients to a blender, along with any accumulated juices. Add epazote and blend on high speed until smooth, 1 to 2 minutes. Season with salt and set aside.

Make the Salsa Verde Ranchera: Roughly chop the onion, then cut the garlic and serrano chiles in half. Place the tomatillos, onion, garlic, serranos, and water in a dutch oven or other covered pot. Set the dutch oven or covered pot over medium-low heat, and cook until all ingredients are slightly softened, about 20 to 25 minutes. (Alternatively, you could place all of the ingredients on a sheet tray, sprinkle them with water to allow them to steam, and cover them with aluminum foil. Roast in an oven that has been preheated to 180°C, or 275°F, until cooked through, about 30 minutes.)

Once the vegetables are cooked through, remove the dutch oven or covered pot from the stove and allow to cool for 10 minutes. Once cooled, transfer all the ingredients to a blender, along with any accumulated juices. Add cilantro and epazote and blend on high speed until smooth, 1 to 2 minutes. Season with salt and set aside.

Make the Huevos Rancheros: In a large skillet, heat the grapeseed oil over medium heat. Working in batches to avoid overcrowding, add the tortillas and toast on both sides, flipping once, until slightly crispy but not hard, about 1 minute total. Using tongs, pick up the tortilla and allow any excess oil to drip off. Set aside on a paper towel-lined plate and repeat the process with the remaining tortillas. When all of the tortillas are toasted, spoon your desired amount of refried beans across the surface of each one.

In a separate large skillet, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Crack one egg at a time into a bowl, and then carefully pour the bowl's contents into the hot pan. Fry until the whites are totally set but the yolks are still a little runny, about 1 minute. If necessary, use a spoon to baste the egg whites with the hot oil.

Assemble: Gently place one egg on top of two separate tortillas. Spoon your desired amount of salsa verde on top of the egg white on one tortilla, leaving the yolk exposed. Repeat with the salsa roja on the other egg. Season with salt and garnish with a pinch or two of crumbled cheese. Serve immediately.



SALSA TATEMADA/ CHARRED SALSA

"THE WHOLE POINT OF THIS SAUCE IS TO
GET THE FLAVOR OF THE CHARRING."

All of the ingredients in this rich, smoky salsa are blistered on a hot comal before they're combined in a *molcajete* (a Mexican-style mortar and pestle made from volcanic stone). Gabriela prefers using a *molcajete* to a blender because it creates a more rustic handmade sauce; these tools, along with dried chiles, are available at Latin markets and online at sites like MexGrocer and Amazon. If you'd rather, you can use a cast iron skillet in place of a comal and a blender in place of a *molcajete*.

This recipe features fresh serrano chiles and their dried counterparts, morita chiles, but Salsa Tatemada can be made with other types of chiles as well (you can substitute the fresh serranos for jalapeños and the morita for dry chipotle chile if the others are more readily available to you). If you are sensitive to spice, be mindful when deseeding and destemming the dried moritas—the veins of the chile often contain more heat than the seeds, so trim them out. And be sure to open a window and/or turn on the exhaust fan when charring the vegetables. Once cooked, use your Salsa Tatemada to enliven tacos, fish, and even roasted vegetables.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES ABOUT 760G

8g chile morita, destemmed
20g garlic, roughly chopped
150g white onion, roughly chopped
12g chile serrano, sliced in half lengthwise
and deseeded
200g tomatillo, husks discarded
530g plum tomatoes, halved,
stems removed
Salt to taste
14g cilantro

METHOD

Place a comal or a cast iron skillet over high heat. Place the dried chiles and garlic cloves on the comal or in the skillet to char. Cook the peppers until the skin softens slightly, about 2 to 3 minutes, then remove the chiles and place in a bowl or small pot of warm water to rehydrate. Set aside for at least 10 to 15 minutes—the chiles should be soft enough that their skin will disintegrate when ground. Leave the garlic on the comal or in the skillet to continue blistering, and add the onion.

After about 3 to 4 minutes, remove the garlic and place it in the *molcajete* or blender. Continue roasting the onions and add the fresh serrano, cut side down (do not remove the seeds). Add the whole tomatillos and the sliced tomatoes, flesh side down. Flip the serranos so that both sides get charred and blistered. Continue roasting the onions, serrano, tomatillos, and tomatoes, flipping occasionally, until all ingredients are cooked through and charred, about 10 to 15 minutes. Turn the heat off the comal or skillet, but leave the charred vegetables where they are.

If using a blender to combine, place all of the roasted ingredients into the jar, add salt to taste, add the cilantro, and blend. Use the “pulse” button until the desired consistency—chunky or smooth—is reached.

If using a *molcajete* to combine, place the onions and 1 of the tomatillos into the *molcajete* with the garlic. Grind the garlic, onions, and tomatillo together into a rough paste. Once the onions and garlic are smooth and pasty, add the remaining tomatillos and tomatoes to the *molcajete*, along with the salt. Continue to grind until the sauce is mostly smooth, with some chunks (remove any large chunks of tomato skin with your fingers).

Add the softened chiles to the *molcajete* and continue grinding the salsa, taking care to break down the chile skins. Add more salt and continue grinding or blending until the desired consistency is reached. Add the fresh cilantro to the sauce and stir without mashing to incorporate.

Serve immediately. Salsa Tatemada keeps covered in the refrigerator for up to 4 days.



TOSTADAS DE ATÚN/TUNA TOSTADAS

"I WANT TO THINK OF THE TUNA TOSTADA AS A PARALLEL TO THE CAESAR SALAD: NOBODY KNOWS WHERE IT'S FROM, EVERYBODY LOVES IT, AND IT'S VERY POPULAR."

Gabriela's tuna tostadas are one of the most iconic items on Contramar's menu. But as popular as the dish is today, it wasn't always so in demand: Gabriela developed the recipe in 1998 and made use of fresh tuna, which was, at that time, an underutilized fish. "It was one of the cheapest fish in Mexico—no one wanted it 20 years ago," she says. Its availability, combined with the trend at that time for cuisine with an Asian influence, led to the birth of these Tostadas de Atún, which blend Mexican, Japanese, and Italian flavors. And the recipe hasn't changed since day one.

As with many of Gabriela's recipes, the setup is very simple, so it's of the utmost importance to use the best-quality seafood, citrus, and seasoning you can find. Buy only the freshest tuna from a responsible source, make your own mayonnaise, and taste your oranges to get a better sense of how sweet and acidic they are. As always, Gabriela encourages you to taste throughout the cooking process so that you can hone your own palate—depending on what kind of oranges you're using, the marinade below, for example, might need to be balanced with a bit of lime juice or more soy sauce. A homemade chipotle mayonnaise and fresh avocado bring in a creamy element that ties the whole dish together.

LEARN MORE

Sustainable Seafood

Gabriela is a major proponent of cooking with seafood that's been sustainably caught. Tuna is historically overfished and often caught using methods that result in a significant amount of bycatch (other species of fish caught unintentionally during the tuna-fishing process). Despite their popularity, tuna tostadas aren't always available at Contramar because responsibly sourced tuna is not always available. At Cala, Gabriela's restaurant in San Francisco, she opts for farmed trout in lieu of tuna to maintain the dish's sustainability.

There are resources to help you make more informed decisions when shopping for seafood. The Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program provides at-a-glance information on species that are abundant versus those that are overfished. It also offers overviews of seafood that pose mercury or other chemical-related health risks. Consulting with Seafood Watch and developing a relationship with a trustworthy fishmonger in your area are ways to ensure that you're getting high-quality, sustainable seafood at home.

INGREDIENTS

For the Mayonesa Con Chipotle:

MAKES 216G

1 egg
6g freshly squeezed lime juice
5g sea salt
20g chipotle in adobo, canned,
seeds removed
180ml grapeseed oil

For the tostadas:

MAKES 8 TOSTADAS

140g (about 1) leek, white part only,
thoroughly washed and sliced into
3mm-thick rounds
60ml freshly squeezed orange juice
from about 2 oranges
60ml soy sauce
18ml lime juice (optional)
480ml rice bran oil, safflower oil, or any
vegetable oil with a high smoke point
8 day-old corn tortillas
340g sashimi-grade tuna, trout, or other
fatty fish, thinly sliced against the grain
30g Mayonesa Con Chipotle
1 avocado, cut in half, pitted, peeled,
and cut into 8 slices
Lime wedges, for serving

METHOD

Make the Mayonesa Con Chipotle: In a food processor or blender, pulse the egg, lime juice, salt, and chipotle until well combined. With the motor running, slowly add the oil in a thin stream, processing until the mayonnaise emulsifies and turns creamy, about 4 to 5 minutes. Partway through, be sure to turn off the processor and scrape down the sides to incorporate all ingredients. Set aside. (Gabriela encourages you to make your own mayonnaise at home, but you can also start with premade mayo and stir 1 to 2 tablespoons of puréed canned chipotles into it, depending on your spice preference.)

Prepare the leeks: Place the sliced leeks in a bowl of cold water and use your fingers to gently separate the rings. Transfer the rings to a clean towel and allow them to dry completely.

Make the tuna marinade: In a small bowl, stir together the freshly squeezed orange juice and soy sauce, and taste. If the mixture isn't acidic enough, add the juice of 1 to 2 whole limes. The juice should be a little sweet, a little salty, and a little acidic.

Fry the tortillas: In a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan or Dutch oven, heat the oil over medium-high heat until it reaches 180°C (350°F). Ensure that there are at least 2 inches (5 centimeters) of oil in the pan. Working in batches to avoid overcrowding, add as many tortillas as will fit in the oil, flipping occasionally with a wire skimmer. Cook until golden and firm, about 1 minute. (If your tortillas are thicker, they'll need more time to fry.)

Transfer the fried tortillas to a plate lined with paper towels to cool. Repeat the frying process with the remaining tortillas. Once all of the tortillas are fried, don't discard the oil; you'll be using it to fry the leeks. Allow the tortillas to cool for at least 15 minutes.

Marinate the tuna: While the tostadas are cooling, place the fish in a small bowl with the soy sauce–orange juice marinade. Set aside.

Fry the leeks: Make sure that the oil is at 180°C (350°F). Drop the leeks into the oil and stir constantly so they cook evenly and don't stick together. The instant you see the leeks turning golden, after about 2 to 3 minutes, remove them with a slotted spoon or wire skimmer and set them on a plate lined with paper towels to cool completely. The leeks will crisp up as they cool.

Assemble: Once the tostadas are cool, spread a thin layer of mayonnaise evenly across the surface of each one. Distribute the sliced fish among all of the tostadas. Sprinkle each one with fried leeks, and add a slice of avocado. Serve with fresh lime wedges.



QUESADILLAS DORADAS/ GOLDEN QUESADILLAS

"FRIED QUESADILLAS ARE A VERY TYPICAL
MEXICO CITY STREET FOOD."

Quesadillas, part of the vast family of foods known as *antojitos* (“little cravings”), are a typical street snack or appetizer in Mexico City. They’re usually small, savory bites intended as precursors to the main event (other examples include tacos dorados or tostadas) or as a late-night bite after a few drinks. In Mexico City, the word *quesadilla* is something of a catchall, used to describe almost anything folded up in a corn tortilla. On the streets of Mexico City, they’re often served fried, like an empanada. Hence these vegan (so, yes, cheeseless) quesadillas filled with a special part of the corn known as *huitlacoche*.

Huitlacoche is, technically speaking, a fungus that infects corn and causes the kernels to swell up into dark, puffy growths. It’s considered a delicacy in Mexico, and the kernels are sometimes referred to as Mexican truffles. “*Huitlacoche* is the king of Mexican mushrooms,” Gabriela says. Its flavor is earthy and mild, and it’s somehow sweet and savory at once. You can find it fresh in Mexico and parts of California, though canned, frozen, and vacuum-sealed versions also exist (you can buy prepackaged *huitlacoche* on Amazon or through online speciality food retailers such as MexGrocer, Oregon Mushrooms, or Marx Foods). In a pinch, other types of fresh mushrooms—chanterelles or cremini—will work, too.

Gabriela is all about experimenting with the ingredients that are readily available to you, so if corn smut isn’t something you can find (or stomach), try this same technique to create quesadillas with other fillings. Gabriela recommends ricotta cheese, chicken tinga, braised greens, squash blossoms, crumbled chorizo, or some combination thereof. Mushroom-based quesadillas are often seasoned with epazote, a pungent Mexican herb that you can find fresh at Latin markets and farmers’ markets (the dried version is available on Amazon and at many online spice purveyors such as Penzeys).

It’s important to fill and fold the quesadillas carefully. Make sure the fresh masa is moist enough to avoid cracking, and press out all the air when sealing the snacks. If it does crack, you can still make repairs: Simply roll out a small ball of masa, press it into a thin tortilla, and gently “patch” fresh masa over the broken parts of the quesadilla.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES 6 TO 8 QUESADILLAS

For the tortillas:

260g fresh masa

For the filling:

12g grapeseed oil

95g white onion, minced

12g garlic, minced

3g chile serrano, deseeded and minced

325g fresh *huitlacoche*

Salt to taste

7g epazote, finely chopped

For frying:

960ml grapeseed oil

For serving:

200g Salsa Verde Cruda
(recipe on page 14)

METHOD

Prepare the *huitlacoche*: Remove the husk and any stray hairs from the corn cob. Holding the kernel upright on its stem side, use a sharp knife to slice the kernels off, working from top to bottom.

In a medium sauté pan over medium heat, heat the grapeseed oil. Add the onion and sweat until translucent, about 2 minutes. Add the garlic and the serrano, stir to combine, then add the *huitlacoche*. Decrease the heat to medium-low and add more oil if necessary to avoid sticking or burning. Cook, stirring often, until all vegetables are softened, 3 to 5 minutes. The *huitlacoche* will darken as it cooks. Season with salt and stir in the epazote. Turn off the heat, cover the mixture, and set aside while you make the tortillas.

Make the tortillas: Roll out golf ball–size masa balls and press according to the directions in Chapter 3: Tortillas de Maíz (page 10). Open the press and remove the top sheet of plastic, leaving the tortilla on the bottom piece of plastic and on the press. Spoon 2 scant tablespoons of the *huitlacoche* mixture in the center of the tortilla. Be careful not to overfill.

Seal the quesadillas: To seal, lift both sides of the plastic and bring the bottom edge of the tortilla to meet the top. Using your fingers, gently pinch the edges of the tortilla together through the plastic, pushing out any air before closing completely. Your finished quesadillas should resemble empanadas or ravioli. Repeat this process until all of the filling is gone.

Fry the quesadillas: Heat the grapeseed oil in a large heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium-high heat until a thermometer reads 180°C (350°F). Line a plate with paper towels.

Working in batches to avoid overcrowding, carefully add 2 to 3 quesadillas to the oil. Use a spatula or wire skimmer to ensure that they do not stick together, and cook, rotating occasionally, to ensure all sides are golden brown, about 8 to 10 minutes.

Use a fine-mesh strainer or wire skimmer to transfer the quesadillas to the paper towel–lined plate and allow them to drain and cool slightly. Serve hot with Salsa Verde Cruda on the side.

LEARN MORE

A HANDY GUIDE TO MEXICAN CHEESES

There are dozens of varieties of Mexican cheeses: Some are fresh and some are aged; some are smooth and creamy, and others are dry and crumbly. Here are a few of the most common and versatile types to experiment with in your cooking.

QUESO FRESCO/QUESO AÑEJO

Literally, fresh cheese. *Queso fresco* is soft, moist, and crumbly, making it perfect for sprinkling over *antojitos* (little snacks) and beans. It's made from whole milk and can vary in saltiness. It's often sold wrapped in a banana leaf or corn husk. *Queso añejo* (old cheese) is aged *queso fresco* with a harder, drier texture and is often sold pre-grated.

COTIJA

This aged cheese, named for the town of Cotija in the state of Michoacán, has a strong salty flavor, making it an ideal topping for beans, salads, *antojitos*, and more (it's commonly sprinkled on top of *elote*, or grilled corn). At room temperature or colder, it's dry and crumbly, but it will soften slightly when warmed.

QUESO DE OAXACA

Known as *quesillo* in Oaxaca, queso de Oaxaca looks like a ball of white string cheese (not unlike mozzarella). It's creamy and mildly flavored, and it melts easily, making it an ideal stuffing for quesadillas or chiles. It can also be shredded and used as a garnish on top of soups, tostadas, and beans.

PANELA

This is a soft, white cheese made from skim milk, which makes it firm and flexible (it will not melt when heated). It's gently salted and can be eaten plain as a snack, or it can be sliced and used as a sandwich filling.

CREMA

A naturally soured, slightly thickened cream that's like a combination of American sour cream and French *crème fraîche*. Typically used as a garnish after cooking, crema adds a rich and tangy bite to soups, vegetables, and tacos.



AGUACHILE CON CAMARÓN/ RAW SHRIMP IN LIME AND CHILE

"I BELIEVE IN THE PLEASURE OF EATING
THE FRESHEST SEAFOOD."

Aguachile translates to “chile water,” and it refers to a simple way of serving raw fish or shellfish in a bath of lime juice (and, in this case, fish stock), spiced with chiles and herbs. At no point do you need a stove or an oven—citrus alone can transform the proteins in raw seafood and in effect “cook” it; thanks to the lime juice, the fish will firm up and turn an opaque white.

Aguachiles are all about the balance of salt and acid. Don't be shy with either, and taste frequently as you prepare the sauce. In a dish involving so few ingredients, the integrity of each is crucial. The seafood you use should be very fresh and bought from a trustworthy, responsible fishmonger; the limes should be juicy and ripe for squeezing. Chiltepin, the finishing touch, is a very small, very hot chile from Sonora with a pungent, slightly smoky flavor. It's available ground at Latin markets and online at MexGrocer and Spice Jungle. You could also use chile piquín in place of the chiltepin if you prefer.

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Aguachile vs. Ceviche

Gabriela's recipe for *aguachile* might remind you of another raw seafood dish: ceviche. What's the difference? Ceviche came first, likely originating in Peru some 2,000 years ago. Ceviche contains fresh raw fish "cooked" in an acidic marinade—typically citrus juice—spiced with *ají amarillo* (a yellow chile with a hot and slightly sweet flavor), red onions, and other seasonings. The fish in ceviche is often allowed to sit in the marinade for 20 to 30 minutes before being served. During this time, the citric acid from the juice causes the proteins in the meat to denature, which is similar to what happens when heat is applied. The result is raw fish with the firm texture and opaque appearance of cooked fish. There are dozens of ceviche variations across Central and South America, making use of the different seafood, spices, and citrus abundant in each place.

Aguachile is a Mexican variation of ceviche that originated in Sinaloa. It most often features shrimp, lime juice, and chiles blended with water (hence its name) and served with thinly sliced cucumber and red onion. Unlike ceviche, *aguachile* is usually served immediately after the citrus is added, with no need to let the seafood sit and cure. It's a common beach-side snack served with tostadas and sliced avocado. The dish is at its prime the day it is made, so don't make more than you intend to serve and eat.

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 4 TO 6

575g medium, head-on,
peel-on shrimp, raw
2 tsp sea salt, plus more as needed
240ml freshly squeezed lime juice
from about 8 limes, plus 1 to 2
additional limes
60ml shrimp stock
120g red onion, julienned
10g parsley leaves
10g cilantro leaves, packed
8g chile serrano
300g cucumber, cut into thin rounds
1 tsp chiltepin or chile piquín
Maldon sea salt or another finishing salt
25g cold-pressed olive oil
Totopos (deep-fried tortilla chips)
for serving

For the shrimp stock:

Heads and shells of shrimp
(all that you get from your recipe)
470ml water
50g onion
40g celery
8g parsley
1 bay leaf

METHOD

Prepare the shrimp: Remove the heads of the shrimp and set them aside to make the shrimp stock. Using a knife or your fingers, remove the shells and set them aside with the heads. With a paring knife, devein the shrimp by making a shallow incision down the middle of the shrimp's back and removing the black vein with the tip of your knife. Discard the vein. Butterfly the shrimp and use your fingers or a knife to ensure that all of the meat is white and clean. Set the meat aside in a small bowl.

Sprinkle 1 teaspoon of the salt over the shrimp and stir to combine. Add enough lime juice to cover the shrimp and set aside to cure for 4 to 5 minutes while you prepare the remaining ingredients.

Make the shrimp stock: Rinse the scraps of the shrimp to remove any blood or impurities. Simmer the scraps with about 470 milliliters of water and the onion, celery, parsley, and bay leaf (plus any other aromatics or vegetable scraps you'd like) for 20 to 30 minutes, skimming the surface occasionally with a wire skimmer. Once the stock is cooked, strain it through a fine-mesh sieve. Set $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the shrimp stock aside, and store the remaining stock in the refrigerator for up to 5 days or in the freezer for up to 3 months.

Pickle the onions: Place the onions in a small bowl, and sprinkle them with $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of salt. Add enough lime juice to barely cover the onions and quickly "pickle" them. The juice should turn pink when it hits the onions.

Make the aguachile: In a blender, combine the shrimp stock, parsley, cilantro, and $\frac{1}{2}$ of a serrano, along with the remaining lime juice and the juice that the shrimp has been curing in. Taste and, if necessary for acidity, squeeze an additional 1 to 2 limes into the blender. Blend until you have a smooth liquid. Taste for seasoning and adjust if necessary.

Assemble: Pour the contents of the blender into a bowl. Arrange the shrimp on a serving plate skin side down so they can absorb more juices. Season the shrimp with a pinch of salt. Spoon the *aguachile* over the shrimp until they're covered. Arrange the cucumbers on top of the shrimp, and garnish the dish with a few slices of pickled onion. Sprinkle with ground chiltepin or chile piquín and sea salt. Drizzle with olive oil just before serving. Serve immediately with *totopos* on the side.



TAMALES DE GUAYABA/ GUAVA TAMALES

**"THE TRICK TO A GOOD TAMAL IS ENSURING
THE DOUGH HAS A LOT OF AIR IN IT."**

Tamales are self-contained meals conveniently wrapped in their own compostable plates. Since they're usually made en masse, tamales are a staple at Mexican parties and celebrations. Gabriela favors the sweet guava filling below when the tropical fruit is in season in the winter. Feel free to try this recipe with other high-pectin fruits—plums, apples, pineapple, and berries are all excellent choices. In general, fruits with a naturally high pectin content make for more jam-like fillings.

Although the traditional fat used for tamales is lard, Gabriela uses butter in her recipe, whipping it in a standing mixer until it's very fluffy before adding the fresh masa. Incorporating a lot of air will help the tamal retain a light texture when cooked. The second trick to a good tamal is wrapping it well to ensure that it won't fall apart once it's in the steamer. The traditional tamal wrapping is a corn husk, but some tamales are wrapped in banana leaves; corn husks are better for firm or dry fillings, while banana leaves are used more often to contain very wet or soupy fillings.

The guava filling in this recipe calls for piloncillo, or unrefined whole cane sugar that looks like a craggy brown cone (you can find it at Latin markets or online at MexGrocer). If you can't track down piloncillo at any stores near you, mix 220 grams of brown sugar with 40 grams of molasses. You'll also need cinnamon for the filling, so keep an eye out for Mexican cinnamon sticks, known as *canela*, which are rich and flavorful (you can use ground cinnamon in a pinch).

Just like corn tortillas, perfect tamales are the result of practice, so keep at it. The ones you make here will freeze well and can be cooked in a steamer without being defrosted.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES 12 TO 15 TAMALES

20 corn husks, for wrapping the tamales

For the guava filling:

70g piloncillo

1 cinnamon stick

350ml water

500g guava

For the masa:

MAKES 700G

300g unsalted butter, softened

75g granulated sugar

1 tsp baking powder

1 tsp baking soda

2 tsp ground star anise

For the fresh whipped cream:

240ml heavy cream

13g granulated sugar

METHOD

Place the corn husks in a large bowl of warm water to soften while you're preparing the filling.

Prepare the filling: In a small saucepot set over medium heat, combine the piloncillo, cinnamon, and water. Slice the guavas in half and use a spoon to carefully scoop the flesh and seeds into the pot with the piloncillo mixture. Bring the mixture to a boil over medium-high heat, then decrease the heat to low and simmer until the liquid reduces slightly and thickens into a viscous syrup, about 10 to 12 minutes. (The guava flesh should disintegrate in the liquid.) While the filling is cooking, slice the guava peels into strips, about ¼-inch thick. Set aside. Once the liquid thickens, set aside to cool slightly.

Remove the cinnamon sticks from the piloncillo mixture (if using). Using an immersion blender set on low speed, carefully blend the filling until smooth and uniform, about 1 to 2 minutes. Strain the filling through a fine-mesh strainer placed over a clean bowl. Use the back of a spoon to press the filling against the sides of the strainer in order to remove the seeds and keep all of the liquid. Once all of the liquid has been collected in the bowl, discard the seeds.

Add the sliced guava rinds to the bowl with the filling, and stir to incorporate. The mixture should resemble a caramel with pieces of guava rind. Set aside while preparing the masa.

Make the masa: In the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with a whisk attachment, beat the butter on high speed until very fluffy, about 5 minutes. Stop the mixer and add the sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and ground star anise. While whisking on medium speed, slowly add golf ball-size chunks of fresh masa to the bowl. Wait until each chunk is incorporated before adding the next. Once all of the masa has been added, increase speed to high and whisk until the mixture resembles heavy whipped cream, about 2 to 3 minutes.

Assemble: Remove the corn husks from the water and gently blot to dry. Using a spoon or a spatula, spread two generous spoonfuls of the masa dough into the husk, forming a small well in the center for the filling. Be careful not to overfill the corn husks—the masa dough should be completely enveloped in its wrapping or it will leak out while cooking.

Add a spoonful of the guava filling into the well you created in the masa, again being careful not to overfill—the masa should envelop the filling, just as the corn husk envelops the masa. Use the sides of the corn husk to gently press the filling into the masa.

To seal the tamal, gently squeeze the masa and filling toward the back of the husk, pushing out any air, and then fold the bottom of the husk underneath. The tamal should be “closed” at the bottom and “open” at the top. Set the tamal on a plate and repeat the filling process with the remaining masa and guava.

Steam the tamales: Fill a deep stockpot with two to three inches of water, then set a steamer basket into the pot. (The water should not be high enough to touch the tamales.) With the heat off, arrange the tamales in an upright position, sealed side on the bottom of the basket. Arrange them side-by-side so that they hold each other upright. Cover the pot and turn the heat up to medium. Steam the tamales for 1 hour, checking the pot intermittently to ensure that the water has not evaporated. Check the tamales for doneness by slicing one open—it should feel firm to the touch. Turn off the heat and let the tamales sit in the steamer until you’re ready to serve.

Make the whipped cream: Add the heavy cream and sugar to a stand mixer fitted with a whisk attachment (you can also add the ingredients to a large bowl and use a hand mixer). Mix the ingredients until soft peaks form.

Assemble: To serve, remove the tamales from the steamer with tongs or your hands, and open the packets. Eat directly from the husk, or remove the tamal and transfer it to a plate. Serve with fresh whipped cream or extra guava filling if desired.

BONUS RECIPE: BLACKBERRY ATOLE

Atole is a warm traditional drink made of ground masa. It's usually sweetened with piloncillo (unrefined whole cane sugar—more on that on page 50) and scented with cinnamon. Here, Gabriela combines it with the flavors of a seasonal fruit jam. For a different variation, try this same recipe with raspberries instead of blackberries.

INGREDIENTS

MAKES ABOUT 220G

For the fruit jam:

360g blackberries
40g sugar
200ml water

For the masa mixture:

1.5L water
125g piloncillo
8g cinnamon sticks
220g fresh masa

METHOD

Make the fruit jam: In a small saucepan over medium heat, combine the blackberries, sugar, and water. Cook, stirring occasionally, until blackberries break down and release their juices, about 5 to 6 minutes. Transfer the mixture to a blender (or a tall vessel if using an immersion blender). Blend into a smooth purée and set aside.

Make the masa mixture: In a medium pot over medium heat, combine the water, piloncillo, and cinnamon. Bring to a simmer for about 2 to 3 minutes, stirring occasionally to dissolve all the piloncillo. Remove the cinnamon stick. Add the masa and whisk to incorporate. The mixture should be thick and smooth with no lumps.

Reduce the heat to low and stir in the blackberry purée until the mixtures meld, about 3 to 4 minutes. Once combined, pour the liquid into a blender and blend to achieve a smooth consistency. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve to remove any blackberry seeds. Serve hot.

THE ART OF THE DETAILS

“In Mexico we have a culture that thankfully still prides itself with the art of hospitality,” Gabriela says. Hospitality in this sense is a concept that applies on multiple levels: from polished service in a restaurant setting to graciously welcoming guests into your own home.

Part of it is cultural. “Food is such an important part of Mexican culture,” says Gabriela. “Food is such a binding element of who we are and of how we relate to wherever we’re from...we are all very proud of being Mexicans through the food.” For her, that pride manifests itself in preparing food with care and without compromising on the quality of ingredients. Cooking with intention and the best possible raw materials will set you on the right path.

Beyond the quality of the food itself is the care you take in serving it. “I believe the art of serving is the key to Contramar’s success for so many years,” Gabriela says. She praises her team for their exceptionally high standards and level of professionalism while on the job as well as for the human touch they impart on the space. “It was really the warmth of the people who came to work with us that made [Contramar] what it is today. And I believe that that is the best accompaniment for good food.”

That warmth is something you can impart in your own home when cooking and entertaining as well. Gabriela grew up in a household that regularly welcomed people from different cultural, ideological, and political backgrounds. She strives to find positive qualities in every situation. “Not in a stupid positive way, but just in a way of admiring the beauty of the world that we live in,” she says. “Not only the beauty, but the complexity.”

Now that’s worth raising a glass to—all together around the table.