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Get hooked on Mazatlan cuisine

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By Carolyn Walkup

Many of us who dine frequently at any of the many local Mexican restaurants in the suburbs may think we know a lot about Mexican cuisine. However, there's nothing like tasting native dishes at their source to show us what that food is really like.

A recent trip to Mazatlan opened my eyes and palate to the fresh seafood, handmade tortillas and just-picked tomatillos of this Pacific coast city.

Mazatlan, located about 275 miles northwest of Puerto Vallarta on the Pacific Ocean, is considered Mexico's first resort town and was once a sizzling destination for the American spring-break crowd. In recent years it lost popularity to the beaches of Cancun and Riviera Maya on the Gulf of Mexico and the resorts of Cabo San Lucas on the Baja tip.

The culture and the cuisine, most notably its ocean-fresh seafood and local peppers, plantains and papaya, are reasons to rediscover Mazatlan.

Mexico's largest shrimp fleet is based here, so shrimp lovers are in their element. Ocean fish and shellfish of all kinds, including marlin, mahi mahi, dorado, corvina and snook show up on local menus, depending on the season.

Pedro y Lola, one of several fine dining restaurants with sidewalk cafes on the Plaza Machado, is acclaimed for its shrimp and seafood creations. Pedro y Lola Shrimp, one of its signature appetizers, plates two fresh-caught and flambéed jumbo shrimp in a caramelized orange and pineapple juice butter sauce. A serenade by strolling minstrels added to the charm of dining al fresco in the tropical night air.



Located along Pacific Ocean, Mazatlan offers visitors boatloads of fresh seafood and beautiful sunsets.

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A fisherman displays his morning bounty. Some of Mazatlan's shrimp and other fresh seafood finds its way to Chicago restaurants.

Courtesy of Carolyn Walkup



Some more casual restaurants even serve fish for breakfast. The Shrimp Bucket's breakfast menu, for example, includes marlin stew with Clamato juice, olives, garlic and carrots, garnished with cabbage, red onion, cilantro and lime. Visiting fishermen can have their catch prepared for them here and at other restaurants.

With meat dishes, stews or soups, local cooks commonly include animal parts — head, brains and tongue (don't knock it 'til you try it) — that may not appeal to the average American. Most menus have English translations, but don't hesitate to ask your servers, many of whom speak some English, if definitions of some words are not clear.

Corn tortillas are made by hand at quite a few local restaurants and are far superior to the packaged variety we can grab off grocery store selves. One memorable restaurant that makes tortillas at a demonstration station is El Meson de los Laureanos, a rustic restaurant named for an infamous stagecoach robber. Located about 30 minutes northeast of Mazatlan in El Quelite, it is worth the drive to experience traditional ranch-style Sinaloan dishes.



Tour guide Maria Elena Soltero checks out the habanero peppers at the Pino Suarez Market in historic Old Mazatlan.

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Locally raised meats and vegetables are the specialties here, served with a variety of savory sauces. Shredded beef, broiled lamb and pork, quail and cow tongue come with the handmade tortillas and an array of side dishes, usually family-style. This hearty feast is best consumed at lunch time and followed by a siesta.

Panama, a small local family restaurant that began as a bakery, serves all day long. At lunch I enjoyed, enchiladas dona petra made with three handmade corn enchiladas stuffed with grilled chicken breast and topped with chorizo, white corn and poblano strips. The guava cake made with both sweet and tart guava fruit and a cookie crumb crust was a favorite dessert.

Things to know about Mazatlan

- Located on the Pacific Coast, Mazatlan has 16 miles of oceanfront.
- About 2 million tourists visit for harbor cruising, golf, sport fishing, eco-adventures, the performing arts, Colonial-era heritage sites and family-friendly activities, such as the Mazatlan Aquarium, one of Mexico's largest.
- Most of the large hotels are located in the Golden Zone north of downtown, but a growing number of boutique hotels are being restored near the historic city center of Old Mazatlan and the tree-lined Plaza Machado.
- More and more of the 480 historic sites and 19th Century buildings in Old Mazatlan are being restored as restaurants, nightclubs, museums and art galleries. The Angela Peralta Theater, a showcase for the performing arts, is an especially fine example of this restoration movement.
- Yes, Mazatlan has purified water, so cases of the dreaded turista, so feared by Americans who've been afflicted on visits elsewhere in Mexico, are rare here.

If you can't escape to Mazatlan this winter you can get a taste of the port city close to home. A handful of suburban Mexican restaurants feature a few dishes from various regions, including Sinaloa where Mazatlan is located.

Most of the shrimp and produce that area Mexican restaurants import from Mexico originates in Sinaloa, according to Dudley Nieto, chef and consultant at a series of Mexican restaurants, including San Gabriel Mexican Café in Bannockburn.

“Whatever we need from Mexico, we can get in Chicago. It's a blessing for Mexican restaurants,” Nieto said. “The seafood from Sinaloa is very exciting, and most of the produce, such as tomatoes and tomatillos, comes from Sinaloa.”

Two suburban restaurants that serve marlin ceviche similar to what I enjoyed in Mazatlan are Fat Rosie's in St. Charles and Mago Grill & Cantina in Arlington Heights and Bolingbrook. An appetizer sometimes served as a special at Fat Rosie's, Tacos Esquinapa, is named for a small town near Mazatlan.

Carolyn Walkup has been writing about food and restaurants for more than two decades. Her trip was sponsored by the Mazatlan Hotel Association.