

BRIDAL GUIDE

Honeymoon & Travel | Mexico

Culinary Vacations in Mexico

For all you gourmets out there, Mexico offers some of the tastiest culinary experiences in the world.

by Judy Koutsky

Tacos, burritos and chimichangas may be the menu must-haves at your fave Tex-Mex place, but in Mexico the cuisine is infinitely more exciting (and diverse) than your average refried beans. Sure, rice, corn, beans and chocolate are staple items all over the country, but each region boasts ingredients with a unique color and flavor—some spicy, some mild.

In the Yucatan Peninsula, for example, hot habanero chili paste is favored over central Mexico's chili powder blend of dried chilies, cumin and oregano. Take a cooking class while honeymooning in Mexico, and you will not only experience the delicious dishes for yourself, but you'll also gain the skills to recreate them at home. Here are three different culinary learning opportunities; whichever you choose, you'll have an extremely tasty experience.

Yucatan Peninsula: Cancun

Thanks to the luxe resorts, amazing Mayan ruins and miles of beautiful beaches, the Yucatan Peninsula is one of the most popular regions of Mexico. Add to that a myriad of hip nightspots, high-end shopping, artisan boutiques and fabulous spas, and you have a world-class destination.

Food Facts: Before the arrival of the conquistadors in the 14th century, the indigenous Mayan people relied on corn, maize, beans and squash as food staples. The Maya also barbecued wild poultry and made chocolate drinks. The Spanish introduced rice, beef, pork and domesticated chicken to the native diet.

Get Cooking: The new Culinary Center at **The Ritz-Carlton, Cancun**, offers guests a chance to experience local cuisine while enjoying the area's well-known honeymoon offerings. The center hosts 12 classes a week, including sessions that focus on traditional Mayan recipes, modern BBQ techniques and DIY healthy spa meals. There's also a food and wine class, which tackles the art of pairings. Each two-hour session at the center begins with time to enjoy views of the ocean from the giant windows while sipping a margarita. Then, it's out to the center's beachfront garden to pick herbs, like spicy chilis and Yucatan allspice, and such vegetables as squash and tomatoes to utilize in your dishes. Back inside, you'll set up at one of four cooking stations, which feature Viking appliances and copper pans, and tackle three to five recipes.

Class instruction includes the proper way to cut veggies, the perfect presentation of your food and, finally, there's the best part—eating. In the evenings, the Culinary Center offers one-hour wine and tequila tastings. In the tequila session, you'll learn about the history of the drink and that good tequila is sipped like brandy, not thrown down as a shot.

Stay Here: The Ritz-Carlton, Cancun, sits in the heart of Cancun, minutes from the city's nightlife. The luxury resort boasts 1,200 feet of beaches, a world-class spa, six restaurants and water activities, such as swimming with the dolphins (culinary classes start at \$95 a person; wine and tequila tastings start at \$55 a person. Doubles start at \$279 a night; 800-241-3333; ritzcarlton.com). *Bridal Guide Exclusive! Book five nights and receive a complimentary cooking class for two at the Culinary Center. Go to bridalguide.com/deals for more details.

Central Mexico: San Miguel de Allende

San Miguel de Allende with its cobblestone streets, centuries-old palacios and magical town square has long been a preferred destination for lovers of architecture. Founded in 1542, San Miguel is one of the best-preserved colonial towns in the country and has been named a national monument.

Food Facts: This region is known for its beef dishes, and you'll find plenty in this city. Local favorites include pacholas (ground beef patties), pork empanadas and fiambre (cured meats topped with fruits, vegetables and olive oil). Tomato-based stews and sauces, flavored with tomatillos and dried chilies, are also menu staples.

Get Cooking: At Sazón, a gourmet cooking school and retail shop located in an 18th-century hacienda, you can sign up for a variety of programs ranging from two-hour cooking classes, which focus on preparing simple local specialties like soups and meat marinades, to weeklong culinary packages that include hands-on instruction and lectures, accommodations at the nearby Hotel Casa de Sierra Nevada and field trips to local sites. Opt for one of these and you'll shop for ingredients at area markets, dine in private homes and local restaurants and explore historic sites.

Sazón has recently introduced the Toque Travels series, which features top visiting chefs from around the world. Like the standard offerings at Sazón, the programs are varied: There are single classes in, say, learning the various uses of chocolate in regional recipes and weeklong packages that feature the art of cooking French cuisine.

Stay Here: Stay at the Orient Express-operated, 33-room boutique **Hotel Casa de Sierra Nevada**, and you'll be only steps from Sazón. Located on the opposite side of the colonial town plaza, the property is spread across numerous courtyards and nine different buildings, including a former customs house, an 18th-century mansion and a military fort (Sazón cooking classes start at \$50; 800-701-1561; sazonsanmiguel.com. Doubles at Casa de Sierra Nevada start at \$290 a night; 800-701-1561; casadesierranevada.com).

Pacific Coast: Punta Mita

Punta Mita is a quiet, gated villa and resort beach community that's 40 minutes northwest of busy, popular Puerto Vallarta. Visitors to the area enjoy a variety of activities: hiking, cycling and horseback riding, as well as water sports like sailing,

surfing and kayaking. Golfers get a bonanza—they can tee off at the community's Jack Nicklaus Signature Course, a 19-hole championship green with sweeping ocean vistas.

Food Facts: Seafood dishes, flavored with cilantro and lime and accompanied by avocado and rice, are top choices at this coastal hideaway. And most meals (yes, even breakfast) are spiced with salsa huichol. Originally developed by the area's Huichol Indians, the hot sauce is made from a variety of chilies, spices, vinegar and a dash of salt.

Get Cooking: At this high-end destination, everything is at your beck and call. Have the concierge arrange an in-villa cooking class and you'll get one-on-one instruction for creating delicious Mexican seafood dishes. The menu is up to you. Do you have a meal that you've always wanted to master? The chef can show you how it's done. You'll make barbecue fish marinades, chocolate mole sauces, and learn the best way to make guacamole. Or ask the chef to help you develop take-home recipes based on your likes. Private cooking classes are accompanied by butler service. He'll set the table, serve your meal and clean up, so you can enjoy a romantic candlelight dinner as the sun sets over the Pacific.

Stay Here: Rent an oceanfront villa at **Las Palmas, Punta Mita**, and you'll have access to the area's private club, which houses a fitness center and swimming pool complete with shaded cabanas. Guests can also opt to eat at the club's palapa-roofed, open-air restaurant (one-on-one, in-villa cooking classes start at \$300 and include chef and butler service for lunch and dinner. Villa rentals at Las Palmas start at \$1,000 a night; 888-647-0979; premier-resorts.com).