

NUEVO MEXICO



Zarandeado adobo-marinated sea bass, charcoal grilled with Miraflores ratatouille

One thousand miles south of San Diego, I'm seated at the marble bar of the Hilton Los Cabos' El Meson restaurant (a farm-to-fork and sea-to-table food spot), where I'm chopping a potpourri of ingredients for what will be lunch—a unique guest experience the hotel will arrange upon request. Before me is a basket overflowing with the freshest ingredients I've ever seen, for a tortilla soup and guacamole. I know how fresh they are because only two hours earlier I hand-picked the cilantro, radishes, tomatoes, peppers, arugula, corn, edible wildflowers and a dozen other delights from the verdant, fertile grounds of the Huerta Tiky Cabo farm alongside Chef Mauricio Lopez.

As the Hilton's post-Hurricane Odile culinary asset, Mexico's celebrity chef brings a culinary genius with a heavy helping of sustainability to his mixing bowls. Rather than focus on flying in fine products from far-flung locations, he's got farmer Gilberto Verdugo just over an hour away, beyond the Sierra de la Giganta in Miraflores. Chef Lopez sources the fruits (and vegetables) of Verdugo's labors to prepare uniquely tasty menus for guests who've included Selena Gomez, Justin Bieber, Adam Sandler... and me.

While gathering greens with the sweet-faced, crinkly eyed chef, I got to know the man whose *abuela's* kitchen back in his hometown of

We're not talking about the state of New Mexico, but rather a reimagined look at Mexican cuisine haute enough to tantalize the palate. Here, we chat with a leader in the field,

CHEF MAURICIO LOPEZ.

BY SHIRA LEVINE



Acapulco first inspired him, ensuring that today his ingredients all grow within 100 miles of his kitchen.

Why did you decide to work in Cabo when your training could have gotten you a job anywhere?

I can imagine tremendous places like Paris and New York, where you can bring in the best-quality products, but I have farmers who have a lot of love for their products. I gain creativity from that.

Can you give me an example?

When I saw the zucchini flowers today my imagination was like, "I can do this, and this and this." I'm really impressed with how the farmers worry about the products; they love them. So I care very much about all the great ingredients I have in front of me. I love when I hear, "Chef, I have a new product for you; you need to use it in your dishes!" The farmers give me ideas; they say, "Do it roasted." And then that gets my imagination working, a revolution in my mind.

Tell me about your food memories from Acapulco.

When my *abuela* started cooking, the house smelled delicious—steaks with cumin, onions, garlic, pepper. She would let me smell the pan. We

children thought it was meatballs. She would tell us to go outside because she wanted it to be a mystery. I would look to see the ingredients and then imagine the seeds, the onion, the garlic and the cumin that she put into it.

Do you cook for your grandma and your mom now?

They love how I cook because I show them how they can make another kind of preparation with their recipes.

How old were you when you started cooking?

Seventeen. I was one of 15 kids trained to be future chefs for a high-end company. I was one of two guys from Mexico. I won the contest when I was 19 and they sent me to Cancun to start my new life. I trained two-and-half years from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. with three chefs from Asia and France. Now I create my own style of cuisine.

How would you describe your food?

A little of everything. I like Italian food. Mexican was one of the last cuisines that I learned. I like simple freshness. I like farm-to-table.

You don't always keep it simple. You got very detailed in your collaboration with the Hilton's Eforea Spa and its director, Adriana Tello.

When I saw the inside of the spa I saw the little tables, and all the little brushes and bottles, and I thought, "I can do something like this with food." My chefs can do something very special right in front of the guests, with stations and little details, a food menu that reflects the spa.



What would be your last supper?

I was born in Acapulco so I like my resources. I like to be on the ocean and catch and make my food. I also like cheese, prosciutto and pasta. I love pasta more than enchiladas—and I like enchiladas. But the truth? Sopas made by my wife.

How does she make them for you?

Simple: corn, a little oil, salsa, cheese, onions and cream. That's it! That makes me happy! No salmon. No foie gras. No caviar. Sopas.

And when you are feeling fancy, what do you like?

Foie gras of course. Also the seafood in Italy, the carbonara pasta in Rome. They use what I love: tomatoes, oil, garlic, basil. That's it. Simple and easy.

That is your food philosophy: easy, delicious, clean and fresh.

Yes. I have the ocean before me. I have fish. I add the ingredients, what's in front of me. I don't have to go to Europe for foie gras, or to Chile for salmon. Everything is here!

What is an ingredient you don't have that you want?

I don't need anything else, I have everything. Why do I need caviar if I have really good, fresh fish here? I have really good tuna! Japanese come here to Mexico for our tuna.

You studied with great chefs and mentors. What is the greatest lesson you've learned?

The best, most important and unique ingredient that I can put on my plate is love.

NORTH OF THE BORDER

Wall or no wall, Mexican food culture will continue to influence cuisine here in the United States. The best Mexican-inspired eats are undeniably delicious and increasingly authentic, fresh and local for those who prefer maiz over flour, and are in the cilantro-is-delicious camp. I ate at thoughtfully menued restaurants across the U.S. and found a few special spots where you can get your *buen provecho* on.

In coastal Alabama, dishes get innovative in order to keep things local. At Chef Chris Sherrill's **FLORA-BAMA YACHT CLUB**, the lionfish nachos and a catfish ceviche with red snapper cracklin' give the menu some south-of-the-border flair. James Beard semi-finalist Chef Bill Briand, of **FISHER'S ORANGE BEACH**, fuses Latin flavors into his blue crab claws, marinated in a charred corn vinaigrette with pickled chiles, cilantro and smoked paprika.

In Pittsburgh, Chef Dave Racicot's **TÄKO** boasts grilled pork shoulder tacos al pastor with roasted pineapple and avocado salsa. My favorite? Tacos Tåko: grilled octopus with harissa aioli, preserved lemon and mizuna greens and herbs.

The Hawaiian island of Oahu's fine food scene embraces its multi-culti diversity by using local poke and ahi as base ingredients. At **BUHO COCINA Y CANTINA**, the Mexican spicy tuna bites take ahi to the next level with spiced serrano chili, chipotle aioli and a tomatillo habanero dressing. At the Four Seasons at Ko'Olina's brand-new **FISH HOUSE**, Chef Martin Knaubert's Mexican corn forever seduces palates, and the chicharon-style duck with Portuguese sausage fried rice is not to be missed.

Don't mess with a foodie's taco night! At **SPOON & STABLE** in Minneapolis, Chef Gavin Kaysen's North Loop restaurant is the food spot du jour come Saturday night. The former Daniel Boulud protégé's tacos out-dazzle fancy food trucks with mouthwatering filling options: octopus tacos with cranberry beans, and red mole duck with ramp salsa and fried cheese curds.