



Mexico

From fiestas to siesta. How our chilli-loving hombres have mastered celebration and relaxation! Words: Elizabeth Conway

MEXICO'S IRREPRESSIBLE VITALITY is perfectly summed up by its culinary exports. How could the country that introduced our beloved chilli pepper to the world be anything other than colourful and vibrant? With their Day of the Dead festival, they even managed to turn the sombre spectre of death into a wonderful celebration of life and living! Nobody knows how to fiesta like our Latin American friends, so it's no wonder thousands of American students flock to Cancun each year to take part in the notorious Spring Break celebrations.

Religion, ritual and superstition play a huge part in Mexican life. Take the Island of the Dolls (or Isla de las Munecas) for example. An island littered with hundreds of decapitated and mutilated dolls it has strangely become something of a tourist favourite. Created by the island's only inhabitant, Don Julian Santana to provide solace to a young girl's ghost, his faultless intentions however ended up just a tad on the creepy side...

Think of Mexico and a thousand other lively stereotypes to mind. High-flying luchadores, tequila and lime, moustachioed men happily shaking maracas dressed in ponchos and sombreros. Even its history is delightfully vibrant. Remnants of Aztec culture that have been preserved show an ancient culture dressed in perfectly patterned cloth, extravagantly coloured headdresses and intricately designed masks (Let's not mention the ritual sacrificing though. Gulp.). But what's really intriguing about Mexico is of course its instantly recognisable and singular cuisine. Enchiladas, burritos, fajitas, tacos and quesadillas - the list is endless. With flavours every bit as rich as its colourful culture it's easy to see why Mexican food is just so popular the world over.

CANCUN

It's strange to think that modern Cancun grew from a once desolate fishing village, virtually forgotten on the south-eastern tip of Mexico. An area once thriving for its Maya inhabitants, the 16th Century Spanish Invasion took its toll and the area was left ravaged by disease, warfare, piracy and famine. Happily things improved, but not for a long long time. It wasn't until 1970 that the Mexican government finally began an expensive and sustained period of transformation, but it now stands as the most popular tourist destination on Earth, and for good reason. Cancun already contained the classic mix of crystal clear waters, exotic palms and over 6,000 miles of pristine shoreline but the Mexican government's master plan added a dash of luxury. Now the expertly crafted tourist zone has sprinkled the city with an array of contemporary shopping centres, classy restaurants and fairy-tale resorts.

Our flight touches down in Cancun

International airport and I head straight for the beach. Powdery white sands exfoliate my feet as I stroll lazily along the shoreline. Everywhere I look locals are smiling and waving. There's a multitude of water sports available but I resist the temptation to jump straight in the water and cool off from the blazing Central-American sun. Along the journey I stop for a while, watching as hundreds of infant sea turtles scramble clumsily down the beach, aching for their first touch of the cool sea water. Elsewhere they are joined by tribes of small crabs (all going for their daily wash I imagine) and the odd starfish sunbathing.

The following day I continue the theme of relaxation and simply lay poolside, golden rays on sunlight gently kissing my skin. The palace-like resorts in Mexico tightly hug the coast line, creating peaceful and relaxing views normally only ever seen on canvas. A clean cut, fresh approach is displayed in the architecture, with



white walls and a modern interior. This truly calming and serene atmosphere is present throughout and perfectly helps you enjoy a stress free break away.

By midday the sun has me feeling energized, my body seemingly swimming with serotonin and vitamin d. I am itching to explore and my first stop is visiting the iconic Chichen Itza. The ancient Mayan pyramids known by locals as 'El Castillo' (the castle) is one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and its every bit as impressive as its more famous Egyptian counterparts. At 24 metres high and containing stunningly crafted architecture, the ruins of this pre-Columbian city are now one of the only reminders of an era long since passed.

What I love about the Mexican way of life is that it's so laid-back and relaxed. Mexican people are warm and friendly, and they enjoy nothing more than getting together with friends and family, food being the essential part of many happy gatherings. Mexican food has a reputation for being mouth-wateringly spicy, but that's not completely true. Instead, all of their ingredients can be categorised as strong, each dish bursting with rich, powerful

flavours. Later that night I sample some classics of Mexican cuisine – enchiladas. These are tender pieces of chicken mixed with colourful peppers and refried beans, wrapped within a soft, golden, corn tortilla and topped with a hot and spicy tomato sauce and melted cheese. They are crunchy but juicy, and wrapped in a tortilla it keeps you waiting to experience the full taste. The cheese which lifts the dish is infused throughout, included within the sauce and baked on top, with a sneaky shot of tequila to finish it off!

Most popular Mexican dishes are entwined with a Spanish flare including well known dishes such as nachos, fajitas, burritos and enchiladas. We have many authentic Mexican packages here in the UK, but it's not until you've been to Mexico yourself that you can truly experience the delicious flavours that the local chefs include within these dishes.

MARKETS

The next day we visit the "mercados públicos," which simply means public markets. What is distinctive about these markets is that they are usually housed in buildings owned and operated by the local government, with numerous stands inside rented by individual merchants, selling produce and basic food staples. Here I am introduced to unique Mexican ingredients which are generally not present in other cuisines. These include edible flowers, vegetables such as 'huauzontle' and 'papaloquelite' or small criollo avocados which have a delicious edible skin. The fresh fruit on offer is never ending, tropical fruits such as guava, prickly pear, sapot, mangoes, pineapple and 'cherimoya' (custard apple) all hit the spot and I would highly recommend you discover and try.

After spending the day sampling local produce, our dinner simply includes light

KANKUN SAUCES

A mysterious, caped luchador has arrived, bringing with him the authentic taste of Mexico in colourful, masked bottles. Aside from their glamorous exteriors, these disguised sauces have an inner strength with a real kick (and even a dive and head-butt or two). The traditional chipotle chilli sauces were created by Rolando Cardenas, who has encapsulated his childhood in a bottle – a secret recipe that was inspired by his family's cooking, mixed with a love for vibrant and flamboyant Mexican wrestling.

Similarly to Mexican wrestlers, the 5 sauces have distinctive personalities, ranging from a zesty mild sauce and smoky marinade, to an extremely hot pure habanero chilli. As KANKUN say, bring Mexico to your table, and "Liberate your luchador!"

What colour will you be rooting for?

We have ten of these heroic sauces to give away, and the first two lucky readers will receive an exclusive KANKUN t-shirt! For your chance to win, email, "LIBERATE YOUR LUCHADOR!" and your details including address to competition@britishcurryclub.co.uk

Closing date 31 October 2013

“MEXICAN FOOD HAS A REPUTATION FOR BEING SPICY BUT THAT'S NOT COMPLETELY TRUE”



snacks (or bocados), and appetizers (antojitos or botanos) such as tacos, salsa, guacamole and dips. This satisfies my appetite before onight with friends. First stop is the local club, Carlos 'n Charlie's - a fun bar decorated with the most bizarre and quirky decor, even including cows hanging upside down on the ceiling! I enjoy listening to local music before settling down in the famous Coco Bongos, a club filled with dancers, actors, gymnasts and an array of live music genres keeping you entertained until early hours of the morning.

With its virgin white sands and tropical turquoise waters it's like something straight out of a travel brochure. Due to its friendly people, relaxed atmosphere and endless array of activities to fill your time, Cancun is something truly special. <



A TASTE OF Mexico

Bring the exotic
flavours to your table

CHICKEN AND TOMATILLO CHIMICHANGAS

These fried burritos are a common sight on street stalls and in cafés along the Mexican border with Texas, but are not so well known further south.

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

2 skinless chicken breast fillets
1 chipotle chilli, seeded
15ml/1 tbsp vegetable oil
2 onions, finely chopped
4 garlic cloves, crushed
2.5ml/½ tsp ground cumin
2.5ml/½ tsp ground coriander
2.5ml/½ tsp ground cinnamon
2.5ml/½ tsp ground cloves
300g/11oz/scant 2 cups drained canned tomatillos
400g/14oz/2⅓ cups cooked pinto beans
8 x 20–25cm/8–10in fresh wheat flour tortillas
oil, for frying
salt and ground black pepper

HOW TO COOK

- Put the chicken fillets in a large pan, pour over water to cover and add the chilli. Bring to the boil, lower the heat and simmer for 10 minutes or until the chilli has softened and the chicken is cooked.

Remove and chop the chilli. Transfer the chicken to a plate. Leave to cool slightly, then shred.

- Heat the oil in a frying pan. Fry the onions until translucent, then add the garlic and spices and cook for 3 minutes more. Add the tomatillos and beans. Cook over a moderate heat for 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Simmer gently for 5 minutes more. Add the chicken and seasoning.
- Wrap the tortillas in foil and place them on a plate. Stand the plate over boiling water for 5 minutes until they are pliable.
- Spoon one-eighth of the filling into the centre of a tortilla, fold in both sides and then the top and bottom. Secure with a cocktail stick.
- Heat the oil in a frying pan and fry the chimichangas in batches until crisp, turning once. Remove them from the oil, drain on kitchen paper and serve.



CHILLIES RELLENOS

Stuffed chillies are popular all over Mexico. The type of chilli used differs from region to region, but larger chillies are obviously easier to stuff than smaller ones.

Makes 6

INGREDIENTS

6 fresh poblano or Anaheim chillies
2 potatoes, total weight about 400g/14oz
200g/7oz/scant 1 cup cream cheese
200g/7oz/1¾ cups grated mature (sharp) Cheddar cheese
5ml/1 tsp salt
2.5ml/½ tsp ground black pepper
2 eggs, separated
115g/4oz/1 cup plain (all-purpose) flour
2.5ml/½ tsp white pepper
oil, for frying
chilli flakes, to garnish (optional)

HOW TO COOK

- Make a slit down one side of each chilli. Place in a dry frying pan over a moderate heat, turning frequently until the skins blister. Place in a plastic bag and set aside for 20 minutes. Peel off the skins and remove the seeds through the slits. Dry with kitchen paper and set aside.
- Scrub/peel the potatoes and cut into 1cm/½ in dice. Bring a large pan of water to the boil, add the potatoes and simmer for 5 minutes or until the potatoes are just tender. Do not overcook. Drain thoroughly.
- Put the cream cheese in a bowl and stir in the grated cheese, with 2.5ml/½ tsp of the salt and the black pepper. Add the potato and mix gently. Spoon some of the potato filling into each chilli. Put on a plate, cover with clear film (plastic wrap) and chill for 1 hour.
- Put the egg whites in a clean, grease-free bowl and whisk them to firm peaks. In a separate bowl, beat the yolks until pale, then fold in the whites. Scrape the mixture on to a shallow dish. Spread out the flour in another shallow dish and season it with the remaining salt and the white pepper.
- Heat the oil for deep frying to 190°C/375°F. Coat a few chillies first in flour and then in egg before adding carefully to the hot oil. Fry the chillies in batches until golden and crisp. Drain on kitchen paper and serve hot, garnished with a sprinkle of chilli flakes for extra heat, if desired.