

Dining in the Heart of Mexico

Modern Mexican food in a hip hotel, a converted cantina, and a “garden of miracles”

Mar 08, 2011 @ 5:52 PM

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There are scores of restaurants in the pretty colonial town of **San Miguel de Allende** in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. Thus far, Hooters and The Hard Rock have not reared their *cabezas*, and there isn't a Subway or a McDonald's in sight, but a lot of the local eateries are very much geared towards gringos. This isn't surprising. San Miguel, which is pretty much in the center of the country, about 165 miles northwest of Mexico City, is famous for two things: It was the first Mexican municipality to declare independence from Spain (it is named in part for an early revolutionary hero, Ignacio Allende); and it boasts one of the largest concentrations of full- and part-time American and Canadian residents of any town in Mexico — almost ten percent of the total population, according to some estimates. *(Photo courtesy of Flickr/esparta)*



Americans — the Stream family of New Orleans — own the new **Hotel Matilda**, an unexpectedly contemporary-style establishment on a narrow cobblestone street at the edge of the old *centro*. Most local hotels — even the brand-new super-upscale Rosewood property around the corner from the Matilda — are faux-colonial (or occasionally real colonial) in architecture and furnishings. The Matilda was built almost from scratch, on the bones of a longtime local favorite called the Villa Jacaranda, and is cool and hard-edged with warm accents (imagine a hipper boutique version of a W). *(Photo courtesy of Hotel Matilda)*

The place is said to be San Miguel's first "green" hotel — organic waste is composted, and some of the power is provided by photovoltaic and solar panels. Work by modern-day Mexican artists like Bosco Sodi, Nacho Rodríguez, and Aldo Chapparo adorn the walls (as does a clumsy copy of a Diego Rivera portrait of Matilda Stream, for whom the place is named).

The dining room at the Villa Jacaranda was famous for its fish and chips (served English-style wrapped in newspaper) and its key lime pie. Today, an American chef named Bernie McDonough, from Boston by way of Savannah, Turks & Caicos, and Jackson Hole, offers a much more complex menu, using grown-to-order produce from a nearby organic farming operation, locally raised meat, and Mexican cheeses (including some he makes himself). His duck confit and caramelized onion empanadas with papaya sauce is intense in flavor and irresistible. His thick pork chop with stone ground grits and jalapeño–onion relish is hearty and delicious.

Seared scallops with a fondue of leeks and huitlacoche (the corn fungus sometimes called the truffle of Mexico), roasted pumpkin and local pecorino ravioli, and spice-crusting tuna with black bean relish are among his other specialties. And he

makes what is widely considered to be the best cheeseburger in town — with cheddar he produces himself. Surprisingly, this is one place that doesn't draw a large North American clientele, certainly not from among the local residents, anyway. They think the place is too expensive. Stylish couples from Mexico City, on the other hand, practically line up outside. *(Photo courtesy of Flickr/nkymike)*

A few blocks from the Matilda — easy walking distance if you find it easy to walk up very steep cobblestone streets — is a very different kind of place: a perfect little bar and taqueria called La Sirena Gorda (The Fat Mermaid). Run by José Luis Viveros Hildago, who owns a full-scale restaurant of the same name in Zihuatanejo, the bar occupies the former premises of a notorious 1920-vintage cantina called La Manantial, which means "the source" or "the spring," a reference either to the freshwater springs that once supplied most of the city's water or to the abundance with which alcohol of all sorts that has long flowed freely here.





The signature

cocktail here is the ginger margarita. The fare, by chef Luis Muños, is mostly seafood, including house-smoked oysters and mussels, ceviche, and tostadas de tiritas (tiritas being strips of fish, pompano in this case, and onions marinated in lime juice, typical of Zihuatanejo). The best thing here, though, are the unusual fish tacos, made of tuna prepared in various styles usually used for meat: as carnitas (fried in lard and shredded), chilorio (in a dense sauce of chiles and tomatoes), and al pastor (roasted, with pineapple). They're not quite like anything you've ever sampled before but are very, very good. *(Photo courtesy of Colman Andrews)*

The most adventurous cooking in the state of Guanajuato isn't in San Miguel but in the town of **Guanajuato**, a once wealthy silver-mining town roughly 50 miles to the northwest, at **El Jardín de los Milagros** — The Garden of Miracles. Here, a good-natured, rotund, ATV-driving chef named Bricio Domínguez — a regular guest at **Madrid Fusión**, the leading Spanish avant-garde food conference, every year — combines traditional foodstuffs and methods with the latest Adrià-inspired innovations.

His large menu admittedly contains some reasonably traditional items (empanadas of cheese and smoked marlin; his take on paella), but Domínguez positively beams when he sets in front of the diner his shrimp ceviche "sin limón" (without lime), acidified instead with the tart juice of *xoxonoxtle*, a variety of green cactus pear; or sopas (cornmeal shells) of shredded tongue with avocado and wild tomatillo foam; or a cream of onion soup with the incongruous but agreeable addition of little filaments of guava; or remarkably tender lamb chops on a bed of onions caramelized with agave syrup and *piloncillo* (unrefined cane sugar), the whole swarming, if you'll pardon the expression, with *escamoles*, which are ant larvae dug out of maguey roots. They don't taste like chicken, but they do sort of taste like butter or mild cheese. And in this presentation, they also taste like modern Mexico

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