

Worldly Delights: Oaxaca

Mary Luz Mejia discovers a more authentic ‘other’ Mexico in the cuisine and culture of Oaxaca

Joyous music fills the *zócalo*, or town square, thanks to the musicians playing in the gazebo nearby. I'm sipping a picture-perfect margarita made with the sun-kissed juice of Mexican *limónes* and artisanally produced tequila, while palms sway overhead. Bougainvillea overflows balconies in a riot of colour as vendors sell their handcrafted treasures in its shade. While this may conjure up images of a beautiful Mexican seaside resort, I'm actually referring to inland **Oaxaca**, one of the country's culinary and artistic gems.

I fell in love with Oaxaca years ago when I filmed an episode there of a culinary documentary series for the Food Network Canada. I had a vague idea of what awaited me in this city, nestled in a valley among mountains in the country's far south. I knew Oaxaca was renowned for its culinary and cultural traditions that weave proud pre-Hispanic roots with a Spanish colonial legacy. What I didn't expect was the city's dramatic beauty, the lilt of ancient Mixtec and Zapotec languages spoken in the streets, and the sheer abundance of the fresh produce available year round. I also never expected to experience so much heart and soul in a place where

the people are as generous as the fertile valleys surrounding the state of Oaxaca's capital city.

This is the Oaxaca I've come to respect and admire more with each visit. But it wasn't enough for me to enjoy a vacation there, take photos and share them with friends and family. No, I wanted other like-minded travellers to revel in a well-made *mole* (complex sauce) and to get our hands 'in the *masa*' (dough), making tamales or Oaxacan chocolate. And I wanted to stray off the beaten path with a special group of people who would have a great appreciation for a lunch made by three generations of Zapotec women, who also happen to be the best textile weavers in the state. With the help of our Oaxacan connection **Alvin Starkman** (a former Toronto litigator), internationally renowned chef **Pilar Cabrera Arroyo of La Olla** restaurant and **La Casa de los Sabores** cooking school, as well as my husband Mario, our collective wish came true.

Among the first travellers to sign up were two of Canada's leading culinary icons, **Elizabeth Baird** (former food editor of *Canadian Living* and still a prolific food writer) and award-winning cookbook author **Rose Murray**. Toronto chef **Vanessa Yeung** joined in as well, and soon we had our group of adventurous gourmands. We swapped all-inclusives for a beautiful B&B in the centre of town, substituted liquor-fuelled days for artisanal mezcal tastings in nearby pueblos and all-you-can-eat buffets for Oaxacan cuisine at some of the city's finest rooftop terraces. Flocks of tourists swarming for super-sized margaritas at chain restaurants? Not a chance! This is another Mexico, one that Baird describes as ideal for those "wanting to discover a vibrant, different culture."

In Oaxaca, there's no better place to start than with a walking tour of the historic city centre, which includes the jewel in the city's crown – the **Santo Domingo Church**. A beautiful church that began to take shape in 1572 thanks to Spanish Franciscan friars, the structure is a study of shape and light. The beige stone façade is considered 'simple' by Mexican decorative standards – but it's impressive to our eyes. We step inside at dusk as the sun filters through the stunning stained glass windows, and we're mesmerized by what



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some describe as a “golden vision of a Baroque heaven.”

Later that evening, chef Pilar hosts dinner at La Olla’s rooftop patio. A dark blue velvet sky and a magnificently set table await us, along with our chef’s take on Oaxacan cuisine. Her *pescadillas*, or minced red snapper, caper and onion turnovers are sublime, matched only by the *tamalitos de mole amarillo*, mini cornmeal tamales stuffed with chicken in a yellow *mole* sauce, steamed in banana leaves. I see our culinary friends’ eyes light up when they bite into the rehydrated dried *chile pasilla Oaxaqueño* stuffed with mashed black beans and topped with fresh cheese. Balanced, mildly spicy and unique in its combination – we are all smitten. We cap these and other unique dishes off with a cup of *café de Olla* (cinnamon-infused, sweetened coffee) and Pilar’s *pan de quesón* (cheesecake) with pineapple and prickly pear compote.

A post-dinner stroll through the colonial downtown city streets is in order after this feast. Everywhere we turn, we’re greeted by scarlet red, indigo blue and burnt orange textiles. Indigenous women with neatly braided hair tell us they learned to make everything from rugs to shirts from their foremothers; traditions that are still very much alive in Oaxaca and its surrounding pueblos.

On a warm afternoon, we drive 45 minutes to **Santo Tomás Jalieza**, where the Navarro family greets us at their home. Chef Pilar and Alvin are good friends with the mother, her son and two daughters – all of whom are known for their beautiful backstrap loom work, save for Gerrardo, who is the family painter. The group was treated to a special lunch including fresh-off-the-*comal* (flat terracotta griddle) tortillas and grilled *tasaño* (or thin beef steaks), and a demonstration of how to make *sopa de guías*. This vegetarian

soup is typical of the area and is made with zucchini, its blossoms and vine as well as corn to thicken the broth. Since tourists would never have access to the Navarro’s family home – with its impeccable dirt courtyard where the weaving takes place – or their outdoor kitchen, the group was transfixed. Rose Murray said it best: “To see artisans like this working in their own homes and then to have lunch made by them, this is a rare treat.”

Mexican food is the original **Slow Food**. You can’t rush the making of tamales or a *mole* sauce any more than you can a well-smoked barbecue. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the valley’s markets. The Sunday-only **Tlacolula town market** is where you go to smell roasting chiles, sip the ‘drink of the gods’ (*tejate*), a cool cacao and corn drink, eat cinnamon tortillas and find artisanal kitchen gadgets.

We follow this with cooking classes led by internationally renowned chef **Susaro Trilling** at her picturesque **Seasons of My Heart Cooking School** and chef Pilar at La Casa de los Sabores. Two types of *mole* (*chichilo* and *negro*) are made, devoured and admired for their complexity. Along the way, we meet other travellers, all seeking something more from Mexico. Elizabeth Baird decides that it’s the ability to “buy bread at the bakery, have tacos with the locals and shop in their markets that makes you feel like a visitor rather than a tourist” in Oaxaca.

I could go on about the knife-maker, who uses 12th-century Spanish techniques to produce timeless knives, or the coal-seared meat tacos we savoured at the best street-side stand downtown, but that would be unfair. The only way to really experience the vibrancy, colour and pageantry of Oaxaca is to go there yourself. And when you sit down for a margarita in the *zócalo* and hear marimba music floating through the flower-perfumed air, have another for me! ▣