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INTRODUCTION

A vibrant melting pot of striking flavours and pungent aromas, Mexican food is known the world over for its ingredients with a kick. Tangy chiles, sour lime and floral coriander characterise many of its recipes. Yet one of its best-kept secrets is that its dishes are also innately wholesome and satisfying. This a cuisine made to feed a community; comfort food at its best.

Mexico's local staples are steeped in history, shaped by the land and the sociology of its people. Many originate from a vegetarian Aztec diet; maize was cultivated by indigenous farmers thousands of years back. In Yucatán, ancient Maya flavours live on in the oft-used ingredients of sharp lime, oranges and the notorious habanero chilli. And with arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century came domesticated animals and other ingredients, giving the nation new twists to old methods.

Today Mexico is home to one of the world's most renowned street food cultures. In Mexico City, *antojitos* (street-food bites) bestow the streets with scents of homemade salsa, rich onion and beef-topped *chalupas* and woody, blackened corn. Head to Oaxaca for a colourful street food scene with snacks like *garnachas*, originally served as

party food at *velas* (festivals). Venture to Puebla and you'll experience the city that gave birth to the chocolate and chilli *mole poblano*.

But street food can be found away from the markets too, in diners and gourmet restaurants throughout the country, where the only palpable difference is presentation. In Baja California, for example, upmarket seafood, trendy craft breweries and vineyards stretch along one of the world's largest peninsulas. Here, young chefs combine local delicacies such as lobster and fish tacos with contemporary Asian flavours. The Pacific Coast is another slice of gourmet heaven: eat on sun-soaked terraces alongside shrimp markets, sampling local fruit, herbs and edible flowers that complement exotic dishes such as fish and coconut ceviche.

Despite its regional varieties, a common element unites this cuisine across the country: a collective resourcefulness. Communities pull together preparing for fiestas, at which food is created both to feed the masses and deliver a celebratory punch. Dishes come alive in the *pueblos*, with festivities marking patron saint celebrations, weddings and birthdays – especially *quinceañeras* (15th birthday celebrations) – think warming *chiles en nogada*, pork tacos and pots of *pozole* stew.

This is a culture in which local food, full of heart and prepared with an unlikely combination of humility and pride, is king. The Mexican food experience has earned the right to its status as one of the most exciting and authentic in the world.





MEXICO CITY & CENTRAL MEXICO

The great melting pot of Mexican culture, Mexico City combines a vibrant street-food scene with the country's most celebrated haute-cuisine. Around the capital, several towns such as Guadalajara and Puebla have developed their own proudly distinctive local flavours

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SOPA SECA DE NATAS

Crepes in creamy tomato sauce

Nicos chef Gerardo Vazquez is passionate about preserving Mexico's culinary traditions and it shows in his sopa seca de natas, an exceedingly rare lasagne-like crepe dish, an intriguing marriage of Mexican and French flavours.

Chef //
Gerardo Vazquez
Location //
Nicos, Mexico City

If it weren't for Mexico City restaurant Nicos, an old French-Mexican entrée known as sopa seca de natas could well find itself in danger of extinction. Chef Gerardo Vazquez, a pioneer of Mexico's slow-food movement, simply wants to give the dish the exposure it deserves.

'I am the only one who has put sopa seca de natas in a restaurant. It's important because many Mexican recipes have faded into obscurity, they go out of style and get lost along the way.'

The recipe comes from French nuns working in the kitchen at Guadalajara's Capuchinas Convent in the mid-19th century, around the time of the French intervention in Mexico. Fast forward about six decades, as the Mexican Revolution is winding down, and Vazquez's grandmother is hired as kitchen staff, and it's there where she learns the recipe for sopa seca de natas, which she would pass along to Vazquez's mother, Nicos' founder Maria Elena Lugo.

Sopa seca de natas is essentially a tropicalised, savoury version of French-inspired crepe cakes. Poblano chile pepper slices and shredded chicken are sandwiched between layers of paper-thin crepes, then the dish is oven-baked in a creamy tomato sauce. Natas refers to the cream obtained from boiling raw milk, but mascarpone cream works as an acceptable substitute.

Architect-turned-chef Vazquez has deep respect for Mexico's culinary traditions. Thanks in part to his advocacy efforts, in 2010 Mexico became the first country ever to have its cuisine recognised by Unesco as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. Sopa seca de natas is just one of many important culinary traditions being kept alive at Nicos. Menu items also include seasonal *escamoles* (ant larva) and edible flowers, both of which have pre-Hispanic roots, and the restaurant buys some of its produce from *chinampas* (raised gardens along canals), a farming practice that dates back to the Aztec era.



SOPA SECA DE NATAS

Crepes in creamy tomato sauce

Serves 8

Preparation & cooking time 2hr 50min

For the crepes

240ml (8½fl oz) milk
5 eggs
230g (8oz) flour
butter, as needed

For the sauce

1kg (2¼lb) tomatoes
240ml (8½fl oz) cream from boiled raw
milk (or mascarpone cream)
salt, to taste

For the filling

½ chicken breast
¼ white onion
3 coriander (cilantro) sprigs
salt, to taste
4 poblano chile peppers

For baking

115g (4oz) butter, cut in small cubes

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Preheat the oven to 200°C/390°F.

To make the crepes, mix the milk, eggs and flour in a bowl, then let rest for 30 minutes.

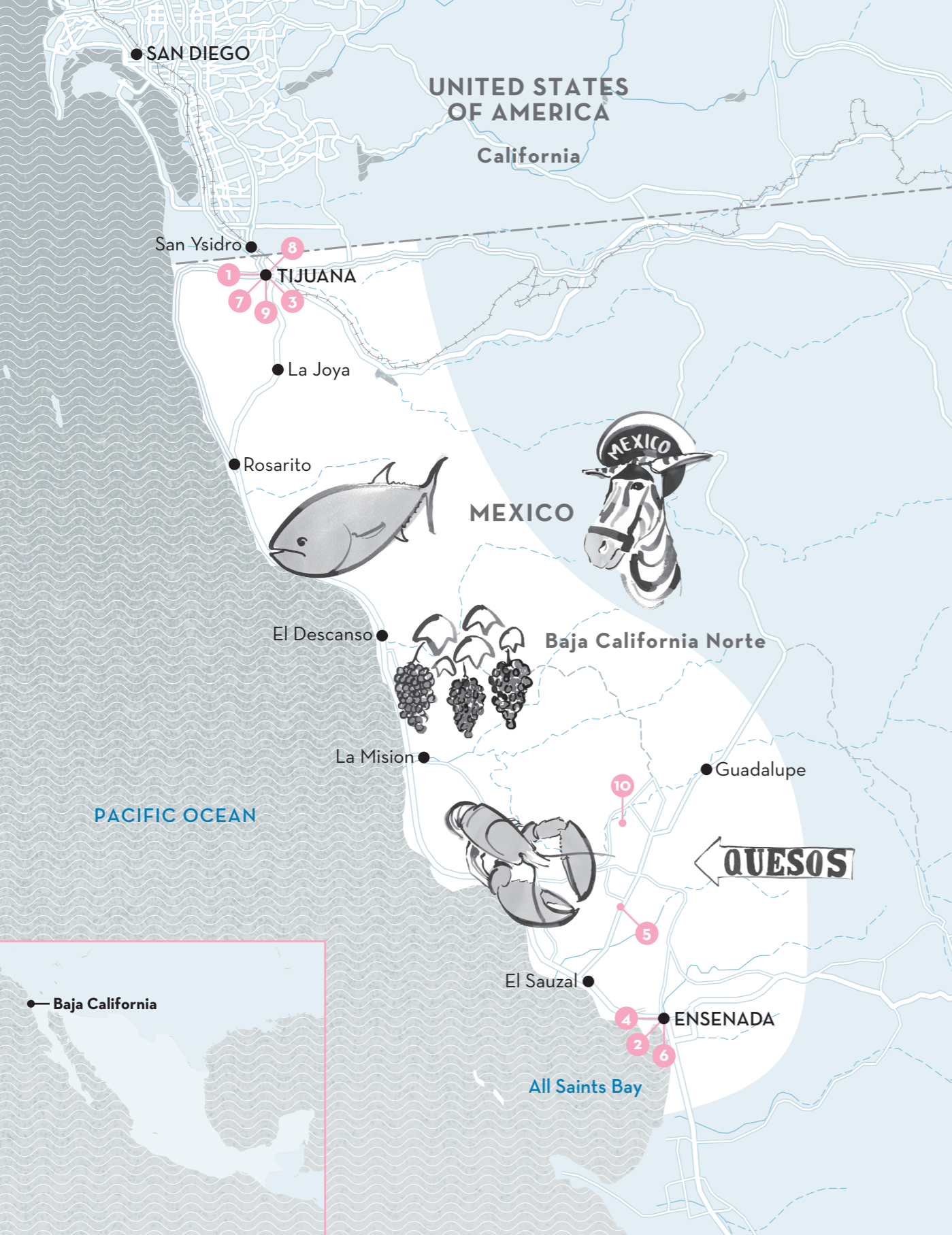
Heat a small pan with butter and pour a thin layer of batter into the pan. Cook over medium heat for one or two minutes, then flip the crepe. Repeat this process until you have no more batter. Set aside crepes in a container covered with a damp cloth.

For the sauce, boil the tomatoes until they are soft, then drain the water, blitz the tomatoes with a blender/liquidiser and strain the sauce into a pot. Over medium heat, reduce the sauce to a puree.

Blend two ladles of the tomato puree with the cream then add the rest of the puree, salt to taste and blend again. Set aside the sauce.

For the filling, boil the chicken breast for 45 minutes with the onion, coriander and salt to taste. Remove the chicken from the stock, let it cool, then shred it.





BAJA CALIFORNIA

The northernmost tip of Mexico plays host to some of the top restaurants in Latin America. Its Mediterranean climate and coastal air is prime for the vineyards of Valle de Guadalupe, which produce most of Mexico's wine

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ABOUT THE WRITERS

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