

Old World Beauty, New World Flavours



Mexico

WHERE ON EARTH

LAURA SUTHERLAND

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DON'T GET BETWEEN A Mexican chef and her *mole*. This complex sauce can be made in any number of ways but one thing is constant. To be its extraordinarily delicious self, many ingredients are required. And that's where the competition comes in. One chef we encountered rolled her eyes when she heard that we'd tasted a mole made with 35 ingredients. "Mine has 52," she sniffed, "and nine different kinds of peppers."

San Miguel de Allende

by LAURA SUTHERLAND

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD Chef Aidee with chiles en nogada; Balloon seller in the Cathedral plaza.

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT Market adies;
Fountain detail at Casa Tres
Cervezas; Casa Dragones Tequila.

«Mole (pronounced *mo-lay*) is often described as the expression of the Mexican spirit in food — spicy, earthy and passionate — concentrated into one beloved sauce. It's made for special occasions like weddings and birthdays, and mole poblano is the most famous and certainly the most common in Central Mexico, where the 500-year-old storybook city San Miguel de Allende is located.

As we sampled the mole poblano at La Cocina Restaurant, one of the stops on our San Miguel Food Tour, we learned that 52 ingredients isn't even the top. "One mole chef I know," our guide explained, "uses 85 ingredients." We didn't really care how many ingredients were in the mole we were eating — it was so good that we practically licked our plates while we listened and learned.

That brings me to another important lesson. No matter where you travel, always book a food tour for your first day. There's no better way to absorb the history of a place than in a cozy café sampling *sopa de tortilla* or *cochinta pibil*. You'll get the lay of the land and hear about noteworthy architecture and residents, and you'll be surprised how much your memory improves when local indulgences like dulce de leche-filled churros fuel your brain.

San Miguel de Allende's historical centre, where we were walking and tasting, hasn't really changed much in centuries. Its narrow cobblestone streets and tall, spice-coloured walls are still punctuated with thick wooden doors that open to reveal hidden courtyards and lavish gardens. The shady town square with its Mexican-Gothic cathedral is edged in sidewalk cafés and resonates with mariachi music night and day. In 2008 the United Nations decreed the city a World Heritage Site, forever preserving its romantic, Spanish colonial glory.

San Miguel has been an art centre for half a century, but in recent years it's also become a gastronomic destination



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**...Rooftop bars and
restaurants are
popular in San Miguel
for good reason...**

where Mexican celebrity chefs have opened restaurants and innovative local chefs offer new perspectives on traditional Mexican comfort foods. Everyone takes advantage of the region's plentiful agricultural bounty.

To get a sense of what is grown in the neighbourhood, we wandered into the Mercado and marvelled at the rows of papery-husked tomatillos, cactus leaves the size of ping pong paddles and endless varieties of peppers waiting to be transformed into something delicious. We bought ears of freshly grilled corn coated with chile powder and lime juice, and with pleasantly burning lips, we cruised the adjacent Artisan's Market admiring colourful woven tablecloths, brightly painted pottery and shiny silver jewellery.

The street tacos in the Mercado looked appealing, but we'd heard that the jicama tacos at popular La Azotea had an almost cultish following. Here, a thin round of jicama cradles the savoury ingredients instead of a corn tortilla and adds a snappy crispness. The hunt for unusual tacos took us next to Taco Lab in Doce 18, an historic building that houses a collection of boutiques, tasting rooms, gourmet shops, restaurants and cafés, where that day's taco contained spicy potatoes in a warm salsa slurry. Chef Donnie Masterton also runs The Restaurant, and the fancy dinner we had there later in the week featured Latin-inspired dishes like rib-eye with chimichurri sauce.»



LAURA SUTHERLAND



LA FOODIE

MEXICO

Cook &

SERVES 4-6

Guacamole

GUACAMOLE IS THE perfect accompaniment to almost any Mexican dish. Remember when making this recipe to hold off cutting the avocados until the last minute. You can chop the other ingredients a few hours in advance, but saving the avocados will make quite a difference in the flavour and colour.

Avocados 3 ripe, preferably Hass¹

White Onion

Roma Tomato²
1, finely chopped

Serrano Chiles
1-2, vein removed, seeded and minced

Cilantro
chopped, 2 Tbs

Lime 1, juiced

Salt ½ tsp or to taste

1 CUT the avocados in half and remove the pits. Scoop the flesh into a bowl and mash with fork until the mixture is somewhat smooth.

2 STIR in all other ingredients.

3 GARNISH with diced tomatoes, chopped parsley or pomegranate seeds.

¹Most avocados purchased in supermarkets are too firm for guacamole. Buy them a few days ahead of time and let them sit unrefrigerated until they are soft and ready to use. Hass avocados are recommended because their ample flesh darkens slower than other varieties.

²Or an apple and a pear, or peaches or plum, depending on season.

Recipe courtesy of La Cocina Cooking School, San Miguel de Allende.



MEXICO

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ALEANDRO

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD
CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT Modern
chefs put a new spin on
traditional foods;
Buying corn in the
market; A decorated
doorway; Local
handicrafts;
Cobblestone streets
add to the city's
historic charm.



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«To experience how top Mexican chefs are pushing culinary boundaries, we dined at Aperi, where *Chopped Mexico* finalist Matteo Salas is at the helm. We opted for the five-course tasting menu and felt like we were in a magician's theater when our waiter lifted a smoke-filled glass dome to reveal one of their signature side dishes — superbly flavourful smoked beets.

Chef Salas' more casual restaurant, Jacinto 1930, features innovative takes on traditional Mexican main course dishes, like pork with black *chichilo* (another spin on mole), green beans and pumpkin. But the cactus leaf salad with tortilla wontons and pepita and cilantro purée was so dazzling that I skipped dessert and ordered a second salad instead.

Another celebrity chef, Enrique Olvera, runs Moxi in sleek and sexy Hotel Matilda. Of course we ordered the beef with dark, rich, chocolatey mole, and thought the squash blossom risotto had the perfect peppery kick. Like many other fine restaurants in San Miguel, Moxi features the best of the emerging wine scene in Mexico.

There are plenty of beautiful hotels in town, but we headquartered at Casa Tres Cervezas, an art-filled private rental home with a pool and a glamorous rooftop patio and bar. I'd tasted Mexico's national dish, voluptuous chiles en nogada, at a café nearby and was so taken that I asked the Casa's private chef Aidee if she knew how to make it. "Of course," she said, looking at me like I'd asked if she knew how to toast bread — and offered to show me how.

She assembled and cooked the dish's lavish filling — finely chopped meats, chile, apples, peaches, raisins, pecans, almonds, roasted tomatoes, onion, garlic, cinnamon, spices, blue cheese (her signature) and more, spooned it into roasted green poblano chiles, covered them in a sumptuous walnut cream sauce and sprinkled pomegranate seeds over the top. The red, white and green of the dish are the colours of the Mexican flag. It's showstopper beautiful and a masterpiece of sweet and savoury.

I had another chance to make chiles en nogada when I took a class at La Cocina Cooking School, led by 30-year San Miguel resident Kris Rudolph. Her encyclopedic knowledge of Mexican food »



KATIE BORDER

MEXICO

Cook
to

SERVES 4-6

Mole Poblano *for Beginners*

A FASTER, EASIER version.

Dried Ancho Chiles

3 oz, about 6 medium

Sesame Seeds ½ Tbs

Blanched, Slivered Almonds 3 Tbs

Raisins 2 Tbs

White Onion chopped, 1 cup

Cinnamon ½ tsp

Dried Oregano ½ tsp

Chicken Broth 2-3 cups

Lard or Olive Oil 3 Tbs

Sugar 1 tsp

Salt ½ tsp

Mexican Chocolate very finely chopped, 2 Tbs

- 1 HEAT** a skillet over medium heat and toast the chiles for 20-30 seconds on both sides until they become soft and fragrant but do not allow them to scorch. Remove and discard the stems and seeds. Tear or cut the chiles into small pieces, place in a bowl and cover with very hot water for 30 minutes. Drain and put in a food processor.
- 2 WHILE** the chiles are soaking, toast the sesame seeds in a skillet over medium heat until barely golden brown. Add them to the food processor, along with the almonds, raisins, onion, cinnamon, oregano and a half cup of chicken broth. Process for two minutes, then transfer to a blender and blend for two minutes more, adding broth if it gets

too sticky. If the mixture is not totally smooth, put it through a strainer to remove any bits of remaining chile skin.

- 3 HEAT** the lard or oil in a medium-sized pot over medium heat, add the mole paste and cook, stirring constantly, until most of the liquid has evaporated and it becomes shiny. Then, little by little, stir in the rest of the broth and add the sugar. At this point, the mixture will be thinner than you want the finished product to be. Add more broth a little at a time if necessary. Simmer the mole until it is the consistency of a milk shake, about 15 minutes. Stir in the salt and chocolate. Serve over cooked chicken, turkey or pork.




«kept us entertained and informed as we spent a busy afternoon stuffing chiles with several different fillings and constructing a dangerously rich pastel de tres leches, or three-milk cake for dessert.

Rooftop bars and restaurants are popular in San Miguel for good reason, especially at night when the city's old buildings sparkle and glow and the soaring spires of the cathedral gleam against the sky. The views from Luna, the Rosewood's rooftop bar, and Quince, a relative newcomer, are perfect for pre-dinner cocktails. For a long view of the city, head to Zumo Restaurant at sunset to admire the sun's last rays colouring San Miguel's historic skyline.

Tequila is still king in Mexico, so we had to try the award-winning tequila at Casa Dragones in Doce18, where we perched on stools in a tiny tasting room wallpapered in thin sheets of obsidian mined from the brand's blue agave fields.

Casa Dragones was started by the founder of MTV, who hired one of the most accomplished tequila masters in the business to craft this exceptional spirit. We sipped the fiercely smooth and silky beverage while we learned that tequila is as highly regulated as champagne and like wine, it reflects where and how it was produced.

When we weren't eating and drinking, we wandered the streets stopping in art galleries, museums, chic shops and colourful folk art boutiques. Of course we walked everywhere so we could enjoy the city's old-world beauty and stumble upon new discoveries... and work up an appetite for our next exceptional meal. 

Visit
to

Aperi Restaurant
www.aperi.mx/en

La Azotea
www.facebook.com/pages/La-Azotea/178942275484147

Casa Dragones Tequila
www.casadragones.com

Casa Tres Cervezas
www.trescervezas.com

Doce18
www.doce-18.com

Jacinto 1930
www.jacinto1930.mx

La Cocina Cooking School
www.mexicocooks.com

Luna
www.rosewoodhotels.com/en/san-miguel-de-allende

Moxi
www.moxi.com.mx

Quince
www.quincerooftop.com

The Restaurant
www.therestaurantsanmiguel.com

San Miguel Food Tours
www.sanmiguelfoodtours.com

Taco Lab
www.tacolabsma.com

Zuma
www.zumosma.com

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MEXICO

PHOTOS THIS PAGE FROM TOP
Roasting corn; La Parroquia
Cathedral; Mexican chocolate; Fresh
produce displayed in the market.

JOHNNY LAI

