

Ric's Picks

An American Ex-Pat's Guide to THE BEST FOOD & DRINK IN COZUMEL

Want the inside info on where the locals eat? Want to try something new, but want to know a little about it before you do? Want the best bang for your buck, without sacrificing quality? Tired of being herded into the "tourist" restaurants by their touts?

Well then, this guide is for you. For years, I have watched restaurants come and go on the island and have noted that my favorites are still here and going strong. Why? Great food at good prices. A guy standing in front of a fancy restaurant in a funny sombrero holding a menu open is not necessarily the best indication of a great restaurant. Take it from me, there are many fantastic local restaurants in town that serve food you'll want to write home about.

Also included are a few pages on Quintana Roo's regional dishes, drinks, and culinary traditions. Take a few minutes a browse through them. You'll surely find something you've never tried, but once you do, you'll tell all your friends about how you now know one of the insiders' secrets of Cozumel.

¡Buen Provecho!

Bon Appétit!

Enjoy!

Pescadería San Carlos

This family owned restaurant is presided over by Juan Diego, who makes it his job to insure every one of his clients are happy. Diego worked on a shrimp boat for a while in Louisiana, and it was there that he learned the three things Americans prize in seafood: Freshness, Freshness, and Freshness! His meals come with a complimentary serving of what is undoubtedly the best *ceviche* on the island. The kitchen is open for everyone to see the way the cooks turn out the delectable, whole, fried fish that the restaurant is famous for. Most of his Cozumeleño clients order the fish for take-out, but he has a dozen or so tables in the back patio where the service is fast and super friendly. Every Sunday his brother, Simon, plays music with his island band in the patio for a real family-oriented day. They are a little off the beaten track: drive east on Avenida Juarez to Calle 55 (Casa Mission is on the corner) and turn right. Go down two blocks to Calle 3 and turn right again. Turn right onto Calle 50 at the next corner and they are in the middle of the block on the east side of the street. They're closed on Mondays.

Los Moros

Los Moros is the "new" location (they moved to this spot in 1987) of the old, venerable, Tortas Moros that reigned over the corner of Juarez and 10th Avenue for many years as an island institution. They still

serve the very best *tortas* (hot sandwiches served on a large bread-roll) in Cozumel, which are great for taking with you to the beach, or eating at their off-the-beaten-track location at Av. 75 Bis between Calles 2 and 4. It is well worth the detour into the “inside” of San Miguel to try the traditional *Frijol con Puerco* (a meal served only at lunch on Mondays, as is the custom in the Yucatan) or their *Queso Relleno*, *Relleno Negro*, or any one of the other of the dozens of items on their menu. It will take you half an hour just to read it all! Impeccable service from a staff that is comprised of both family and employees that have been with them so long they are family now as well. 1PM until 11PM, closed Thursdays.

Las Palmeras

Yes, it looks like a tourist restaurant. Yes, it has a guy out front waving a menu. But, you know what? Mimi and Pepe Beccera’s Las Palmeras Restaurant at the foot of the municipal pier on the waterfront’s *malecon* has been an island fixture for over 40 years. Where else can you get a ringside seat to all the comings and goings of islanders, travelers, ferry passengers, cruise shippers, *taxistas* and carriage drivers? Keep your table long enough and you will see nearly everybody from Cozumel pass by at least once. Try their *bistek tampiqueña*, it will melt in your mouth.

El Super Hit

El Super Hit Taqueria (on Av. Pedro Joaquín Coldwell at Calle Adolfo Rosado Salas) started out 40 years ago at the entrance of the Rojo Gomez baseball stadium as a weekend-only taco stand that served only *cochinita pibil*, that wonderful, melt-in-your-mouth, bitter-orange-marinated, roasted pig that is a staple in the Mayan diet. Over the years, the small stand evolved into a permanent restaurant, serving much more than the *cochinita*; *puerco asado* (oven-roasted suckling pig), *pollo en escabeche* (marinated chicken) and all manner of tacos, *tortas*, and other local delicacies fill out their menu today. If you want some of their delicious roast pig or *cochinita pibil* to go, they sell it very reasonably by the kilo for take-out.

Restaurante Santa María (in the Municipal Market)

I remember the days when, if you wanted ethnic food in Cozumel, you had to wait until Mini-Lenny’s made their weekly chop-suey. With the advent of the cruise-ship industry on Cozumel, several restaurants have sprung up to serve authentic Filipino and Indonesian food to the ships’ crews. Restaurante Santa María is one of the best. It is the restaurant on the corner of Salas and Av. 20, in the new section, at the very corner of the street, with parking-lot parking right in front. Restaurateur Jorge Merino will see that you understand the various exotic-sounding dishes that I find heavenly. Try the *Halabos Hipon* (shrimp in a sauce worthy of a five-star Michelin restaurant) or *Bakwan Udang* (shrimp fritters with a spicy dipping sauce). 8AM to 4PM, Monday through Saturday.

ParriPollo

For the very best charcoal-grilled chicken on the island, you gotta go to **ParriPollo** at Av. Pedro Joaquín Coldwell and Calle Rosado Salas. Chicken is all they do. Whole, half or quarter, are the only choices you get. Over thirty years in the same location, these folks have been turning out the least expensive, highest quality *pollo asado* you ever sunk your teeth into. Take out only. It’s ‘*para chuparse los dedos!*’ (finger-licking good!) Open 9 AM to 6 PM, daily.

La Candela

A newcomer to the restaurant game, La Candela opened in 2004, then moved to its present location at the corner of Calle 6 and Av. 5. They are open 8AM until 6PM daily except Sundays. Their daily lunch

The US has lemonade. In Quintana Roo, we have lemonade, limeade, orangeade, watermelon-ade, guanabana-ade, and many other varieties. They can be made with either *agua natural* (still water) or *agua mineral* (sparkling water). A few of the many flavors are:

Barley (<i>Cebada</i>)	Watermelon (<i>Sandia</i>)
Key lime (<i>Limonada</i>)	Peach (<i>Melocoton</i>)
Tamarind seed (<i>Tamarindo</i>)	Hibiscus flower (<i>Jamaica</i>)
Orange (<i>Naranja</i>)	Cantalope (<i>Melon</i>)
Soursop (<i>Guanábana</i>)	Cherry (<i>Cereza</i>)
Peach (<i>Durazno</i>)	

Many of these same flavors can be had as *licuados*, a drink made from chunks of fruit (not just the juice) blended with water and sugar in a blender and served over ice cubes. They can also be made with milk (*Licuados con leche*). The US has milkshakes. In Quintana Roo, we have *licuados con leche*. These thin, but refreshing, milkshakes come in several flavors:

Banana (<i>Platano</i>)	Strawberry (<i>Fresa</i>)
Cantalope (<i>Melon</i>)	Peach (<i>Durazno</i>)
Avocado (no kidding!)	

Horchata is a traditional, sweet, milky-white drink made from rice, almonds, sugar, and cinnamon.

Agua de coco is the clear, refreshing liquid found inside the '*pipa*,' or immature coconut, often advertised as *coco frio*. It is absolutely nothing like the canned 'coconut milk' in stores.

Alcoholic beverages

Xtabentun is a local alcoholic bottled beverage that is made from honey (traditionally from honey made by the wild, stingless bee of Yucatan), anise, and rum. A very nice digestive.

Michelada is a new arrival from the North of Mexico, a cold beer served with salt, lemon and *salzon* (sometimes the *salzon* is soy-sauce based, sometimes Lea&Perins, and sometimes Maggie sauce)

Seafood cocktails

A *cocktel* is a seafood cocktail appetizer made with your choice of seafood, and a tomato-based sauce similar to 'cocktail sauce.'

Ceviche is seafood marinated in lime juice, cilantro, onions, and tomatoes

Octopus (<i>Pulpo</i>)	Fish (<i>Pescado</i>)
Conch (<i>Caracol</i>)	Shrimp (<i>Camaron</i>)
All of the above (<i>Mixto</i>)	

Vuelve a la Vida is a cocktail made of raw oysters, shrimp, octopus, and their juices, which is purportedly good for hangovers.

Soups (*sopas*)

Sopa de Pescado is fish soup.

Sopa de Mariscos is seafood soup

Puchera is a hearty soup of vegies and beef, pork, and chicken

Potaje de Lentejas is a soup of lentils, bacon, and sausage.

Sopa de Lima is lime soup (made with chicken, chicken broth, lime juice, & tortilla crisps)

Crema de Frijol is slow-cooked black beans with herbs mashed and strained to make a creamy soup.

Caldo Xochitl is a chicken-broth based soup with shredded chicken, avocado, onions, tomatoes, rice, and cilantro)

Fish (*Pescado*)

Frito means fried

Entero means whole

Filete means filet

Sopa de Pescado means fish soup

a la Veracruzana means cooked in a tomato, onion, and olive sauce

Empanizado means breaded

Tikinxic is traditionally a fish (usually barracuda) split lengthwise, marinated in *achiote* (annatto) and lime juice, and grilled over an open fire. Today, it can be any kind of fish marinated in *achiote* and lime juice and baked in a banana leaf.

Huachinango is red snapper

Pargo is snapper

Robalo is Snook

Lisa is mullet

Pez leon is Lion-fish

Anchoa is anchovy

Tiburón, cazon, both mean shark

Mero is grouper

Jurel is horse mackerel

Pulpo is octopus

Calamar is squid

Cangrejo, jaiba mean crab

Camaron, gambas mean shrimp

Pez espada is swordfish

Langosta is spiny lobster

Boquinete is hog fish

Boquilla is white grunt

Chac Chi (red mouth, in Mayan) is a French grunt

Pork (*puerco*)

Poc-chuc is thinly sliced pork, marinated and grilled, served with roasted tomatoes and pickled onions.

Frijol con Puerco are black beans, pork, *epazote*, and onions, stewed together for hours

Chicharon is crispy, fried-out pork skin

Asado means roasted

Lechon means suckling pig

Cochinita Pibil is a whole baby pig, slow baked (originally underground) with bitter orange juice

Lechon asado is a whole, oven-roasted, suckling pig

Beef (*res*)

Rojo means rare

Media, or *a su punto* means medium rare

tres cuartos means medium

bien means well done

Chicken (*pollo*)

al Carbon means charcoal grilled

Mole is a chocolate, sesame, peanut, and pepper sauce

Relleno Negro is a black blend of spices (called *chimole*) is used to make a broth in which a chicken (more traditionally, a turkey or *pavo*) is slow cooked.

en Escabeche is a way to serve marinated or pickled chicken along with the cooked marinade

Pollo Pibil is chicken basted in *achiote* and bitter orange and baked in a banana leaf

Tortillas

The traditional *tortilla* in Cozumel is a small corn tortilla, but these days many places also have flour tortillas for the immigrants from Central and Northern Mexico. This little, round, ground-corn flat-bread is the building block of many of Cozumel's most treasured foods. It is served by the stack with most traditional meals to use as a pusher, sop, taco-wrapper, or just to eat as an accompaniment to the meal. When cut into triangles and fried into crisp chips, they're called *totopos*.

Tortillas used in snacks or as part of the main dish

Salbutes

Take a fat corn tortilla, fry it until it puffs up, add shredded roast chicken, lettuce, onion, tomato, avocado, and a slice of jalapeño and you got a great snack called a *salbute*.

Panuchos

Take a flat, crispy, fried corn tortilla, top it with shredded roast chicken, black beans, tomato, lettuce, and avocado, and you got a *panucho*.

Papadzules

A corn tortilla, soaked in a thick chicken and pumpkin seed broth, wrapped around a stuffing of chopped, hard-boiled eggs and covered with the same thick broth used to soak the tortilla.

Tacos

A meat filling wrapped up in a corn tortilla. In Cozumel, all tacos are soft ones.

Enchiladas

Just like the ones in the US, but never made with that dark, chili gravy so popular in Tex-Mex cooking. They can come in one of 4 varieties:

Suizas = chicken, tomato sauce, and sour cream

Rojo = chicken, covered in red chile sauce

Verde = chicken, covered in green chile sauce

Mole = chicken, covered in mole sauce.

Sincronizadas

A hot ham and cheese sandwich made with tortillas instead of bread.

Quesadillas

Tuck some fresh cheese into a doubled-over tortilla and grill until the cheese melts and you've got a *quesadilla*. Shredded, roasted chicken, or fried *chorizo* can also be added to these little snacks.

Tamales

The word *tamales* is the Spanish plural of *tamal*. Only Americans call one *tamal* a tamale. The *masa* (ground cornmeal and fat) used to make tortillas is also used to envelope a variety of fillings and steamed in a banana leaf to make *tamales (de puerco or de pollo)*. Sometimes cinnamon and sugar is added to the *masa* to make a dessert *tamal*.

Note: In Spain, a *tortilla* is an egg and potato omelet. These are now being served in some Mexican restaurants now under the name *Tortilla Española*, not be confused with a Mexican *tortilla*.

Eggs (*huevos*) are served in a bunch of different ways here. Some of the most popular ways are:

Huevos Motuleños

A crisp, fried tortilla is overlaid with a fried egg, tomato sauce, ham, cheese, green peas, refried black beans and a fried, ripe banana

Huevos Rancheros

A fried egg on a soft tortilla, *cotija* cheese, with a spicy tomato sauce on top

Chilaquiles

Scrambled eggs with tortilla shreds and *chorizo*.

Migas are also scrambled eggs with pieces of old bread or tortillas.

Revueltos are Scrambled eggs

con Longaniza = smoked pork sausage lightly flavored w/ paprika

con Chorizo = pork sausage heavily flavored with paprika

Estrellados means sunny side up

Volteadas means over

Huevo cocido or *duro* is a hard-boiled egg. *Huevo tibio* means soft-boiled egg.

Some other recipes you should try while visiting Cozumel are:

Queso Relleno

A whole round of Edam cheese, hollowed out and stuffed with ground pork, and then baked in a creamy sauce studded with raisins, capers, green olives and onions.

Relleno Negro

A chicken (traditionally, a turkey) is slow cooked in a broth made with concoction of burnt chiles and spices.

Frijol con Puerco

Black beans, chunks of pork, and Mayan herbs are slow cooked in chicken broth for many hours, then the soup is de-constructed and each ingredient served separately; beans, broth, and pork all go in their own dishes. Garnished with cilantro, chopped radish, minced onion, each diner then re-mixes the ingredients with steamed white rice into his own, personal blend, in his own plate.

Helado de Elote

Fresh corn ice cream. Try it. You'll like it!

Xnipec

A very hot salsa made with *habaño* peppers. The word means 'dog's nose' in Mayan, because it makes your nose run (your eyes will, too!)

Fruits you may be unfamiliar with, but should try:

Guanabana is sour-sop, in English

Naranja agria or sour-orange (for cooking only!)

Pitaya or Dragon fruit, a spectacular hot-pink and green fruit with a sweet white center speckled with tiny black seeds.

Mamay is a football-shaped fruit with a brick-red meat. Very tasty.

Chico Sapote is the fruit of the tree that makes *chicle*, the sap once used for chewing gum. Like a pear sprinkled with cinnamon!

Vegetables

Esquites are corn kernels served in a cup with mayonnaise, and other toppings like powdered chile.

Jicama (large tuber or root, tastes similar to water chestnut)

Nopales (cactus pads) A friend of mine calls this "industrial snot," similar to okra.

Chaya is a plant leaf found in the Yucatan that is used as a flavoring ingredient in soups, casseroles, deserts, and drinks.