

FLAN DE CAMOTE, FRIDA RESTAURANT, GRAND VELAS RIVIERA MAYA



MEXICO SERVES UP CULINARY DELIGHTS FOR SOPHISTICATED TRAVELERS

# Eat, drink. + enjoy

BY STACEY ZABLE



LA CANOA RESTAURANT, ZOETRY PARAISO DE LA BONITA

“MEXICO’S CUISINE IS SO REFINED, FRESH, COMPLEX AND DELICIOUS. SOPHISTICATED TRAVELERS WILL FIND A TREMENDOUS MENU OF CHOICES.”

—Tanya Steel, editor-in-chief, Gourmet.com, Gourmet Live and Epicurious.com



LA CAVA, ROSEWOOD SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

CULINARY LESSON, LAS VENTANAS AL PARAISO



GUAYCURA CEVICHE, LOS CABOS

## COOK IT UP

Culinary activities are an ideal hook for selling Mexico to sophisticated clients, including first time and repeat visitors.

“By developing and promoting cooking classes, food and wine festivals, and gourmet restaurants, Mexico can give prior affluent visitors a new reason for returning to Mexico for a vacation,” said Ron Kurtz, president of American Affluence Research Center in Alpharetta, Ga. “For potential first-time visitors, such activities can be targeted to attract a specific market segment to visit Mexico.”

Agents who are Mexico sales specialists emphasized the value of having personal contacts in Mexico to create unique culinary experiences for their upscale travelers.

Jewell Edney Ramos, CTC, travel consultant/Mexico specialist for AAA Vacations in Hendersonville, N.C., uses her contacts in Mexico to arrange dinners and meetings for her clients with famous chefs. She also has a recommended restaurant list for most towns in Mexico.

Meg Austin, owner of Meg2bookLLC in Denver, also uses her on-site contacts to help create the right culinary experience for her luxury clients.

“A concierge can be so enthusiastically helpful, especially when you explain what you want is all about the authenticity of the destination,” she said. “I also have been known to email the district sales manager and/or the general manager of a property for ideas and suggestions, either on or off property.”

Austin has arranged a variety of culinary experiences for her clients in Mexico, including setting up individual cooking classes at John Gray’s Kitchen in Puerto Moreles. The key to success, she said, is all in the details.

“Setting up a cooking class needs to be on a case-to-case basis,” Austin said. “You need to find out what the client wants to do (not what you think the client wants to do). Many times the client is not sure, so offering options and suggestions are key and listening to their answer is imperative. Then making it happen should be the easy part.”

A superior culinary experience is generally on the short list of must-have factors for upscale travelers, and those who travel to Mexico will not be disappointed. An array of celebrity chefs, award-winning restaurants, authentic cultural experiences around food, cooking classes, food and wine festivals and a UNESCO designation for its national cuisine have made Mexico a top destination for dedicated upscale “foodies.”

“In general, the culinary factor is a hugely important draw for luxury travelers and is seen more and more as a worthwhile marketing tool to develop upscale business,” said Peter J. Bates, president and founder of Strategic Vision in Tarrytown, N.Y. “Whether it’s a celebrity chef, creative cocktails infused with local ingredients, or indigenous cooking, experiencing local gastronomy is high on the preference list for today’s experiential-seeking luxury consumer.”

Mark Oldman, an award-winning author and one of the leading wine personalities in the U.S., sees food and wine as “arguably the major draw” for upscale travelers, with many “building itineraries around special restaurants, winery visits, cooking classes, wine seminars, and authentic experiences such as foraging in local markets.” Within that context, Oldman said Mexico has “emerged as a culinary force to be reckoned with.”

Mexico is “renowned as one of the world’s great culinary destinations,” commented Tanya Steel, editor-in-chief of Gourmet.com, Gourmet Live and Epicurious.com. “Mexico’s cuisine is so refined, fresh, complex and delicious. Sophisticated travelers will find a tremendous menu of choices, whether they are in a taqueria in Mexico City or trying a *molé* in Oaxaca. Chefs from every corner of the globe have moved to Mexico because of the exceptional produce and fish.”

Gastronomy is a key area of focus for the destination and an important ingredient in the diversity of Mexico’s tourism offerings, said Alfonso Sumano Lazcano, director of the Americas for the Mexico Tourism Board for North America.

“In Mexico we are very proud of our cuisine; it is rich and diverse, reflecting Mexico’s landscape, culture and history,” he said. “Travelers to Mexico will find a fantastic range of culinary experiences on offer from world renowned fine dining restaurants in Mexico City to vibrant markets in colonial towns.”

Sumano proudly noted that Mexican cuisine was placed in on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list in 2010; that designation recognized culinary traditions passed down from generation to generation in the state of Michoacán. Mexico is one of only three countries to receive this designation.

Mexico’s wine industry, particularly in the Baja region, is also an emerging force in its culinary appeal. Jay Meyer, vice president/associate publisher for *Food & Wine* magazine, lists Santo Tomas—a family owned winery near Ensenada that has been in existence for more than 120 years—as one of his favorites. Meyer also has high praise for Mezcal, a Mexican spirit that he describes as “the smoky smooth cousin to Tequila.”

Most upscale resorts and properties in Mexico feature local wines and spirits in restaurants and bars.

## RESORT OFFERINGS

Resorts and destinations throughout Mexico—including the beach destinations of Los Cabos, Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Riviera Maya, Cancun and Riviera Nayarit, as well as major city centers such as Mexico City—are recognizing the importance of culinary experiences to visitors, especially for upscale travelers.

Meliá Hotels International “achieved a major milestone for the brand” through a →



## CULINARY DELIGHTS

eat, drink & enjoy



COOKING CLASS,  
CAPELLA PEDREGAL  
RESORT

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new partnership with Martin Berasategui, the Basque chef whose restaurants have earned an array of Michelin stars, according to CEO Gabriel Escarrer. Berasategui opened his first restaurant in North America in December 2011 at the Paradisus Playa del Carmen, which Escarrer described as a luxury all-inclusive resort.

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Canoe also includes a private dining room with a 5,000-bottle wine cellar. Three gourmet restaurants and 24-hour in-room private dining are featured at Zoëtry Casa del Mar.

Rosewood Hotels & Resorts, which has properties in Los Cabos, Riviera Maya and outside of Mexico City, caters to the luxury traveler “with passionate attention to detail, authenticity, and by creating exposure to rather unusual ingredients, like cactus, chilies, pre-Hispanic ingredients and more,” said Robert Boulogne, COO of Rosewood. “The connection to the culture and history of Mexico is explained to the guest.”

Rosewood also has an extensive Mexican wine program in place, inviting regional growers to showcase their products and creating tailor-made menus to suit the specific wines.

Restaurants outside the resorts are also catering to the upscale client. At Ecole de Cuisine LeFort in Bucarias, Nayarit, near Puerto Vallarta, guests can enjoy the ‘Ultimate Dining’ experience described by co-owner Margarita LeFort as “going for dinner at the chef’s house where people are attended to personally.”

For Velas Resorts—which has upscale properties in Riviera Maya, Riviera Nayarit and Puerto Vallarta—cuisine is such a major selling point that it is launching a website exclusively dedicated to its culinary offerings. Although Velas Resorts are all-inclusive properties, the resorts’ international restaurants are open to outside guests. Its restaurants have won numerous awards, including *Food & Wine* magazine’s Top 100 Best New Food & Beverage Experiences. The Frida, Lucca & Piaf restaurants in Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit have all earned an AAA Four Diamond rating.

Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita’s La Canoa restaurant also has been rated with Four Diamonds from AAA. The formal restaurant’s “la cuisine de los Soles®” features a fusion of styles using the spices and chilies of several warm weather countries. La

## TASTY OPTIONS

**D**ining is not the only culinary offering in Mexico that will appeal to the luxury traveler’s quest for authentic, immersive experiences. Upscale resorts are developing participatory experiences that enable visitors to get acquainted with Mexico’s local and regional cuisines through cooking classes and workshops, seminars, tasting menus, interaction with chefs and sommeliers, and more.

Here’s a sampling of what’s available:

- Velas Resorts offers wine and food pairing dinners, cooking classes for children and families, wine and cheese tequila tastings, and food/spa sensory workshops that feature four-course tasting menus.
- The recently opened One&Only Herb Garden at One&Only Palmilla features a state-of-the-art outdoor kitchen that’s the venue for weekly complimentary culinary seminars and Iron Chef style cook-offs led by on-site executive chefs and visiting chefs from surrounding regions in Mexico.
- Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita Riviera Maya and Zoëtry Casa del Mar Los Cabos both offer wine tastings and culinary classes as part of the brand’s Endless Privileges concept. The Casa del Mar property also includes cocktail lessons.
- Many upscale Los Cabos properties offer cooking classes, including: Capella Pedregal; Las Ventanas al Paraiso, A Rosewood Resort; Pueblo Bonito Sunset Beach Resort & Spa; The Westin Resort & Spa; and the Grand Solmar Land’s End Resort & Spa.
- In addition to group and private cooking classes and a tequila class, Las Ventanas al Paraiso offers a ‘Men in White’ program where a guest cooks for his wife, and a ‘Challenge the Chef’ program, where the guest cooks for the chef.
- Guests at Rosewood San Miguel de Allende can participate in cooking classes, organic farm tours, and tasting menus featuring local and artisan products.
- A unique experience at Xcaret eco-archaeological park in the Riviera Maya is a gourmet food and (Mexican) wine pairing tasting at the park’s wine cellar cave, Vino de México Xcaret.
- Hacienda Tres Rios Resort, Spa & Nature Park in Riviera Maya offers cocktail lessons, tequila tastings and sushi lessons. Guests can also watch the chef prepare meals using natural ingredients and special techniques during a Cocina Natura presentation.



LA FRIDA  
RESTAURANT,  
GRAN VELAS  
RIVIERA  
NAYARIT

celebrity snippet

### MARIO LOPEZ: WALK AND A TALK



Mario Lopez, host of TV’s *Extra* entertainment news show, popped the question to Courtney Mazza in Ixtapa over this past New Year’s weekend. Lopez proposed (and Mazza accepted) during a solitary walk, just as the sun was setting.

Source: [www.usmagazine.com](http://www.usmagazine.com)