

Along the Gulf Coast of central Mexico lies a region steeped in history, fed by the sea and forest, and modernized by a new generation of chefs. MICHAEL SNYDER embarks on an epic road trip to unearth one of the most exciting food scenes in the country—and discovers there is simply no place like...

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The Santuario de la Virgen de la Candelaria, a Catholic church in the town of Tlacotalpan, Mexico. Opposite: A musician at Yambigapan, a homestay in southern Veracruz.




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EACH MAY, WHEN the first peals of thunder rattle the cloud forests of Mexico's eastern Sierra Madre mountains, white, star-shaped blossoms known as *flor de trueno*—literally “thunder flowers”—open in dense clusters, marking the beginning of the rainy season in Veracruz. This state, a sickle of hills and beaches along the Gulf Coast, is a place of spectacular abundance year-round, brimming with coffee, vanilla, and honey. But during the summer rains, daily showers raise wild mushrooms from the forest floor and coax dozens of varieties of flowers into bloom.

“In Veracruz alone, there are 52 edible flowers. And we eat them—we don't decorate with them,” said Raquel Torres Cerdán, a 72-year-old anthropologist, cookbook author, and onetime restaurateur, on the balmy April afternoon we met at her home in Xalapa, Veracruz's state capital. For the past six years, she has used her kitchen to offer workshops focused on the food of her home state, a subject she has studied for more than 40 years.

From a young age, Torres visited the hills around Xalapa with her family, extending her travels to more distant corners of Veracruz in her twenties as an anthropology student and employee of the federal government's Rural Development Program. Though she started working in her father's restaurant at the age of 13, the diversity of ingredients she encountered in those later trips came as a shock. They reflected not only the wide range of fruits and vegetables, seafood, and wild game in Veracruz, but also the cultures and rituals that have flourished there for three millennia, beginning with the Olmecs, the first major civilization of Mesoamerica.

And yet, Torres says, finding expressions of that diversity outside of home kitchens has always been difficult. After she opened her second restaurant in the early 1980s in Xalapa's historic center, she scoured cookbooks from as far back as the 18th and 19th centuries—and found no recipes that required, for example, those thunder flowers, an ingredient used regularly by Veracruz's 14 Indigenous communities. “I thought, well, of course, these books were written for people who could *read*...which is to say,

for the rich,” she told me as we sat in her intimate ocher kitchen. “That's when I became preoccupied with doing something different.”

Torres had prepared a half-dozen recipes, all of them representative of the region. She had stuffed pear-green jalapeños, shiny as lacquer, with a pale-yellow mash of sweet plantains, then bathed them in a sauce of goat-milk cheese and cream. Young black beans stewed slowly in a narrow-necked clay pot with masa dumplings, sticky and supple as gnocchi. A pitcher of nectar made from wild *capulín*, an astringent stone fruit like a cross between açai and black currant, sat on the sideboard, lurid as a bruise and generously spiked with *caña*, a high-proof liquor distilled from sugarcane. For dessert Torres served a simple dish of *zapote negro*, the fruit slicked with honey and orange, its flesh black as molasses and unctuous as overripe avocado.

For all their simplicity, these dishes defied my expectations of what Veracruzano cooking could be. When I arrived the day before my lunch with Torres, my knowledge was limited to a few emblematic dishes. I'd eaten *chilpachole de jaiba*, a piquant soup made with chiles and corn and crab, ingredients native to the Sotavento, a region in the state's steaming south. I'd gorged on gorditas, corn-flour tortillas deep-fried in oil and puffed up like golden balloons. And, of course, I knew fish a



◀ Anthropologist and cookbook author Raquel Torres Cerdán in her Xalapa kitchen. Right: Torres's pork ribs with chipotle-garlic adobo, vegetables, and stewed black beans.

la veracruzana, made with pickled chiles, tomatoes, olives, and capers—ingredients with their roots in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. But these dishes, though well known elsewhere in Mexico, tell an incomplete story of Veracruz’s geographic and cultural diversity.

As we finished lunch, I asked Torres what, if anything, unified Veracruz’s culinary identity. She shook her head, smiling indulgently. “We can’t speak about a single identity in Veracruz. It’s local cultures, local cuisines, local identities,” she said. “What makes a cuisine unique is who’s cooking, not the things they cook.”

IHAD ENDED UP at Torres’s house thanks to Erik Guerrero Arias. The most prominent chef in the state, his latest restaurant, Namik, opened in early July in the city of Veracruz, known locally as El Puerto. We’d met some months earlier over coffee in Mexico City, where I’ve lived since 2016, to talk about the new project. Over the course of a long, meandering conversation, he extolled the state of Veracruz’s many virtues with an evangelical zeal. In me, he’d found an easy convert.

From the time of the Olmecs until the Spanish landed on Mexican shores in 1518, the region had supported a succession of Indigenous civilizations that left behind an artistic and archaeological record of stunning sophistication, from the colossal stone heads of the Olmecs at San Lorenzo, in the southeast, to the monuments and smiling clay dolls left by the Totonacs at El Tajín, in the state’s north. It was here that the Spanish established their first permanent settlements in Mexico, along them El Puerto, for centuries the primary entry point for migrants arriving from the east, and still one of the country’s busiest ports.

Guerrero, 38, grew up in Poza Rica, an oil town in northern Veracruz, a region rich with citrus trees and vanilla orchids. He spent his youth helping out at the family snack shop, collecting orders and distributing change while learning how to steam tamales and fry plantains. After a series of restaurant jobs in Mexico and France, he landed a career-making gig in 2011 as the executive chef of Pujol, in Mexico City, before opening his own place, the seafood-focused Dos, in El Puerto. Five years later, he started a sustainable fishing project, Nuestra Pesca (“Our Fish”), working with fishermen to improve the quality of their catch while educating cooks and consumers about the diversity of Gulf species. He met Torres shortly after, and they immediately recognized each other as kindred spirits. Guerrero invariably refers to Torres as La Maestra: the teacher, the master. Torres, for her part, treats Guerrero with the affectionate condescension of an older sister. Her jibe about the flowers? That was for his benefit.

Guerrero has not had an easy time expanding the culinary lexicon of his customers. At Dos, he told me, he and his team struggled, at first, to sell fish that most people in El Puerto had grown up seeing as *corriente*, or common—a complaint shared by his friend and colleague Abraham Guillén Arévalo, chef and owner at the high-end restaurant Mardel, which is on the beach in El Puerto. Harder still, Guerrero says, was convincing clients on the coast that products brought down from the mountains—chayote root, like a smooth-skinned celeriac; lantern-shaped *grosella*, or gooseberries; long-fingered flowers of the chocho palm—formed a part of their state’s heritage. “People were used to *pescado a la veracruzana*, their seafood cocktail, their *agua de jamaica*,” he said. “We would serve this beautiful *agua de grosella*, and they would complain. We had people get up and leave all the time.”

Inspired by Torres, Guerrero decided that, at Namik, he would build a menu to showcase ingredients and techniques that even people who grew up in Veracruz rarely have the opportunity to try. And so Guerrero and I, taking Namik’s menu as a loose guide, traveled through Veracruz’s verdant hills and riparian south, meeting and sometimes traveling with cooks and farmers, scientists and writers—all of them intent on disseminating a more complete understanding of their state’s culinary identity, creating change not through transformation but through excavation.



IN MY FIRST MORNING in Veracruz, I drove out into coffee country to meet Guerrero at Finca Sierra del Mar, an experimental farm owned by Emilio Vélez Quintero. Vélez grows coffee and corn, raises pigs and sheep, and works closely with neighboring farmers

to improve the quality and yield of their harvests. At mid-morning, the snowcapped dome of Citlatépetl, a dormant volcano, seemed to float over receding hills the color of jade as we sipped dense pulls of espresso redolent of green peppercorn and dried apricot, the coffee that Vélez serves in his shop in El Puerto. Guerrero, for his part, plans to buy not only coffee from Vélez but also fruits and vegetables and whatever else he manages to produce. “As a culture we’ve lost our capacity for symbiosis. I run a restaurant. This guy makes the coffee I serve, but if he wants to grow fruit, I’ll take what I can of that product,

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Scenes from Veracruz include, clockwise from top left, a vendor selling squash blossoms at the Mercado Unidad Veracruzana; the Catedral Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, in El Puerto; coffee tasting at Finca Sierra del Mar, an experimental farm; fried fish fins, salsa verde with avocado, and salsa de molcajete (made with roasted tomatoes, garlic, and peppers) at the restaurant Namik.





too,” Guerrero said. “Those are the relationships you lose when you start counting pesos.”

The next day we drove on to the coast, where El Puerto announces its gregarious urbanity with storage tanks and cranes and an endless sprawl of shipping containers. For centuries this was among Mexico’s most cosmopolitan urban centers, the first port of call for immigrants arriving from Europe and the Middle East and for men and women brought from western Africa as enslaved workers. Rich monastic orders built convents and churches alongside customs houses run by wealthy merchants, who imported luxury goods from Europe and sent back shiploads of cacao and chiles.

The morning after dinner at Mardel, where Guillén served us just-caught Gulf fish in three preparations—deep fried, *a la veracruzana*, and straight off the grill, all transcendent in their simplicity—I woke at dawn for a walk through El Puerto’s historic center. Blocks of coral, long the city’s primary construction material, blazed white, through crumbling layers of plaster damaged by northerly winds and relentless humidity. Austere colonial churches rubbed shoulders with florid 19th-century mansions and Modernist apartment buildings raised on sail-shaped *pilotis*, all in various states of romantic decay. Outside the historic

center, I stopped for breakfast at the Mercado Unidad Veracruzana, a Bauhaus behemoth built in 1942. I snagged a seat at a frenetic, 52-year-old stall named for its owner, the formidable Doña Bella, and ordered a *gordita dulce* made from masa spiked with piloncillo, or unrefined cane sugar, and served in a bath of *mole negro*. It exhaled a sigh of nixtamal-scented steam as I pulled it apart.

Driving out of Veracruz the next morning, we stopped for impeccable cold brew from Antonino’s, arguably the best of the city’s handful of third-wave coffee shops, and continued down the coast past open fields and open ocean, grabbing lunch in the town of Alvarado at the 30-year-old Restaurante Tella. Set in a shabby concrete box, it overlooks the slate-blue Alvarado Lagoon. The brash, bawdy owner, Doña Tella, turned out dishes enriched by the seafood pulled in by the fishermen who live along the water’s edge. Her interpretations of the state’s coastal bounty were humbler than those I’d tried in El Puerto. First came fresh tortillas slicked with lard and refried beans and topped with baby shrimp and shredded crab. The house specialty, *arroz a la tumbada*, came next, a soupy rice studded with sea snails and flavored with tomato, garlic, and oregano, like a poor-man’s paella. The dish, she told me, has its origins on the old launches

◀ From far left: A waterfall in the jungle of Los Tuxtlas; the shrimp-and-snail cocktail at ¡Ay! Apaa, in El Puerto.

where fishermen would toss whatever they could find in a pot for a quick, easy lunch. “*A la tumbada* is like *a la chingada*,” Tella laughed, using an expletive. “It’s something any fool can make.”

From Alvarado, we followed the Papaloapan River inland to the village of Tlacotalpan, once an important port where ships would arrive from Europe loaded with almonds and Carrera marble and depart with pineapple, cotton, and sugar. Tlacotalpan fell into decline in the early 20th century, after the Tehuantepec Railroad rendered river transport obsolete. Preserved in the amber of sudden irrelevance, Tlacotalpan’s quiet lanes, unique in Veracruz, are lined by 18th-century mansions painted in vibrant rose and lilac, emerald and cobalt. Older residents open their doors to sell the village’s famous *dulces de almendra*, an almond sweet similar to marzipan—as much a testament to the town’s historic wealth as the French floor tiles in the charming, if dilapidated, Museo Salvador Ferrando, which is dedicated to the eponymous painter.

That night, we settled in at the village’s oldest cantina, Blanca Nieves, for ice-cold beers and *toritos*, sweet



concoctions of milk, fruit, and hazardous quantities of *caña*. As the hours passed and seven-ounce Coronitas sweated away on our table, a pair of young musicians played Son Jarocho, the warm, rhythmic folk (Continued on page 100)

Visiting Veracruz

Where to Stay

Hotel Emporio

This 223-room high-rise in El Puerto has three swimming pools and guest rooms overlooking the harbor and the 16th-century fortress of San Juan de Ulúa. emporiohotels.com; doubles from \$51.

Los Amigos

Comfortable cabins on a mangrove-fringed lagoon in Los Tuxtlas, just inland from the beach. losamigos.com.mx; cabins from \$30.

Mesón de Alférez Xalapa

A stay at this colonial house in Xalapa comes with a delicious breakfast. pradodelrio.com; doubles from \$40.

Yambigapan Estancia Rural

Owner Nidia Hernández Medel offers cooking classes and two rustic, no-frills cabins on her property in San Andrés Tuxtla, near

Laguna Encantada. fb.com/restaurantyambigapan; doubles from \$30.

Where to Eat

¡Ay! Apaa

A tiny neighborhood seafood joint in Boca del Río with delicious *coctéles* and ceviches. 103 Calle Antonio M. Carlón; entrées \$7–\$10.

Café Sierra del Mar

The El Puerto outpost of Emilio Velez’s farm serves exceptional coffee and a good, simple breakfast. fb.com/fincasierradelmar.

Doña Bella

This stall at the Mercado Unidad Veracruzana serves the finest gorditas in El Puerto. Calle Juan Soto at Nicolás Bravo.

Mardel

Nab a seat on the terrace overlooking the Gulf of Mexico and order fresh, local whole fish and

ceviche. mardel.com.mx; entrées \$11–\$40.

Namik

Erik Guerrero’s new restaurant is reviving the culinary heritage of Veracruz. namik.mx; entrées \$14–\$20.

Restaurante Tella

A no-frills space with views of the Alvarado Lagoon. Try the shrimp-and-crab tortillas and cool off with an icy beer. Km 1, Carretera Federal Alvarado Veracruz; entrées \$4–\$7.

Ruda

A restaurant and cultural center in the coffee town of Coatepec, just outside Xalapa. comedorcultural.com; entrées \$5–\$24.

What to Do

Acuyo Taller de Cocina

To really dig into Veracruz’s rich cultural and culinary history, book a class in the Xalapa home of Raquel

Torres Cerdán. fb.com/acuyotaller.

Monday Market in Coscomatepec

A great place to witness Veracruz’s living culinary traditions—and to taste some exceptional *barbacoa* and tamales.

Museo de Antropología Xalapa

One of Mexico’s finest anthropology museums tells the story of Veracruz’s Indigenous civilizations through artifacts and sculpture. uv.mx.

Museo Salvador Ferrando

A quaint village museum named for a 19th-century painter from Tlacotalpan. Filled with antiquities, it’s worth a quick visit if only for its dusty, old-world atmosphere. fb.com/salvadorferrandomuseo. — M.S.



(Veracruz, continued from page 77)

music that originated centuries ago in Veracruz's cattle farms.

AFTER TLACOTALPAN, the highway bends past cattle farms and sugarcane fields before rising steeply into hills jutting straight out of the sea. Crystalline natural pools are surrounded by tropical greenery. Outside the town of San Andrés Tuxtla, we found a rural homestay, Yambigapan, perched on the edge of the Laguna Encantada, or Enchanted Lagoon, a limpid pool in an ancient volcanic crater. Nidia Hernández Medel started Yambigapan with her brother Bruno on two acres of land that their parents bought in the early 1990s as a place to retire.

As with most people in this part of Veracruz, known as Los Tuxtlas, Hernández's heritage is a blend of cultures and identities. It's a reflection of the region's Indigenous peoples and the population of African descent that, by the 18th century, constituted as much as a quarter of the people living in southern Veracruz. Today, Los Tuxtlas is a center of Mexico's Afro-Mexican culture, present in its mix of religious practices (best seen at the Iglesia de la Virgen del Carmen, in Catemaco), in the traditional medicine (often misidentified as *brujería*, or witchcraft), and, of course, in its food.

Like Guerrero, Hernández considers Torres a mentor and, like La Maestra, uses her kitchen to give lessons. But even more than the mountain food I'd tasted days earlier in Xalapa, the recipes at Yambigapan

shocked me. Curls of tripe, boiled then quickly smoked on the grill over fragrant guava leaves, were electric with raw garlic, cilantro, and lime, like something from the hill tracts of Southeast Asia. *Mogomogo*—mashed taro and plantains fortified with lashings of pork lard—tasted more like a Caribbean dish than one you'd find in Mexico.

In one way or another, Hernández told me, all of these dishes speak to the history of her homeland. Spanish traders brought in cumin and cloves from Asia. Formerly enslaved people from West Africa, who established free colonies in southern Veracruz as early as 1618, and later, immigrants from the Caribbean, used locally grown *viandas*, or tubers, like taro and sweet potato, to approximate the yams of their ancestral homeland. The mixing of lard and sugar into masa emerged from those same Black foodways. Even the *arroz a la tumbada* that we'd eaten with Doña Tella, she told me, was an interpretation not of a Spanish paella, but of Creole jambalaya, a dish likely brought to Alvarado on the ships that once connected the town directly to New Orleans.

For Hernández, sharing these recipes is an essential act of cultural preservation for a community whose history is too often erased from Mexico's official narrative. "When you give someone a recipe, you're giving away a part of yourself," she told me over breakfast. Toucans winged between avocado trees as I sipped thick taro atole, soothing as oatmeal, made by mixing an ingredient that originated in the Asia-Pacific region with an Indigenous dish of Mexico's corn-rich central valleys. "You can't make sense of a recipe unless you know its story."

IN MY FINAL DAY in Veracruz, I drove back into the central hills to visit the Monday market in Coscomatepec, a town set in the folded skirts of Citlalpetl. Guerrero first visited this area around the time he met Torres, and "it really

changed the way I see things," he said, explaining that the trip expanded his vocabulary of ingredients in much the same way that he hopes Namik can expand that of his clients in El Puerto, a distance of just 87 miles by road, but many worlds away. We spent the morning snaking our way between vendors from more than 50 nearby villages. Old women in gingham aprons sold wild blackberries, sour as citrus; bundles of wild greens in shades of sage, silver, and violet; and white palm flowers called *tepojolotes*, which they fried and served on tortillas with a pinch of salt.

Guerrero joked around with vendors, as comfortable as if this were the market of the town he'd grown up in. He pointed out ingredients he planned to use at Namik: Purple leaves of *yerba mora* for a fish-head broth. *Calabaza melocotón*, an indigenous squash that tastes more like melon than most melons, for a delicate pudding sprinkled with cacao nibs. He told me he plans to experiment with mixing taro and yuca flours into his tortillas and hopes one day to master those *tepojolotes*, too. "They always come out bitter," he said. "But I haven't given up."

None of these dishes are exactly traditional, but tradition, especially in Veracruz, is never a constant. Once Namik opens, Guerrero told me, he'll make it mandatory for anyone who wants to work in his kitchen to spend at least a full day out fishing and another working on Vélez's coffee farm. Members of the team will tour the state constantly, covering all 212 of its municipalities every two years. He'll keep growing his circle, not making anything new, he insists, not innovating, but revealing the intrinsic beauty of the home he loves. "There's still so much for us to learn," he told me that morning. "The truth is, I don't really know Veracruz at all." ✦

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