

MAYALAND CUISINE

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Dedicated to

Doña Elsi, Doña Zenaida, Doña Noemy

Doña Aurora, Doña Elide and Don Felix,

and all the other teachers

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Preface

This work consists of the recipes lying behind the book *K'oben* by Amber O'Connor and E. N. Anderson (Rowman and Littlefield 2017). Originally, the present work (*Mayaland Cuisine*) had a large component of regular text, introducing and explaining the Maya world and Maya food. All that material was updated, fleshed out, and incorporated in *K'oben*. The recipes, however, were very thinly represented, so here they all are together. Enjoy!

Gene Anderson, Riverside, CA, 2016

YUCATAN AND QUINTANA ROO

Culinary Specifics

An important characteristic of Yucatecan cuisine is that onions and garlic often roasted. The distinctive taste of thoroughly roasted and mashed onion or garlic is one of the real “signature flavors” of Yucatan. Traditionally, they are roasted over an open flame till the skins begin to blacken and the inside begins to soften. It should be soft enough to mash easily—no more than that. In the kitchen, the broiler does the best job. You can also bake them, or roast them in a covered frying pan.

The other recipe chapters of this book are arranged in a traditional cookbook fashion, but I have taken the liberty of arranging this chapter according to local thinking, since it makes the task of explaining everything a good deal easier. I begin with basic maize staple foods. Then follows a section for recados. Then come relishes and salsas. Then tamales and related foods. Only then do I move on to the traditional soups, fish, flesh, fowl, desserts, and drinks.

Critical to Yucatecan food are *recados* (from Spanish *recaudo*, “collection”), called *xak'*, “mix,” in Maya. These are homemade or bought in the market in bulk or in cubes. These cubes are sometimes found in North American markets that have a Caribbean clientele, but should be avoided unless you know your spices well. In the United States, cubes of recado and of achiote paste are sometimes adulterated or stale. Thus, in the following recipes, when the recipe calls for a cube, use a cubic inch of homemade recado.

A special section of the following is devoted to recados.

One recipe needs to be here, as it is basic to tamales and much else that follows:

Maya Lard

Take fat cuts of pork. Chop fine and fry over low heat, adding some water. Stir to avoid sticking. Or: cut into larger chunks and bake (adding water) in moderate oven till the drippings are rendered out and the meat is quite dry. In either case, enough water must be added so that the meat juices do not cook out or dry up. The goal is a mix of fat and meat juices, not just fat.

BASIC MAIZE FOODS

Bread of the Milpa

This is a ritual dish for the Food of the Milpa (*janlikool*) and Praying for Rain (*ch'a' chaak*) ceremonies. The number 13, the masa, and the sikil were all sacred to the ancient Maya. The thirteen layers represent the thirteen layers of the cosmos. These breads are sometimes marked with sacred designs in achiote-colored oil or stock, as well as with sikil.

The dish is included here for ethnographic interest. The culinary interest is slight.

2 lb. masa

2 cups cooked beans (black-eyed peas or black beans) (optional)

6 oz. sikil

Salt

Banana leaves

Make thick tortillas of the masa. Stack them with layers of sikil and beans in between, till they are seven tortillas high (13 layers in all). Wrap in banana leaves and cook in pib.

Variant: *Piim waj*

Maya for “thick corncake.” Sometimes reduplicated (*pimpim*) or translated into Spanish as *gordita*.

Make a giant tortilla: 1 foot across and 1/4” thick. Wrap in leaves and bake in pib. Or it can be cooked, unwrapped, on a griddle.

This is *much* better if the masa is mixed with lard, as for tamales, especially if you are cooking it on the stovetop.

It is even better if mixed with cooked beans (black-eyed peas are the traditional ones), including their liquid. In this case it has to be wrapped and baked (in oven, about 350o, if no pib is at hand). It is then eaten with Tomato or Chile Sauce.

Is Waj (“Corncake of New Maize”)

Market version:

Grind up new maize (cut from ears of sweet corn) and leave standing for a few days until very slightly sour. Add salt and make into very thin tortillas. Cook till crisp.

More sophisticated version:

1 cup white flour

1/2 cup lard

Kernels from 3 roasting ears, cut off close

1/4 tsp. baking soda

Salt

Grind kernels. Mix with other ingredients. Make into very thin tortillas and cook on griddle.

Kernels from really young, tender sweet corn are really too soft for this; one needs kernels with some substance. The Maya eat young corn at the stage that in my youth was called “roasting ears”—the kernels still tender, but somewhat more starchy than the sweet-corn stage. One can use tender sweet corn kernels, however, by reducing the quantity somewhat, so the resulting dough is firm enough to make good tortillas.

Variant: common is a sweet version, using sugar instead of salt.

Saka' (*Sak ja'*, “white water”: Corn gruel)

The other staple food—along with waj.

The ancient *saka'* is just corn meal or mashed new corn in water. Today, the word usually means pozole: Wash nixtamal kernels (available in Mexican markets). Boil till they break open. Drain. Grind and form into a ball the size of a tennis ball.

Variant: Fry or toast the nixtamalized kernels before grinding.

For consumption, the ball is dissolved in water, stock, or soup. The simple rural method is to dissolve in water with salt and chile.

To approximate saka': Cook a small amount of “Maseca” or other prepared Mexican corn meal in good stock, stirring constantly.

Similar preparations are made by processing the maize in slightly different ways. Sikil can be mixed in and the resulting atole cooked.

Fancy pozole or atole: Grind fresh green corn. Mix with sugar. Coconut cream can be mixed in if desired.

Ground toasted corn kernels, made into a drink, are *pinole*. (Pozole, pinole and atole are Nahuatl words; saka' is the basic Maya word.)

RECADOS

These are the soul of Yucatecan cooking. It is essential to make your own recados, unless you can get to a major public market in Yucatan.

To make a recado, grind all the ingredients very fine, and moisten with enough vinegar or bitter orange juice to make a solid paste, adding salt to taste. Failing bitter orange juice, use lime juice or a mix of orange and grapefruit juice (do not use bottled bitter orange juice preparations).

In Yucatan, you can get a spice mix called *xak'*. (This just means "mix" in Maya, and is also used for the recados themselves.) The pre-made spice mix typically involves a cinnamon stick, 1 tsp. cloves, 1 tsp. pepper, 2 tsp. oregano, 1/4 tsp. cumin, and 1 tsp. allspice. (Naturally, these ingredients are variable.) All these are ground fine. Then all you have to do is add achiote paste and you have your recado.

Achiote Paste

Bring achiote seeds to boil, in water. Drain and soak overnight in vinegar, bitter orange juice or lime juice. Blend. It takes a tough blender to make these hard seeds into a paste. A stone mortar and pestle is preferable, but then the preparation takes a strong arm and a lot of pounding.

Black Recado

2 ancho chiles or other dark dried chiles

1 tsp. allspice
1/2 tsp. cumin
1 tbsp. black pepper
1 tbsp. achiote paste
2 garlic cloves
2 tsp. oregano
Citrus juice or vinegar

Roast the garlic cloves. Seed and toast the chiles. They should darken enough to make the recado quite dark. Grind all. In Yucatan the chiles are actually burned to a glossy black, but this kills the taste of the chiles. It also has to be done outdoors, standing upwind, since the vapors of burning chile peppers are seriously dangerous to eyes.

Variant: the garlic is not always roasted.

Hot Recado

2 tbsp. dry chile
4 allspice berries
8 epazote leaves
1/2 tsp. black pepper
2 garlic cloves
1 tbsp. achiote
Vinegar or bitter orange or lime juice to make thick paste

Mole Recado

2 ancho chiles
3 pasilla chiles

1 tbsp. black pepper
1 small piece of cinnamon stick
3 cloves
Half tbsp. sesame seeds
3 garlic cloves
Bitter orange or lime juice to make thick paste

Recado for cold meat

3 allspice berries
1/2 tsp. black pepper
3 cloves
1 small piece of cinnamon stick
1 roasted head of garlic
Pinch of saffron (optional)
Ground dry chile to taste
Vinegar, bitter orange juice, or lime juice to make paste

Spread on the meat or mix in with it.

Red Recado

This is the standard—the Universal Seasoning of Yucatan.

1 tbsp. achioté paste (more in Quintana Roo, often 3 tbsp.)
1 tsp. (or more, to taste) black pepper
1 tsp. dry oregano leaves, crushed

1/4 – 1/2 tsp. cumin seeds

2-4 cloves

1 small piece of cinnamon stick

3 garlic cloves, slowly roasted till soft

Bitter orange juice (or substitute) to make thick paste

Prepare as with above. Variants: Allspice is often added—about 4 berries. Garlic can be unroasted. Coriander seeds (very few) can be added, but are rare in Yucatan. Naturally, everyone varies the amounts slightly.

A village recado would be heavier on the achiote, garlic, and oregano, which everyone grows in the yard, and much lighter on the expensive store-bought spices (cloves, cinnamon, cumin, pepper).

Roast Garlic Recado

20 large garlic cloves

1/2 tsp. ground cumin

1 tsp. black pepper

1/2 tsp. cloves

2 tsp. oregano

Bitter orange or lime juice

Roast the garlic (broiling in oven, or over open flame). Peel and mash. Grind the spices. Mix with enough bitter orange juice or equivalent to make a paste.

Variant: use some unroasted garlic, and/or a roasted onion.

Steak Recado

1 tbsp. black pepper

3 garlic cloves

2 tsp. oregano

Vinegar (recommended for this one) or bitter orange juice or lime juice, to make thick paste

Some steak recados add allspice, cinnamon and cumin—very little of each, say about 1/4 tsp.

Spicy Recado

1 tbsp. pepper

1 small stick cinnamon

4 cloves

3 garlic cloves

1 tsp. oregano

1 pinch saffron

Bitter orange juice or lime juice, to make thick paste

Tamale Recado

1 tbsp. black pepper

3 allspice berries

5 epazote leaves

2 garlic cloves

1 tbsp. achiote

ground dry chile

Vinegar or bitter orange juice or lime juice to make thick paste

White Recado

Not called for in any of the following recipes, but great in soup or stew, especially with turkey.

1 tbsp. black pepper

3 garlic cloves

1 tsp. oregano

2 cloves

1 pinch cumin seeds

1 pinch saffron

1/4 tbsp. cilantro seeds

Coriander seeds (optional)

Vinegar (white vinegar is ideal here; citrus juice is not recommended for this one)

APPETIZERS AND SALSAS

Basic relish to eat with Maya food:

1 bunch radishes

Few leaves cilantro

Chopped onion and/or garlic, to taste (optional)

1 fresh green chile or one habanero chile (if you can stand it—the taste is much better, but habaneros are almost unbearable to the uninitiated)

Salt and pepper to taste

Chop the radishes and other ingredients and marinate in bitter orange juice or lime juice.

Chopped tomatoes can be added.

Botanas (snacks to eat with drinks)

A typical selection might include:

onion, garlic and tomato stir-fried and then mixed with cilantro and sikil

Cucumbers, onions, cilantro, radishes, cut up, in vinegar

Boiled potato cubes with onion, cilantro, vinaigrette

Ceviche (raw fish and shellfish bits marinated in lime juice with cut-up chiles and tomatoes and onions, with salt and black pepper)

Ha' Sikil P'ak ("Water, sikil and tomatoes"—a nice descriptive name)

2 tomatoes

1 red onion

Few sprigs cilantro

Juice of 1 bitter orange

1/2 cup sikil

Chile habanero to taste

Salt to taste

Roast and peel tomatoes. Chop these with cilantro and onion. Add the bitter orange juice. Stir in the sikil, then the habanero. This should be a thick paste. Serve for dipping up with tortilla wedges.

Habanero Salsa

1 onion
5 garlic cloves
2 lb. tomatoes
1 habanero
1 tbsp. oil
1 pinch oregano
1 pinch salt

Chop all. Fry the garlic and onions first, then the chile and finally the tomato, stirring constantly. Add the oregano late in the process.

K'utbi Ik (Chile Sauce)

Seed and toast fresh chiles. Wrap in cloth for a few minutes so skins steam loose, and then peel. Blend or mash with similarly roasted tomato, and garlic or onion. Herbs may be added.

K'utbi Ik, dry chile version

Toast and grind dry red chiles. Roast garlic, green chiles, and onion. Mash all with lime juice.

K'utbi p'ak (Tomato Sauce)

Same as above, but with little or no chile.

Or: Chop and fry onion or garlic. When colored, add chopped tomato, salt, and herbs (epazote, cilantro, oregano) if desired. Bitter orange juice or lime juice can be mixed in. Mash somewhat—it should be chunky, not a paste (see below).

Or: Roast and peel tomatoes. Blend with some cilantro, salt, bitter orange juice and habanero chile.

It can also be *yach'bij* (mashed more thoroughly—to a paste—with a pestle in a molcajete—a small mortar), or *suut'bij* (the same, but with a revolving motion, not smashed down), or just *licuado*—blended in a blender!

Little Dogs'nose (*Xni'-pek'*)

This is the standard Maya salsa. It gets its name because it makes your nose run and become cold and wet like a dog's.

Seed and chop a habanero chile. Add chopped onion, garlic, tomato, and any herbs, to taste. Marinate in bitter orange juice or lime juice, with salt.

It is important that all the ingredients be absolutely fresh for this. *Xni'-pek'* can marinate for a day or so, but no more than that.

Marinated Onions

This is the universal accompaniment for many cooked meat dishes, including pok-chuk and turkey.

1 large red onion

10 peppercorns

3 allspice berries

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 tsp. oregano

1/4 cup bitter orange juice

As much habanero chile as you can stand

Salt to taste

Cut onion into slices. Add the peppercorns and allspice. Let stand very briefly in boiling water. Drain.

Add garlic, oregano, orange juice and chile. Let marinate briefly.

Variante: use vinegar and some water instead of bitter orange juice. In this case, everything is combined, brought to a boil, and left to marinate for a day or more.

P'uybi Ik (Ground Chile)

Toast dried chiles till slightly colored. Then (not before) seed them and grind fairly fine.

Rooster Beak (*pico de gallo*)

5 jicamas

5 sweet oranges

3 bitter oranges

Ground chile, to taste

Cilantro, to taste

Salt, to taste

Peel and cut up the jicamas and sweet oranges. Mix with the juice of the bitter oranges and add the seasonings.

“Rooster beak” is a name generally given to salsas that have a bite like the peck of an angry rooster. This is a mild one, somewhere between a salsa and a salad. It need not be; you can use chopped fresh habanero chiles.

The pieces should be small and even, but definitely separate. This is not a blended sauce.

Rooster Beak II

1 tomato

1 small white onion

1-2 cloves garlic

1 jalapeno chile (or whatever chile you prefer)

Bitter orange or lime juice

Chop first four ingredients into quite small but distinct pieces, and marinate in the juice.

Wasp Larvae

Toast wasp larvae and eat with relishes.

Or just smoke a wasp nest to drive away the adults and more or less cook the larvae, then open the nest and eat the smoked larvae from it. They taste like smoked bacon (at best). (*I have* tried this one.)

Wolis

A mixture of masa, cooked black-eyed peas, sikil, ground dried chile, chopped cilantro and chopped onion. These are not mashed up—just mixed, so the peas and onions remain chunky. The mixture is wrapped in hojasanta leaves, then in a second wrapping of banana leaves, and cooked in the pib or steamed to make tamales.

Without the masa, it is a standard quickly-improvised relish to put on tortillas or other corn cakes. For this, take cooked black-eyed peas; drain; mix in the other ingredients, to taste.

Xek'

The term just means “mixed,” but one standard “mix” is a salad of orange sections and chopped jicama with salt, chile, chopped cilantro, and lime juice. This is traditionally served on the Day of the Dead, November 1.

Xub Ik (Superhot Chile Sauce)

30 dried chiles

2 lb. tomatoes

6 allspice berries

A few peppercorns

4 cloves garlic

8 or more oregano leaves

Branch of epazote

Seed the peppers. Toast them (optional, but typical). Boil. When soft, add other ingredients. Blend all.

Meat can be cooked in this, or it can be used simply as a sauce.

Prepare with all windows open. Use rubber gloves if your hands are sensitive. Avoid touching eyes or other sensitive parts of the body.

Some other typical garnishes and relishes:

Tomato, sikil, coriander, garlic, onion, salt—chopped fine, fried and blended to a smooth paste

Cucumbers vinagreta (thin sliced with onion, cilantro, habanero chiles, garlic, vinegar, oil)

Potato slices vinagreta

Cabbage, chile and cilantro, chopped, vinagreta

White beans cooked with tomato, onion, spices, bits of ham and bacon

Chicharrones stewed with onion, tomato, chile

TAMALES AND RELATIVES (including *antojitos*—substantial snacks—and tortilla-based items)

Black-eyed Pea Tamales

A standard market snack.

1 lb. pork (shoulder is good; loin or other cuts perfectly all right)

Water to cover, 4-6 cups

6 tomatoes

1 clove garlic, roasted or not

1 chile, toasted

1 branch epazote

1 oz. masa

Juice of 1 bitter orange

1 cup cooked black-eyed peas

Masa for tamales

Put the pork in water with the tomatoes, garlic, chile, and epazote. Cook till very tender.

Remove the pork from the broth. Save the broth. Shred the pork into small pieces; chop up the other items, leaving out and discarding the garlic and epazote.

Now cook the broth down with the 1 oz. masa and the bitter orange, till thickened, so it has a high percentage of fat.

Mix this and the black-eyed peas slowly into the masa. Cook down very slowly till hot. The result should be thick enough not to stick or collapse; it has to be the main substance of the tamales—a firm, solid mass, largely maize dough.

Let cool. Then make tamales by putting a layer of masa about ¼” deep on a corn husk, banana leaf segment, piece of foil, or kitchen paper. The big tough corn husks sold for

this purpose in Mexican markets are best, but foil will very often have to do. Put a heaping tablespoonful of pork filling on the masa and roll up into a tamale: a sealed, stuffed corn-dough item some 4-6" long.

Steam. The Maya traditionally seal them tightly in a closed vessel and bake them for anywhere from an hour on up in a *pib*. The classic method otherwise—for those of us without a *pib*—is to crowd them vertically into a pot with an inch or so of water or stock at the bottom, and steam them on the stove top. They also do fine in the oven, on a rack over water in a pan, the whole being sealed with tinfoil; or vertically in a casserole dish in the oven.

A very cheap version leaves out the pork, but in that case you still have to boil down a fatty cut of pork to get the “Maya lard” to make the tamales.

Chanchamitos (simple tamales)

Yucatecans love multiple diminutives. “Chanchamitos” means “little little little ones”—Maya *chan*, “little,” is doubled, and the Spanish diminutive ending added for good measure.

1/2 lb. pork or chicken meat

1 spring epazote

1 1/2 lb. masa

1 square of recado rojo

1 tbsp. lard

Salt to taste

Corn shucks

Chop up the pork. Boil with the epazote. Then dissolve some masa in the stock to thicken it to thin sauce consistency.

Mix the rest of the masa with the recado, lard, and salt.

Using this masa, make tamales in the usual way, but only 1/4 to 1/3 the size of regular ones.

Variants: These can be made with any sort of meat that will do for a filling, including leftovers.

Chaya Tamales (also called “Braza de Reina” – “Queen’s Arm” – or sometimes “Braza de India”)

Boil chaya leaves. Roll any kind of tamale or similar food in them, using the same technique as for stuffing grape leaves or cabbage leaves. Eat the whole thing, chaya leaves and all.

As the name implies, these are usually made long and rather slender, like a girl’s forearm.

One good filling mix: 1 kg chopped tomatoes

½ onion

3 small chiles or 1 chile xkatik, chopped

Oil for frying

Salt

Hardboiled eggs, chopped

Fry up the tomatoes, onions, and chiles (to a sofrito). Mix with the eggs. Use for stuffing the tamales.

Hojasanta is very often used instead of, or even with, chaya. Chard leaves work perfectly well.

Chaya-stuffed Tamales (Ts’otobij Chay; “Dzotobichay” on restaurant menus)

As the name suggests, this very popular dish is thoroughly Maya, surely pre-Columbian. The name means “chaya stuffing” or “chay with filling stuffed into it” (Maya *ts’ot*, “to stuff something into a hollow space”).

1 lb. chaya (swiss chard if you can’t get chaya)

3 lb. masa
1 lb. lard
8 eggs
1/4 – 1/2 lb. sikil (ground squash seeds)
Salt and pepper to taste
Chaya leaves for wrapping
6 small tomatoes
1 onion
2 garlic cloves
Some chile, optional

Chop the chaya and mix with the masa, lard and salt.

Cook the eggs and chop finely. Mix with the sikil.

Make tamales the usual way (the egg mix inside the chaya-masa mix), steaming for an hour.

Roast the tomatoes, onions and garlic. Add whatever chile is desired. Mash. Serve as sauce for the tamales.

This recipe invites creative interpretation. You can stuff it with anything, as long as the stuffing is not strong-flavored enough to kill the delicate chaya taste.

Chulibuul with sikil

Chulibuul means “stewed beans.”

2 lb. young fresh beans from the field (substitutes: frozen limas or black-eyed peas)
2 lb. masa
3 onions
Branch of epazote
4 garlic cloves
1 lb. sikil

Salt to taste

Cook the beans. Mix the masa with a little water. Chop finely the onions and epazote. Grind the garlic.

Mix all, and cook slowly and carefully. Add half the sikil. Serve with the rest of the sikil sprinkled over it and with tomato sauce poured over it.

Fresh variant: Use sweet corn kernels instead of masa. Cook the beans first; add the corn and just bring to boil, no more. The result bears a great resemblance to succotash, except for the sikil.

Toksel variant: If this is made without any maize—just the beans and sikil—it is “toksel.”

Out in the fields, farm workers heat stones in the campfire and drop them into this stew to cook it. Stone soup?

Codzitos

Another mestiza-Maya word: *Kots'* (*codz* in the old spelling), “something rolled up,” with the Spanish diminutive ending added. These are the simple, finger-food version of enchiladas.

Roll fresh or freshly-fried tortillas around tomato sauce with Mexican cheese or ground or shredded meat.

A fancy version I noted at the wonderful Hacienda Teya—a restaurant in a restored henequen estate east of Merida—rolls the codzitos around shredded boiled chicken, then covers them with k'utbi p'ak, then crumbles fresh white cheese over all.

Eggs a la Motul (Huevos Motuleños)

Motul is a large, historically important town in central Yucatan. This dish is a standard breakfast all over the Peninsula.

2 tortillas

Lard

1 tomato

1/4 onion

2 oz. ham

2 eggs

Oil

Salt to taste

1-2 oz. refried black beans

Several green peas (necessarily canned in Yucatan, where peas don't grow, but much better if fresh)

Tomato sauce

Fry (saute) the tortillas in the lard.

Cut up the tomatoes and onion in small pieces. Fry.

Cut up the ham into small pieces. It can be fried also (but usually isn't).

Fry the eggs.

Now cover the tortillas with beans; the beans with the eggs; the eggs with the tomato, onion and ham; and the whole thing with tomato sauce. Garnish with the peas (or mix them in with the tomato and onion, earlier step).

Chickpeas or other vegetables can be used. Various garnishes exist. Much of the quality of the dish depends on the ham; get the best.

Of course, the true Yucatecan eats this mammoth breakfast with habanero sauce—the perfect wake-up at seven in the morning!

Empanadas

Make small tortillas from masa. Fold them around any filling—beans, chopped meat, chicken, k'utbi p'ak, etc., in any combination. Moisten the edges to seal them. Then shallow-fry (sauté) in a pan, or deep-fry in hot oil (but shallow-frying is better). Serve with sliced cabbage, onions in lime juice, or other topping over them.

Enchiladas a la Quintana Roo

10 tortillas

1 cup shredded cooked spiced chicken

3 oz. Mexican sharp white cheese, crumbled

1 onion, chopped

2 ancho chiles

2 pasilla chiles

1 oz. almonds

1 oz. peanuts (optional)

1 cup chicken stock

1 tbsp. lard

Salt to taste

Shallow-fry the tortillas in lard (basically, just put them in some oil in the skillet and move them around till they soften and begin to toast at the edges). Roll them around the chicken. Top with cheese and onion.

Seed and toast the chiles. Grind with the almonds and peanuts. Blend with the stock and season. Cook quickly to thicken and pour over enchiladas.

Fish Tamales

3 garlic cloves

1 tsp. cumin seeds

3 tbsp. achiote

Salt and pepper to taste

1/2 lb. fish fillet

4 tbsp. lard

1/2 onion, chopped

2 tbsp. cilantro, finely chopped

1 tomato, chopped

1/2 cup bitter orange juice

2 lb. masa

Banana leaves

Grind up the garlic, cumin, and one tbsp. of the achiote with the salt and pepper. Cut up the fish and rub this recado into it.

Heat half the lard. Fry the vegetables in it. Add the fish and then the bitter orange juice.

Mix the masa with the rest of the lard and achiote, and some salt.

Make tamales the usual way.

Green Corn Tamales with Chicken

Grains from 30 sweet corn ears

1/2 lb. lard

1 tbsp. sugar

1/2 cup milk

1/4 tsp. baking soda

1 lb. pork loin meat, cooked

Meat from 1 small chicken, cooked

5 chiles

1/2 tsp. black pepper

2 cloves

2 garlic cloves

1 small piece of cinnamon stick

Salt to taste

Grind the kernels. Mix in the lard, sugar, salt, milk and soda. Beat.

Shred or cut up the meat. Seed and toast the chiles. Grind all the flavorings. Mix all, and make tamales in usual way.

Variant: red recado has been known to work its way into these, though it is a fairly strong flavor for green corn tamales, and tends to kill the delicate flavor of the green corn unless *very* small amounts are used.

Hojasanta Tamales

Make as for Chaya Tamales, above, or wrap any tamale in hojasanta (*mak'ol* or *mak'olam* in Yucatec Maya) and then in banana leaves. Steam or bake in pib. The hojasanta leaves are edible, but not the banana leaves.

Joloches (joroche)

From Maya *jooloch*, “corn shuck, dried corn leaf” –presumably from the appearance of the dumplings, like corncobs in the shuck.

1/2 lb. ground beef

1/2 lb. ground pork

1 lb. tomato

1 onion

1 bell pepper

3 garlic cloves

Red recado

1/2 cup vinegar or bitter orange juice

1 1/2 lb. masa

2 tbsp lard

Salt to taste

1 lb. cooked black beans

3 oz. sikil

Cook the meat with the tomato, a strip on onion, half the bell pepper, three garlic cloves, salt, some water and the recado diluted in vinegar or juice.

Mix the masa with lard and salt. Form cones, and stuff them with the meat mix. Close the tops with masa.

Chop and fry the rest of the onion and bell pepper.

Warm up the beans and add the fried vegetables.

Add in the cones and cook 15-20 minutes.

This is one of those common, standard recipes that is infinitely variable. Almost any ingredient can be left out or decreased in quantity, and other common ingredients sometimes find their way in.

For instance: A quick-and-easy village form of the above is simply:

Squash flowers

Onion

Salt

Masa

Boil the flowers with the onion and salt. Form the masa into little cones and add in. The cones should look like the flowers; presumably this is the original inspiration of the dish.

Or we can have:

Joloches with Longaniza

1/2 lb. longaniza

2 tomatoes

1 onion

1 xkatik chile

1 lb. masa

Lard

Salt to taste

Kabax beans

Cut up the longaniza and vegetables. Fry the longaniza, and then the vegetables in its oil. Make small masa dumplings filled with this mixture. Flatten and fry. Add to the beans and serve.

Panuchos

As popular as salbutes (for which see below). A typical workers' breakfast, using up the remains of dinner from the day before.

2 lb. masa

1 lb. mashed black beans (cooked with two branches of epazote; left over from yesterday)

3 red onions

Leftover breast meat from a turkey roasted in red recado

Juice of 4 bitter oranges (or 8 limes)

Tomato and chile sauces

Lard

Make small tortillas. The Maya way is to put an ounce or so of masa on a banana leaf—or, today, a plastic sheet—and press the masa gently into a tortilla. These have to be homemade and 3-4" across (about half as big as regular ones), so they will puff up.

Toast on griddle or frying pan. Hopefully, they will puff up, leaving a hollow center (like pita bread or Indian puris). This hollow center is known as *saay* in Maya.

Stuff the hollow with mashed beans.

Fry (sauté) the bean-stuffed tortillas in lard.

Shred the turkey meat and put on top. Shredded lettuce or other vegetables can be added. (Chicken or other meat can be used, though turkey is traditional and particularly good.)

Cut up the onion and marinate in the salt and orange juice. Serve separately. Also serve separately the *k'utbi p'ak* and chiles. Panuchos are very much an eaters'-choice type of food.

Papadzules

Papa ts'uul means “rich people’s food.” (*Ts'uul*, or “dzul,” is now used to mean “foreigner,” but seems originally to have meant “rich person.”) This may, however, be a folk etymology; Cherry Hamman explains it as “*papak'*, to anoint or smear, and *sul*, to soak or drench” (Hamman 1998:94). Either way, economic progress has come, and this is now a relatively humble staple dish, typically found on the breakfast menu.

1 egg

1 tomato

Bit of habanero chile

1 sprig epazote

Oil

4 tortillas

2 oz. sikil

Salt to taste

Hardboil the eggs. Chop or mash up.

Boil the tomatoes, chiles and epazote. Drain, but save the water. Blend. Fry in oil.

Dissolve the sikil in the reserved cooking water. Mix half of this with the oil. (This is what people generally do now, and I have watched it many a time, but Hamman tells you the ancient way: roast and grind the squash seeds yourself, mix with water, and knead till they produce some oil. See Hamman 1998:94). Spread on the tortillas. Then spread on these the egg mix and roll up.

Pour over the roll-ups the rest of the sikil sauce, and the tomato sauce.

Variant: a much more elaborate version involves mixing the sikil with stock, epazote, onion, garlic and chile, and serving the whole with marinated onions: red onions cut up, blanched, and marinated in vinegar or bitter orange juice with spices and chopped habanero chiles.

Another variant involves boiled chaya (or spinach, one bunch) and 3 tbsp of cut-up chives.

Polcanes

Maya *pool kaan*, “snake head,” with a Spanish plural. The name comes from the resemblance between the opened-up dumplings and a snake’s head with mouth open. Another common and cheap market snack.

2 lb. black-eyed peas (fresh or briefly cooked to soften)

1/2 lb. sikil

1 tsp. ground chile

1 lb. masa

3 tbsp. lard

Salt

Cook the beans. Drain. Mix with sikil and chile.

Mix the masa with the lard and salt. Stuff with the beans. (Or mix flour and masa, make a thin skin and stuff like ravioli.)

Steam or pib-bake in corn husks like tamales, or deep-fry like hush-puppies.

For eating, split and fill with tomato sauce.

Salbutes

Something of a national dish of Yucatan. The name is from Maya *tsajil but'*, "fried minced meat." As with such "small eats" the world over, the best place to get these is down at the marketplace in the morning, where the working people are stoking up for a hard day's work. Salbutes become a powerfully nostalgic flavor for those who regularly eat them in such circumstances.

Make small tortillas from fresh masa. Deep-fry in very hot lard. While these are still as hot as possible, pile on them shredded cooked chicken or turkey (preferably cooked in red recado), chopped cabbage or lettuce, marinated onion (see above), tomato slices, radish slices, and/or anything else desired.

This is often accompanied by the chicken or turkey stock; black beans; and lime slices. As the Maya name implies, they are often topped with fried minced pork instead of poultry. In fact, they are topped with just about anything: beans, tripe, chorizo, etc. A good market stall will have alternatives, the eaters choosing what they want.

Sopes

Fry small, thick tortillas. Top with anything interesting.

Some toppings noted at Merida markets and fiestas include:

Nopal salad (prickly pear pads cooked, cut up, and marinated in oil and vinegar with spices)

Nopal cut up in chocolate mole (made by cooking and mixing chocolate tablets and ground chiles)

Any and all meat, preferably cooked in red recado, shredded

Beans or beans and meat, usually refried black beans

The sopes are then usually further topped off with lettuce or cabbage, various sauces, etc., over the meat.

To'obi joloch (Sweetbread Tamales)

Boil sweetbreads until tender. Chop; eliminate tough membranes. Mix in a handful of chopped shallots and 2 cups sikil.

Use to fill tamales in the usual way.

Vaporcitos (“little steamed ones”)

A very common, minimalist sort of snack.

Mix masa, lard and cooked black-eyed peas. Make this mix into tamales—no filling added—and steam. Eat with Tomato Sauce.

The same thing baked in a pib is called *xnup'*.

Wedding Tamales

This is the full-scale tamale of Yucatan. The main ingredients can, of course, be varied, according to what is available.

1 chicken

1 lb. pork

1 cube red recado

1 tbsp. steak recado

2 lb. tomatoes

1 tbsp. ground allspice

1 small head of garlic, roasted and bashed

Branch of epazote

1 lb. lard

Chile and salt to taste

Masa

Cook the meats. Dissolve the spices in vinegar and add. Add other ingredients. Bone the meats and make tamales in the usual way, using the stock, or grease skimmed from it, for the lard.

SOUPS

“Barriana” soup

Silvia Luz Carrillo Lara, in *Cocina Yucateca* (1995:17-18), reports that this is a true “mestiza” soup, found in many old cookbooks. This is an adaptation of her recipe. It is a relatively “Spanish” dish, preserving the flavors of the Spanish Colonial world. Like all such recipes, it seems to be dying out in Yucatan, but variants of it can still be found. The Spanish ancestors of this dish are still around in southern Spain, and use leftover bread instead of masa, the latter being an obvious Mexicanization.

1/2 lb. masa

1 tomato

1/2 red onion

1 bell pepper

1/4 cup lard (“Maya lard” recommended)

3 pints chicken or beef stock, freshly made

12 olives

2 tbsp. capers

2 tbsp. raisins

2 tbsp. chopped almonds

Salt and pepper to taste

Pinch of saffron (optional)

Break the masa into small pieces and fry them in the lard. Chop the tomato, onion, and pepper, and fry them separately. Add the masa. Then add the stock and cook ca. 10 minutes. Add the other ingredients and cook until all is heated.

Variants without the masa, often with different thickenings, exist.

Chaya Soup

8 or more fresh chaya leaves

1 chayote

1 summer squash

1 onion

3 garlic cloves

1 tsp. ground oregano

6 cups water

1 chipotle chile in vinegar or marinade (canned marinated chipotles are fine)

Salt to taste

Chop the chaya finely. Cut up the other vegetables. Cook all.

Obviously, this recipe can be varied at will. The basic idea is chaya plus other vegetables—a mix of starchy and crunchy ones—and standard Yucatecan spicing.

Covered Soup

This is what Mexicans call a “sopa seca,” a “dry soup.” This isn’t an oxymoron, just the standard term for a soup that includes enough starch to absorb all the free liquid. Such dishes have a Moorish origin; they are related to pilaf. This one is thoroughly Spanish, and thus out of place in a book about the true mestizo cookery, but it is far too typical of Yucatan to leave out. It represents a large class of popular recipes transported from Spain to Yucatan virtually without change. It also provides insight into what was imported from Spain in the old days: capers, saffron, oil, vinegar, wine, and olives were staples of trade.

For the “stuffing”:

A large chicken cut up, or any small poultry

3 garlic cloves

1/2 tsp. oregano

2 bay leaves

1/2 tsp. cumin seeds

1 stick cinnamon

2 cloves

6 allspice berries

1/4 cup vinegar

For the rice:

1/2 lb. rice

5 tbsp. oil

2 xkatik chiles

2/3 lb. tomatoes

1 onion

2 garlic cloves

1/2 tsp. saffron

1 bunch parsley

1 banana leaf

3 oz. lard

For the final assembly:

1 oz. lard

2/3 lb. tomatoes

1/2 cup stock

2 oz. bottled green olives, optional

1 tbsp. chopped parsley

4 tbsp. sherry

1 oz. capers

3 oz. Mexican white cheese

Cut up the poultry. Grind the onions, garlic and spices, rub onto poultry, and marinate overnight.

Soak the rice for an hour or more. Drain and fry in the oil. Add chopped chiles. Roast the tomatoes and blend with the onion and garlic. Soak the saffron in 1 oz. water. Add all these to the rice, cover, and simmer over very low heat for a while—not till fully done.

Spread the banana leaf with lard, in a baking dish. Put half the rice mix on this.

Then fry the poultry in the final 1 oz. lard. Add tomatoes (roasted and chopped) and stock. Then add olives, parsley, sherry and capers.

Cover with the rest of the rice mix, fold the banana leaf over, and bake 10-20 minutes at 375°.

Sprinkle with broken-up white cheese for serving.

Much simpler variants exist, converging on the familiar “Spanish rice” of Mexican restaurants everywhere. This is basically a pilaf with peppers and tomatoes instead of Moorish ingredients. Rice is fried with chopped onion, then spices and other ingredients are added, then liquid to cover $\frac{1}{2}$ -1” deep, then all is simmered at the lowest possible heat till the liquid is absorbed. Standard in Yucatan are simple “Spanish rices” with chicken cooked in red recado, or other variants, added to the tomato-onion-pepper basic formula.

Lentil Soup

1 lb. pork

1 tbsp oregano

2 cups lentils

3 cloves of garlic, crushed

1 onion, chopped

Red recardo, 1 oz.

2 mild chiles

1 carrot

1 chayote

1 platano

2 potatoes

Salt

Pepper

Boil the pork and lentils till the lentils are tender but not quite thoroughly done. Add other ingredients and finish cooking.

Sopa de Lima (Bitter Lime Soup)

This soup requires a strange lime-like citrus fruit, the *lima agria*, with a unique flavor. Note that it is a *lima*, not a *limón* (lime or lemon). It is fact the Thai lime, easy to find in any Oriental market. (No one knows how it got to Yucatan.) The Yucatecan bitter lime should be fresh for this soup, but I get acceptable results with dried Thai lime and a bit of fresh ordinary lime. It is also possible to use ordinary lime only. This is done even in Yucatan if bitter limes are not available. The real *lima* is preferable, though.

This is probably the most famous single Yucatecan dish, after *cochinita pibil*. Yucatecan restaurants far from Yucatan all carry it. They often can't get the real *lima agria*, so don't judge this soup by versions you may have had outside Yucatan.

For the stock and meat:

1 chicken

Salt and pepper, to taste

4 cloves

1 tbsp. dried oregano

4 garlic cloves

1 tsp. cumin seeds

Enough water to produce 8 cups stock

For the soup:

2 tomatoes

1 onion

1 xkatik chile (or other mild chile according to your preference)

1 tsp. vinegar

1 lb. tortillas, cut in strips or wedges and fried in lard

1 bitter lime

Cook the chicken with the other stock ingredients. Eat the dark meat (cook's privilege). Shred the white meat.

Blend the tomatoes, onion, chiles (seeded and soaked), vinegar, and salt.

Combine all: into the stock, mix the blended vegetables; the shredded chicken; the fried tortilla strips; and the cut-up lime. A few squeezes of ordinary lime juice are good too.

Variants: Chicken cooked in red recado is often used, and adds to the flavor.

A couple of tablespoons of beer find their way into some versions.

The fried tortilla strips are dispensable.

Squash Soup

1 tomato

1 bell pepper

3 oz. butter

6 small summer squash

6 or more squash flowers

Salt and pepper to taste

In a saucepan, chop the tomato and pepper and fry in the butter. Add water and the cut-up squash and flowers.

Variant: a couple of ounces of chopped ham can be fried with the tomato and pepper. I prefer the vegetarian form, however.

Tortilla Soup

1 lb. beans

6 tortillas

Oil for frying

1/2 onion, chopped

1 serrano chile, chopped

2 sprigs epazote

2 tomatoes, roasted and skinned

1/2 lb. chorizo, taken out of its casing and fried

Grated Mexican sharp white cheese

Salt and pepper to taste

Cook the beans in enough water for the final soup.

Cut the tortillas in wedges and fry. Fry the onion, chiles, and epazote. Add the beans and tortilla strips.

Blend the tomatoes with salt and pepper.

Combine all ingredients—sprinkling the chorizo and cheese over the top.

White Bean Soup (Yucatan form of a very popular Spanish dish)

1/2 lb. white beans (traditionally small white limas, but ordinary white beans will do)

1/2 white onion

2 tomatoes

1/3 lb. of chorizo sausage, or 1 small chorizo and 1 longaniza sausage

1/4 head of cabbage (optional)

1 green pepper

1/4 lb. Spanish, Virginia or similar flavorful ham

Salt and pepper to taste

Cayenne pepper to taste (optional)

1/2 lb. potatoes

Wash the beans. Then soak, and boil in the same water until beginning to be tender.

Chop and fry the tomatoes, onions, pepper, cabbage, and ham. Add seasonings.

Combine these and the sausages with the beans. Cut up the potatoes, add, and cook all till the beans are tender.

A sprinkling of marjoram and oregano—fresh or dry—is good. One can also decorate with chopped parsley, or even (untraditional but good) cilantro.

SEAFOODS

Baked Fish I

1 large fish (preferably fairly oily)

3 garlic cloves

1 onion

3 oregano leaves

5 bay leaves

1 glass white wine, optional (it's good but the Maya would never have it)

1/2 tsp. pepper

1/2 tsp. cumin seeds

1/4 cup olive oil

Salt to taste

Marinate the fish in the other ingredients for an hour. Bake.

This can also be done on the stove top in a heavy saucepan. Try adding xkatik chiles.

The fish is often even better if rubbed with red recado or otherwise marinated beforehand.

Baked Fish II

1 large fish

3 oz. olive oil

1/2 lb. potatoes

1/2 cup vinegar

6 tomatoes

1 onion

2 xkatik chiles

1/2 tsp. ground cumin or cumin seeds

6 leaves oregano

4 bay leaves

Salt and pepper to taste

Chopped parsley

Grind the spices (except the bay leaves) and blend with vinegar and some oil. Rub into fish.

Cut up the vegetables. Put the fish on the bay leaves and cover with the vegetables mixed with the rest of the oil. Bake.

Variant: Lard is used in the villages instead of olive oil. Butter can be used.

This can be done on the stove top also, in a heavy saucepan.

Chiles Stuffed with Dogfish

See also following dish.

1 piece, ca. 1 lb., of roast dogfish

Branch of epazote

4 tomatoes

1 onion

6 xkatik chiles

Vinegar

1/2 lb. lard

1 cube red recado

Boil the dogfish with epazote. Flake and fry with onion, tomato, and epazote (all cut up). Separately fry some of the onion and tomatoes.

Roast the chiles, wrap in a cloth and leave for a while, then skin and seed. Stuff with the dogfish mix. Fry.

Add the rest of the onion and tomatoes, with the recado, to the boiling stock. Cook down and pour this sauce over the chiles.

A much more elaborate version of this occurs in Patricia Quintana's wonderful book *The Taste of Mexico* (pp. 274-275).

However, only a true dogfish addict would go to the trouble of making even the simple form with real dogfish, and I strongly recommend using regular shark, or (still better) codfish, or some other firm white-fleshed fish. I always do. I admit it—I am not fanatical about dogfish.

Chiles Stuffed with Seafood

Quintana Roo variant of a universal Mexican dish.

6 large poblano chiles, or bell peppers

1 lb. mixed seafood: shrimps, crabmeat, fish, shellfish

Lard

2 cloves garlic, chopped

Oregano to taste

3 tbsp. cilantro, finely chopped

2 lb. tomatoes

1 onion

1 xkatik chile

1 habanero chile (if tolerated)

Sear the large chiles or bell peppers. Seed. They can be peeled also.

Cut up the seafood (the more variety the better). Fry quickly with the spices. Stuff the chiles. Sauté and serve.

Separately, chop the tomatoes, onion and other chiles, roasting any or all if desired. Fry quickly. Serve this sauce over the chiles.

Tomatoes or other vegetables can be stuffed similarly.

Conch in Escabeche

Conch is, alas, getting rare due to overfishing and pollution, and this magnificent dish may not be with us long. However, the loss is not total, for any seafood can be cooked this way. Abalone or other relatively chewy sea food should be particularly good, but now abalones are rare too. One reader suggests scallops—not very close, but perfectly acceptable.

1 lb. conch meat

Juice of 2 bitter oranges or 6 limes

1 onion

5 oz. oil

1/2 bottle vinegar

2 xkatik chiles, roasted and seeded

6 oregano leaves

1/2 tsp. toasted cumin seeds

1 roasted head of garlic

4 bay leaves

Pinch of nutmeg

Salt and pepper to taste

Boil conch till tender. (For a conch, that can vary from several minutes to an hour, depending on the maturity of the conch, but for scallops a very few minutes is quite enough. Small scallops need little more than being brought to the boil.) Leave to cool in the orange or lime juice. Cut up.

Fry the onion lightly in the oil. Add the other ingredients. Boil quickly.

Marinate the conch in this.

Dogfish Pudding

1 1/2 lb. dogfish

1/4 tsp. oregano

2 branches epazote

1 onion

2 large chiles in vinegar

1 lime

4 eggs

1 tbsp. lard

1 oz. breadcrumbs (optional)

Salt and pepper to taste

Sauce:

2/3 lb. tomatoes

1 onion

1 tbsp. lard

1/4 cup dogfish stock

Garnish:

2 avocados

1 head of lettuce, preferably buttercrunch or red leaf

1 bunch radishes

Boil the dogfish with the oregano and epazote; save the stock. Shred the fish. Chop and fry the onion. Add the fish with the epazote leaves. Chop and add the chiles. Fry quickly.

Beat the eggs with some lime juice, salt and pepper. Blend into the fish mix. Put all in mold. Top with breadcrumbs if desired. Bake at 350.

For the sauce, roast the tomatoes. Blend with the onion. Fry in the lard. Add in the stock. Put over the pudding.

Garnish with avocado and radish slices and lettuce leaves.

I have not brought myself to using dogfish (see Chapter 2) in this. Use any white-fleshed fish, cod being probably best because it has enough flavor and texture to stand out in this pudding.

Fish a la Celestun

1 onion

1 bunch parsley

2 tomatoes

Fresh chile, to taste

1 red snapper or similar fish

4 cloves

1 tsp. pepper

Pinch saffron

Frozen peas (optional)

1/4 cup vinegar

Salt to taste

Chop the onion and parsley. Fry. Add the tomato and chile, roasted and blended. Add the fish and spices and vinegar; cook in the sauce till nearly done, about 15 minutes. Add the peas (if wanted) and finish cooking, 5-10 minutes.

In Celestun, a charming old fishing village famous for its flamingoes, the fish is usually fried first, sometimes grilled, and then covered with the sauce *after* it is cooked. The Celestunians use canned peas, having no frozen ones available, but frozen ones are better.

Fish Fajitas

A creative response to the fajita craze. This version is an elaboration of that created by the Faisan y Venado restaurant in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Quintana Roo.

1 lb. white fish fillet (not too delicate a species), cut into strips

Salt and pepper

Juice of 2 limes

4 oregano leaves

Pinch of cumin powder

2 cloves

Ground dried chile

1 onion

1 green pepper

1 tomato

Marinate the fish in the spices.

Cut vegetables into strips. Stir-fry with the fish.

Fish in Green Sauce

A classic Arabo-Spanish recipe, which has evolved into countless variations in southern Mexico. Compare variants in Chapters 2 and 4.

1 large bunch parsley

1 sprig oregano

1 bunch green onions with tops (trim off the ends)

1 bunch cilantro

6 tomatillos

2 xkatik or other mild green chiles

2 garlic cloves

1/2 tsp. black pepper

1/2 tsp. ground cumin

6 tbsp. vinegar

1 onion

Salt to taste

Oil

1 fish

Blend up the greens and flavorings in the vinegar. Fry in oil. Add the fish and cook.

Variants: This may be the most variable dish in the Yucatan Peninsula. Everybody has his or her own version of it. You can use any mixture of the green ingredients, in any quantity. You can vary the spicing at will. You can fry, grill or boil the fish first. Sometimes, people don't fry the green sauce first, but just fry or bake the fish in the sauce. In fact, you don't even have to have a fish. This sauce is used for other seafood and even for pork.

Here, for instance, is another version:

1 fish, ca. 2 lb.; or 2 lb. of fillets or fish steak
5 garlic cloves, roasted
1/2 tsp. cumin seeds
1/2 tsp. oregano
1/2 tsp. black pepper
Salt
4 tbsp. chopped Italian parsley
1/3 lb. tomatillos
2 xkatik chiles
2 green onions with the leaves except for the very tips
1/2 cup vinegar
1/2 cup oil

Clean the fish. Grind the spices and rub into the fish. Leave for an hour in cool place. Blend the other ingredients (greens, vinegar and oil). Put over fish. Cook in a covered dish over a slow fire.

Note that in this version the green sauce is not fried.

Yet another version, almost unbearably good, uses some hojasanta leaf.

Octopus in Its Ink

3 large octopi
6 garlic cloves, chopped

2 lb. tomatoes, chopped
1/2 cup olive oil
2 large onions, chopped
2 serrano chiles, chopped
Lard
3 bay leaves
1/2 tsp. ground pepper
1 pinch ground cumin
1/2 tsp. ground oregano
1 tbsp. parsley, chopped
2 tbsp. vinegar
Salt to taste

Take out the ink (remove ink sacs from octopi) and save it. Wash the octopi and rub with 1 clove of the garlic, mashed. Simmer, with a tomato, one onion, and lard, till octopi are tender. Then clean off membranes etc. and cut up.

Chop and fry the rest of the garlic, the chiles, and the other onion. When colored, add the bay leaves, the rest of the tomato, the pepper, cumin, oregano, parsley and the octopus ink dissolved in vinegar. When this begins to boil, add salt and the octopus. Boil a few minutes, till done.

Squid in its ink is made more or less the same way.

At this point I cannot resist mentioning a dish from Tampico's great seafood restaurant, the Restaurante Diligencia: seafood *petrolera*. This is basically the above recipe with other seafoods—shrimp, fish roes, some fish, clams or oysters—cut up and added. The name is a sick joke; Tampico has offshore oil, and thus oil spills at sea. This dish looks exactly like the aftermath of an oil spill. However, it tastes heavenly. The roes in particular “make” the dish.

Rice with Seafood

Another of those infinitely variable recipes. More typical of Campeche than Yucatan.

6 garlic cloves, chopped

1 onion, chopped

Oil

1 lb. seafood (mixed, or cut-up squid, or shrimp, or other)

1/4 cup vinegar

Several sprigs parsley, chopped

2 roasted tomatoes

2 cups rice

Salt and pepper to taste

Fry the garlic and onion in a little oil. Add the seafood. Add the vinegar. If octopus or squid are among those present, mix in the ink.

Add the parsley and tomatoes, chopped finely.

Separately, fry the rice. Add water and simmer over very low heat. When almost done, add the seafood.

Variant: This is the minimal recipe. Most people would add bay leaf, oregano, green peas, and bell or chile peppers (chopped). Many would add spices including clove, cinnamon, cumin and allspice—all in very small amounts. Some would throw in a carrot, or summer squash, or chayote, or anything else interesting and available.

Salpicon de Chivitos

Tiny sea snails with shells like curled goat horns (hence their name—“chivitos” means “little goats”). This is good with any shellfish. I first encountered it in a tiny cafe on an isolated beach on the north coast of Yucatan.

Boil the shellfish. Mix with their own weight (or a bit more) of raw chopped tomato, onion and cilantro. Dress with salt, pepper, dried oregano, lime juice and a bit of oil.

Samak Mishwi

Arabic for “roast fish.” I have seen it Yucatecanized to “*samik mishul.*” This is one of the relatively recent Lebanese contributions to the Yucatan world. It is as un-Maya a recipe as could be imagined, but I find fascinating the adoption of Lebanese culture in the Yucatan Peninsula.

2 fish

Olive oil

1 garlic clove

2 limes

4 oz. tahini (ground sesame seed paste)

6 sprigs parsley

Brush the fish with olive oil and grill.

Serve with sauce: Mash the garlic cloves with salt and mix with the lime juice and sesame paste. Thin this with water as needed.

Garnish with chopped parsley.

This sauce is a version of the famous *taratur* sauce of the Mediterranean, but substituting Mexican limes for lemon or vinegar.

Shrimps in Chirmole (or Chilmole)

Chilmole (Nahuatl for “chile sauce”) is a very widespread recipe type, deriving from central Mexico, and based on a rich sauce of ground dried chiles, usually thickened with masa. In central Mexico there is a whole connoisseurship of dried chiles, but in Yucatan there is not much choice.

1 lb. fresh or dried shrimp

4 oz. dried chile (ancho, morron or the like)

1 onion

3 garlic cloves
3 Tabasco peppers
6 peppercorns
1/2 tsp. achiote
4 large oregano leaves (or 1 tsp. ground oregano)
2 cloves
1 lb. tomato, chopped
1 branch epazote
2 oz. masa
3 eggs
Salt to taste

Boil the shrimps, peel and clean.

Toast the chiles and grind with the onion, garlic and spices. Combine with the shrimps, the stock they were boiled in, the tomato, the epazote and the salt.

Dissolve the masa and cook down the whole into a thick sauce. Serve decorated with slices of hardboiled eggs or other garnishes.

Warning: note that this recipe uses lots of chile.

(modified from Conaculta Oceano 2000b:33)

Snook in Escabeche

As explained in the Introduction, *robalo* in southeast Mexico is what is called “snook” in the southern US. It’s a flavorful, slightly oily, white-fleshed fish. Any equivalent fish will do; even salmon works fine for this one (texture and richness being more important in this case than flavor and “white fish” qualities).

4 robalo steaks
1 tsp. steak recado

1/2 tsp. ground coriander
1 pinch ground oregano
1 pinch cinnamon
1 pinch ground allspice
2 garlic cloves
2 heads of roasted garlic
4 bay leaves
Vinegar
Salt to taste

Fry the steaks till not quite done. Cool.

Dissolve the spices in the vinegar and some water. Add the fish steaks. Boil quickly.

Snook in Orange Juice

Fish:

2 lb. snook fillets
Juice of 1 bitter orange or a few limes
1/2 tsp. black pepper
1/2 tsp. oregano
Juice of 3-4 bitter oranges (or equivalent)

Sauce:

1/4 cup oil
2 cloves garlic
2 onions
2 bell peppers

2/3 lb. tomatoes

Salt and pepper to taste

1 sprig or more parsley

Marinate the fish in the orange juice, to which the ground spices are added.

Roll the fillets and fry very lightly. Cover with bitter orange juice. Bake at 350o.

Meanwhile, make the sauce: Fry the garlic and onions, chopped, in the oil. Add the chiles and tomatoes, roasted. Add the salt and pepper. Then add the chopped parsley. Cook.

Serve the fish with the sauce poured over.

Tik'in-xik

A very widespread traditional Maya fish dish. Its ancestry must go back to ancient times.

1 fish (2-3 lb.)

3 garlic cloves

1/2 tsp. oregano

1/2 tsp. cumin seeds

Juice of 1 bitter orange or 2 limes

2-3 tsp. achiote

1 tomato, sliced

1/2 small white onion, sliced

1-2 xkatik chiles, seeded, roasted and cut in strips

Salt and pepper to taste

Hojasanta and/or banana leaves

Clean the fish and slash its sides. Blend the spices, garlic, achiote and orange juice. Rub this recado well into the fish. Marinate for several minutes to overnight, according to preference.

Line a baking dish with banana leaves (or substitute). Wrapping with hojasanta leaves and then banana leaves gives better flavor. Put the tomato, onion and chile slices on it. Wrap well in the leaves and bake in a slow oven for 30 to 45 minutes.

Originally, of course, this would have been made in a pib, and you can still do this if you are very good at wrapping. It is also made on the grill, which is easier.

Fish steaks marinated in the recado and simply grilled (without the wrapping) are also excellent.

If you can't find banana leaves, wrap in any flavorful leaf, or put some fennel or bay leaves around the fish, and wrap all in aluminum foil.

Variants: Cinnamon can be added to the recado. All quantities can be, and are, varied according to what's cheap, available, or preferred. This is a notably variable dish; every restaurant has its own recipe.

Worker's Shrimp

1 lb. tomato

1 onion

3 garlic cloves

1 tsp. achiote

1/2 tsp. cumin seeds

5 allspice berries

1 oz. bottled green olives

1 oz. capers

A few raisins

1 sprig parsley

6 tbsp. oil

2 bell peppers

2 xkatik chiles

4 summer squash
2 chayotes
1/2 lb. potato
2 platanos
3 tbsp. vinegar
1 1/2 lb. shrimp (shelled and cleaned)

Roast the tomatoes. Blend with the onion, garlic, spices (ground), olives, capers, raisins, and parsley. Fry this sauce in the oil. Cut up and add the vegetables and cook ca. 20 minutes. Add the shrimp and cook till done, about 10 min.

Workers have more appetite than money, so a great quantity of vegetables are used here to stretch the shrimp.

The olives, capers, and raisins were originally elite Spanish ingredients, and are optional here. Leaving them out gives a more Maya dish—more like what workers really eat.

Fish in Vinegar

A variant of fish in escabeche—the classic Spanish sour sauce, from the Arabic *as-sikbaj* for a vinegared dish.

2 lb. fish, preferably robalo steaks but any firm-fleshed fish will do
4 bay leaves
1/2 bottle cider vinegar
1 onion
1 carrot
1 bell pepper or mild chile
4 potatoes
Oil
4 tomatoes
Oregano

Few sprigs parsley, chopped

Pinch of nutmeg

Salt and pepper to taste

Set a bit of water to boil, with the spices. Cook 10 minutes and take out fish. Chop the vegetables and cook in the vinegar and stock. Add a bit of olive oil. Pour over the fish and serve.

MEAT

Ajiaco, Yucatan style

A rather spectacular elaboration of a standard Mexican recipe. This is another dish that stretches the meat with lots of vegetables. It is thus notably healthy.

1 lb. pork loin

1 lb. pork short ribs

8 allspice berries

2 cloves

1 small cinnamon stick

1/2 tsp. coriander seed

1/2 tsp. oregano

3 garlic cloves

6 tsp. vinegar

1 onion

1 plantain

1/2 lb. tomatoes
2 bell peppers
3 xkatik chiles
1 chayote
1/2 lb. potatoes
1/2 lb. sweet potato
2 summer squash
1/3 cup rice
Pinch of saffron

Cut up the meat. Grind the spices and garlic, mix with vinegar, and rub into the meat. Cook for a few minutes. Then add the vegetables, in the order listed. The rice can be added with them or cooked and served separately.

Add the saffron at the very end (last 5 minutes of cooking).

Ajiaco, Quintana Roo style

2 lb. pork
4 leaves of oregano
4 garlic cloves
1 tbsp. black pepper
1 pinch cumin seeds
2 summer squash
2 carrots
2 chayotes
1 sweet potato
1 plantain
2 potatoes

1 cup rice
1 onion
2 tomatoes
1 green chile
4 oz. lard
Juice of 1 bitter orange
1 pinch saffron (optional; rare)
Salt and pepper to taste
One is tempted to add: 1 kitchen sink.

Boil the meat. Add the spices. As it cooks, cut up the vegetables and add them in.

Separately, chop up and fry the onion, tomatoes and chile. Add the rice. Add enough stock to cook and simmer slowly. As it cooks, squeeze in the bitter orange juice. Add the saffron at the very end.

Variant: This is a typical Quintana Roo dish in that it is delicately spiced. Most ajiacos use a great deal more chiles than this, with dried chiles being notably evident. Adjust accordingly.

The saffron is an exotic touch; in the villages it would not be found. But the other ingredients would. Dishes like this are typical of Maya village cooking, because the dooryard garden is apt to produce, each day, one squash, a couple of tomatoes, a few chiles, and so on—not a lot of any one thing, but an awful lot of different things.

Balinche Salad

Compare the Chojen Salad of the Chiapas highlands.

Cold boiled meat—deer preferred, beef common. It is shredded or chopped, with bitter orange (or lime) juice, chopped radish, cilantro, chile xkatik, and onion. Half a bitter orange is served on the side to squeeze on it.

Other names are used, and ingredients are mixed and matched according to taste.

This is one of those simple dishes that vary according to the creativity of the maker.

Beef in Broth

2 lb. beef, cut up

3 tomatoes

1 bell pepper

1 xkatik chile

1 onion

Half of 1 bunch cilantro

1 tsp. oregano

3 leaves mint

1 head of garlic

1 tsp. black pepper

4 tbsp. red recado

2 chopped summer squash

2 chayotes, cut up

Relish:

6 radishes

Rest of the cilantro

Juice of bitter orange

Salt

Habanero chile (optional)

Boil the meat. Chop and fry the tomatoes, bell pepper, chiles and onion. Add to the meat. Late in the cooking, add the herbs.

Roast the garlic and add it in.

Dilute the recado in some of the stock, and add in. Put in the squash and chayote. Cook till done.

Meanwhile, chop up the radishes, cilantro and chile and marinate in bitter orange juice. Eat as relish for the meat.

Bistec

In spite of the name (which is, of course, “beefsteak”), this dish is usually made with pork in Yucatan and Quintana Roo. However, it is made with beef too, especially rather tough cuts like flank steak.

2 lb meat, cut into thin steaks (1/8-1/4” thick)

Cinnamon stick

1 tsp oregano

1 tsp cloves

1 tbspp peppercorns

3 cloves garlic

Juice from 4 bitter oranges and 2 limes (or just 4-6 limes)

1 carrot

1 onion

2 tomatoes

1-2 potatoes

Salt to taste (traditionally this is an extremely salty dish, to restore salt lost in working in the blazing Yucatan sun)

Grind the spices together, and thin with the citrus juice. Marinate the pork in this for an hour or two. Fry in lard till done.

Meanwhile, peel the vegetables. Boil with salt. Serve the boiled vegetables separately from the bistec.

For sauce (separate): Roast the habaneros. Mash with salt. Add cilantro and onion, and a bit of lime juice. Or serve with limes, radishes and k’utbi p’ak.

Variants: The vegetables can vary according to taste, except that the tomatoes, onion and potatoes must be there.

Bistec (Steak with Potatoes) II: Urban Form

2 lb. tender beef or pork steak, cut thin

1 cube steak recado

Vinegar

Oil

3 tomatoes, sliced

1 onion, sliced

1 bell pepper, sliced

4 potatoes, sliced (in rounds)

Salt to taste

Dissolve the recado in a little vinegar and rub into the meat, with a lot of salt. Put a little oil on the bottom of a casserole or saucepan. Layer meat and vegetable slices. Cook over low heat.

Variant: with more onion and some garlic, instead of the tomatoes and potatoes, this becomes “steak and onions.”

But'

Maya for “minced meat” (not rump steak!). *But'* is translated into Spanish as *relleno*, “stuffing,” which is confusing when it is not being used to stuff anything.

1 lb. ground pork (ideally, finely minced meat of fresh leg)

1 tsp. steak recado

1 pinch ground clove

1 pinch ground cinnamon

1/4 cup vinegar
2 tsp. sugar
4 tomatoes
1/2 onion
1 green chile (or bell pepper)
12 or 15 olives
1 tsp. capers
Raisins to taste
Almonds (to taste; optional)
4 hardboiled eggs
Salt to taste

Mix the spices into the meat. Chop the vegetables. Chop the whites of the eggs (reserve the yolks for garnish). Mix all ingredients and cook in a frying pan, stirring.

This is usually used as a topping or stuffing. It is used to stuff turkey or to make meatballs cooked with cut-up turkey. Either way, the turkey is often boiled in a richly spiced stock (see turkey recipes). *But'* is also used in tacos or on sopes, etc., and of course for stuffing vegetables.

A very characteristic use: wrapped around hardboiled eggs and fried, like Scotch eggs.

Traditional village versions leave out some or all of the classic Spanish imports: olives, capers, raisins, almonds.

In fact, the very traditional, all-local form of it is:

But' Negro

2 lb. ground pork
1 cube red recado
1 cube black recado
1/2 cup vinegar
4 tomatoes

1/2 onion
1 xkatik chile

Proceed as for previous recipe. The same comments apply.

Variant:

8 tomatoes
1 xkatik chile
2 lb. ground pork
1/2 cube steak recado
1 cube achiote paste
1 pinch cumin
1 onion
3 garlic cloves

Roast and peel the tomatoes and chile. Dissolve the spices in water. Add to meat. Cook all in a frying pan, stirring. Chop the onion and garlic and add; they should fry up in the fat from the meat. Eat with tortilla chips.

Chocolomo

The name is “mestiza Maya”; *choko* is Maya for “hot,” *lomo* is Spanish for “loin.” Supposedly, the name comes not from the heat of the cooked dish, but from the fact that this was, and is, the traditional way to cook a freshly-butchered animal whose meat is still warm. The purpose of this dish is to use the more delicate parts of the animal—loin and innards—before they spoil. It is the standard “variety meats” dish in much of south Mexico.

Pork or beef heart, and small pieces of tripe
1 lb. pork or beef loin
Liver, kidney

Brain (optional)

Soup bones

Cube of steak recado

1 head of garlic

Juice of 1/2 bitter orange

4 tomatoes

1 onion, cut up

Sprig of cilantro

Sprig of mint

Chiles to taste

Clean the various meats well. Before cooking, the meat of the kidneys has to be trimmed of fat and thoroughly cut away from the tough white tubule system, and then soaked in water for a while. Discard this water after soaking. This process makes kidneys taste good instead of gross.

Cook the meat with the recados. Start with the heart, tripe, bones, and any tough cuts. Cook for an hour or more. Add the loin and cook a while longer. Then add the liver and kidney; cook for a little more. Add the brain (it is very delicate and cooks fast), vegetables and herbs. Serve with Basic Relish, lime wedges, xni-pek, and other garnishes; it is traditional to have a fairly full board of relishes and garnishes with this dish.

Variants: People use whatever mix of “variety meats” is available. If you don’t like the innards, it is perfectly possible to make this dish with just pork loin (as the name implies).

Cabbage, chayote, xkatik chiles, radishes, and other vegetables are added to this dish, according to taste.

Chorizo

2 lb. pork

1 tsp. pepper

5 allspice berries

1 glass sherry

1 cup vinegar

Nutmeg

1 dried chile, seeded, toasted and ground

Grind the pork twice. Grind the spices and add. Mix all ingredients and knead well. Let stand a while, then stuff into sausage skins. Smoke over smoldering fire including aromatic leaves such as guava, allspice or avocado.

It is possible to make patties and cook directly, without the sausage skins and the smoking process. In this case, try forming the patties around some aromatic leaves (bay leaves, herbs, etc.).

Cochinita Pibil

With this, we reach the crowning glory and fame of Yucatecan cuisine. It goes back to pre-Columbian times; the pit barbecue, a worldwide cooking method, was sacred to the Maya—or at least was used to prepare the sacred foods.

Unfortunately, this is also the easiest Yucatecan dish to ruin. I confess I have tried it only with pork roast, and only in the oven. I have ruined a few roasts even with this simplified form.

This recipe is adapted to a very small piglet. For a larger animal, you have to scale up the ingredients proportionately.

1 piglet, cleaned (ca. 10 lb., or up to 20), with all its innards, or a large pork roast (plus a pork liver, if you like liver)

3-4 cubes red recado, or mix equivalent amount of achiote with clove, cumin, black pepper, oregano, cinnamon and bitter orange juice to make up a paste.

Juice of 5 bitter oranges

Ground chile

Salt and pepper to taste (traditionally, a lot)

Mint leaves

2 xkatik chiles, cut up

Chives (or green onions)

Salt

Banana leaves, for wrapping

Relish:

2 red onions, finely chopped

Juice of one bitter orange

Chopped chiles

Dilute the recado in the juice of 5 of the oranges. Rub this well into the meat and let it marinate overnight. If using a pork roast, slash it and rub the marinade into the cuts.

Now, dig a pit about 4' by 4' by 3' or more. Heat rocks as hot as you can get them in a fire of very hot-burning wood. Transfer these into the pit. Put over them a layer of wet leaves.

Put the pork in a large, *high-sided* roasting pan and wrap *thoroughly* with banana leaves. (If none is available, use any flavorful, safe leaves and wrap the whole thing in aluminum foil.)

Separately wrap the brain (or leave it out). The liver should be wrapped separately, with chopped-up mint, chives, green chile and salt. (If liver is not liked, do this with some of the meat.)

For a really thorough job of using all the pig, chop up the fat, mix with the blood and some spices, and pack into the carefully-cleaned small intestines, thus making blood sausage. Cook with the rest.

Put the pork in the pit. Cover carefully with a fitting metal cover. Bury under a good foot of dirt.

Leave overnight. (Times range from four to twelve hours, but the longer the cooking, the better the result.)

Serve with the raw onions, chopped, marinated with chopped chile (and sometimes tomato) in the juice of the remaining bitter orange. Naturally, fresh habaneros are the chile of choice, but milder forms can be substituted.

Tomato or chile sauce is also often served.

In the Chetumal market, where many stalls sell cochinita pibil, the accompanying sauce is quite different, and wonderful with the dish: a simple guacamole made by mixing avocado and xkatik chiles, about half and half. (Some stalls use more avocado, some use more chile.) These are mashed to a smooth paste. Some lime juice can be added, to good effect. This is a really outstanding sauce for cochinita.

Fortunately for apartment-dwellers (and lazy people like me), this dish is perfectly easy to make in a regular oven, though it never tastes quite so good as when made in a pib. The secret is to wrap it thoroughly and cover it well, so that no liquid or steam escapes, and then cook it VERY SLOWLY—200°—for several hours, until the pork is very thoroughly done. A lot of liquid should result.

It is possible to wrap it thinly and roast at regular temperature (375°). Indeed, this is what almost all restaurants do, especially Yucatecan-style ones that are not in Yucatan! This produces perfectly good roast pork, but it isn't cochinita pibil, any more than orange soda is Dom Perignon.

The best cochinita pibil is found before dawn in the village marketplaces, where the farmers are getting a quick breakfast before going off to their *milpas*—cornfields—for a day's work. The cochinita, prepared by one of the country folk the night before, is freshly dug up and still hot and juicy. The cool air, wood smoke scent, and quiet Maya conversation add much to the experience.

Gopher

A traditional Maya dish. So far, I haven't tried it. You are welcome to do the experimenting with this one.

Trap a gopher. Roast (don't skin, don't clean, just roast). Rub the carbonized hair off. Take all the meat, innards included, off the bones. Mix with salt, bitter orange or lime juice, and chile sauce (or use these as a garnish). Make tacos of this with fresh tortillas. (The true outback thing to do is to pick the meat off the bones with the tortilla pieces.)

This is sometimes referred to, with more rhyme than reverence, as *baj yetel u taj*, "gopher with its dung."

K'ab ik (“Chile Stew”)

2 lb. beef with bones

2 cubes red recado, and a bit of extra achiote paste

1 cube steak recado

Pinch of allspice, or allspice berries

2 to 4 dried ancho chiles (I hope no one reads that as “24 dried chiles”)

2 sprigs epazote

Bitter oranges

1 head garlic

4 tomatoes

1 onion

Cut up and boil the meat. Add the recados, with a pinch of allspice powder or a few allspice berries.

Seed, toast and soak the chiles. Grind and add.

When the meat is soft, add epazote, juice of 1/2 bitter orange (or 1 lime), and a head of roasted garlic (peeled and mashed).

Add the tomatoes and onion, cut up, and finish cooking.

Serve with salsas.

Kibi

This is by far the most popular of the Lebanese contributions to Yucatecan food. Kibis are sold on every busy street corner. They have become so thoroughly Yucatecan that they appear on the menus of Yucatecan restaurants in Mexico City and Los Angeles!

The standard street kibi is uninspiring: ground lamb, bulgur, chopped onion and mint, formed into a depth-bomb (fusiform) shape and deep-fried. It is often served with a relish of chopped cabbage, chile and cilantro in vinegar.

A more authentic Yucatan Lebanese kibi recipe (from a booklet of Lebanese cooking in Yucatan, by Maria Manzur de Borge, that I have lost and that is no longer available) gives a better product:

2 lb. beef

2 lb. leg of lamb meat

1 lb. fine bulgur

Bunch of mint

3 onions

Handful of pine nuts (pinon nuts, pignolias)

Oil

Salt

Black pepper and chile, if wanted

Separate the fatter from the leaner bits of meat. Mince the meat and the onions. Soak the bulgur for an hour.

Mix the leaner meat with the bulgur and one of the chopped onions. Fry the fatter meat with two of the chopped onions. Add the pine nuts.

When the fat is fried out of the meat, drain and mix with the lean meat. Form into depth-bomb shapes and deep-fry. A lower fat alternative (perfectly traditional) is to bake in a baking tray.

Lomitos

2 lb. pork, cut up

1 cube red recado

Juice of 1 bitter orange

1 onion, chopped

2 tbsp. lard

1 lb. tomatoes

2 xkatik chiles (or other fresh chiles, even to habaneros)

1 roasted head of garlic

Rub the pork with the recado mixed with the juice.

Chop and fry the onion in the lard. Add the tomato and chiles. Put in the pork. Add water and simmer. Add in the garlic and cook till done.

Old Rags

Ropa vieja—so named from its appearance, like old shredded rags—is a classic dish known throughout Mexico and the Spanish Caribbean. This is the Yucatan version.

1 lb. leftover stewed pork or beef (if starting from scratch, stew the meat a LONG time, till it is “boiled to rags”)

1 onion

4 cloves garlic

5 tomatoes

1 bell pepper and/or 1 xkatik chile pepper

1-3 sprigs or small branches of epazote

1/2 cup bitter orange juice

1 cube red recado

2 tsp. black pepper

Salt to taste

Shred the meat into small fibres.

Chop up the vegetables and fry, starting with the onion and garlic. Add the meat and fry all.

Many variants of this recipe exist. Tomato sauce, other spicing, etc. can be tried.

In much of the Caribbean this dish is served with “Moors and Christians” (cooked black beans mixed with white rice).

The famous Cuban version of this dish is much spicier. It uses much more garlic, and really hot chiles instead of mild ones. You can vary this recipe accordingly. 3 dried ancho chiles, ground, is a good start.

Om Sikil (Pipian I)

This is a village recipe, extremely conservative—basically pre-Columbian (note lack of frying and lack of any nonnative ingredient except black pepper).

The Nahuatl word “pipian” has almost displaced the ancient Maya name *om sikil*, but the latter is still heard.

2 cups sikil

6-8 cups water

1/2 red onion, chopped

1 tomato, chopped

2 cloves garlic, mashed

1 tsp. ground pepper

2 achiote cubes dissolved in water

1 tsp. dried oregano leaves

2 red chiles

2 lb. meat or fowl

1 cup sour *abal* (Yucatan “plum”; substitute sour plums)

1 tbsp. lard

4 oz. masa

Mix the sikil with the water. Strain. Bring to boil and add the chopped vegetables. Cook ten minutes. Add in the meat and spices. Cook till meat is tender, about 1 hour. Toward the end, add the abal or sour plum fruits.

Take out 2 cups stock. Slowly work into it 1 tbsp. lard and 4 oz. masa. Return this to the soup to thicken it.

It is perfectly possible to dispense with this thickening step.

Pipian

Compare Om Sikil, above.

4 oz. sikil

3 dried chiles

2 tbsp. achiote

2 garlic cloves

2 lb. meat (any sort), cut up

1 branch epazote

4 tomatillos

1 tbsp. masa

2 tbsp. lard if using lean meat (pan drippings here, definitely not commercial lard)

Salt and pepper to taste

Mix sikil with water and bring to boil.

Seed, toast and soak the chiles. Grind them with pepper, achiote and garlic. Add to the sikil.

Add the meat, epazote and salt. Let boil. Add the tomatoes, blended up.

Thicken the sauce with the masa. Add the lard. Cook till done.

Pok Chuk (Maya for “pork chop,” usually spelled “poc chuc”)

This dish was created by the restaurant Los Almendros of Ticul. Los Almendros has an old Mérida branch, and now is developing branches elsewhere. This dish is widely imitated and varied. What it lacks in complexity, it more than makes up in popularity. One of the reasons is the beautifully artistic arrangements that can be made with the separate sauces and beans on the plate.

Rub a thin-cut pork chop with steak recado or red recado. Grill.

Serve with Tomato Sauce, K'utbi Ik, roast onion, cooked black beans, and bitter orange or lime quarters—each served separately in neat piles around the plate. Avocado slices and other garnishes are often added as well.

Pork and Chaya

2 lb. pork

2 tsp. oregano

4 garlic cloves

1/2 tsp. cumin powder

20 chaya leaves (if no chaya is around, substitute 1 bunch Swiss chard)

1/2 cup rice, pre-soaked

1 pinch saffron

Relish:

1 red onion, chopped

3 tbsp. chopped cilantro

Juice of 2 bitter oranges

Boil the pork. Add the spices. When well cooked, add the chaya, rice and saffron. Simmer till rice is just done, ca. 15 min.

Prepare a relish with the onion, cilantro and bitter orange juice.

This is a very Moorish-style recipe; Moorish cooking often involves cooking the rice or other starch in with the meat (as well as the addition of saffron). It produces a rather stodgy dish, especially if overcooked. Thus, you might well want to cook the rice separately and serve the stew over it.

Pork and Beans I (*Frijoles con Puerco*)

This dish is the local variant of a dish universal in the west Mediterranean world: south France, Spain, Portugal. Always, it involves beans of one or another type, with various tough parts of the pig. This black-bean version is a sacred Yucatecan tradition. It is often served regularly on a particular day of the week (the day varies from place to place) as the Daily Special. Whoever said neck bones were low? They're among the best parts of the pig. Also, true Yucatecans are sometimes militant about the tail and ear, but non-Yucatecans can be forgiven for leaving them out!

1 lb. black beans

1 lb. pork meat, cut up

1/2 lb. pork neck bones

1 pig tail, cleaned

1 pig's ear

1 tbsp. black recado

1 tbsp. red recado

4 chopped tomatoes

1 branch epazote

3 oz. lard

1 tbsp. masa

Cook the beans. Cut up the pork and add.

Dilute the recados in half a glass of water and add to the above.

Fry the tomatoes and epazote in lard. Add in the masa and half a glass of water and cook till thick. Add this to the stew. Cook a minute more and serve forth.

Serve as is, or remove the pork from the beans and serve them separately. Either way, a full range of relishes and garnishes should be provided, but must always include chopped radish with onion and cilantro in bitter orange or lime juice; and Tomato Sauce or K'utbi Ik on the side.

Rice is often cooked in the cooking liquid (after initial frying) and served separately.

“Red” variant: Use more red recado (2-3 tbsp. or even more) and some ground allspice.

Pork and Beans II

This is a Yucatecan variant of a more Peninsular-Spanish version of the same dish. In Spain the beans would be white—originally fava beans, now white frijoles. In Yucatan red beans are sometimes used, and are very good in this dish.

1 lb. white or red beans

1 lb. pork

1 lb. pork ribs

6 cubes red recado

Vinegar

1/4 cabbage

1 summer squash

2 plantains

1 lb. potatoes

3 oz. raw ham

2 oz. bacon

2 Spanish chorizos

4 tomatoes

1 onion

1 bell pepper

4 green chiles

1/2 lb. lard

Salt to taste

Cook the beans.

Cut up the pork and ribs. Add the red recado dissolved in vinegar.

When the pork is mostly done, add the beans, and the squash, cabbage, plantains, and potatoes (all cut up).

Separately, fry the chorizo, bacon and ham. Add the tomatoes, onion, bell pepper, and chiles. Fry. Add a bit of vinegar. Mix into meat and beans at last minute and simmer a while.

Variation comes by adding or subtracting different sorts of preserved pork products.

Pork and White Beans

By contrast, this is a very traditional, very Maya recipe. White navy beans, dried limas or black-eyed peas may be used.

2 lb. white beans

2 lb. pork, preferably leg meat and ribs

1 onion, chopped

1 bell pepper, chopped

2 tomatoes, chopped

1 tbsp. red recado

Water

1 xkatik chile

1 head garlic, roasted

Salt and pepper to taste

Cook the beans. When mostly done, add the pork, previously fried in its own fat (i.e. cook, preferably in stickproof pan, till some of its own fat renders out to fry it; you may have to add some water at first).

In this fat, fry the chopped vegetables with red recado dissolved in water or bitter orange juice.

Combine all ingredients and cook till done.

P'uyul de Chicharron K'astak'an (“small pieces of thoroughly-cooked chicharrones”)

A very Maya dish.

Take bits of pork skin attached to fat and meat—i.e. like chicharrones but with the meat attached, not just the skin. Deep-fry for a very long time, till thoroughly crisp. Eat in tacos with Basic Relish or similar garnishes.

Low-fat variant: pan-fry or grill bits of pork.

Steak a la Valladolid (*Bifstek vallisoletana*)

A simple but wonderful and deservedly popular recipe. Valladolid (Yucatan) is the center of the highly traditional maize-growing region of eastern Yucatan state and neighboring Quintana Roo. It is a homeland of simple, filling, but superb foods.

Rub a thin steak or pork fillet in recado of black pepper, garlic, lime juice and salt. Then rub on red recado made of one cube achiote paste, lime juice, ground cumin and a little ground clove, dissolved in bitter orange or lime juice. Marinate an hour or more. Grill.

Stuffed Chayote (“Chayote Slippers”)

A manifestation of the classic stuffed vegetable dishes of Middle Eastern cooking—another Moorish legacy in Spain; note the distinctive suite of Spanish ingredients, the olives, capers, and raisins, appearing yet again.

Basically a variant of Stuffed Squash, below.

1 lb. ground pork

1 onion

1 bell pepper

2 garlic cloves

1 tomato

4 chayotes

1/2 tsp. oregano

1/2 cup oil

Olives, capers, and raisins (optional)

Salt and pepper to taste

Cook the chayotes. Cut in half lengthwise, removing the central seed. (The result looks like a slipper.)

Meanwhile, cook the meat in a frying pan. In the rendered fat, cook the tomato, onion, and pepper, chopped. Add the olives, capers and raisins. Cook this mixture down till dry.

With this, stuff the chayotes. Bake in a pan for a few minutes till it all holds together.

Stuffed Cheese

A thoroughly Spanish-style dish, with Moorish antecedents, now thoroughly nativized in the Yucatan Peninsula. Large Dutch Goudas—alas, often of a quality too low to be seen in the home country—used to be sold everywhere, wrapped in red wax and red plastic wrap. Recently, however, the balance of payments has made them expensive, and they are no longer village food.

There may still be a few proper ladies who refer to these cheeses as *chak chi*, Maya for “red edge,” since *queso*, “cheese,” is one of the many, many, many words that have a double meaning in Yucatan. (The same ladies refer to brown sugar as *piloncillo*, never *panoche*, and refer to eggs as *blanquillos*—“little white things.”)

These large cheeses are often sold by the slice in rural markets. Only the rich can afford the luxury of using a whole ball for a single dish.

Unlike most Yucatecan specialties, this dish is a cholesterol-avoider’s nightmare.

1 ball of Dutch cheese

2 lb. pork

14 eggs, 12 of them hardboiled

3 cloves garlic

Dried oregano to taste (use a lot)

1 clove (or more)

Oil

Raisins, olives, and capers, to taste (a lot)

Lard

Saffron, to taste (optional)

1 cup flour

2 cups of tomato sauce

Salt and pepper to taste

2 xkatik chiles

2 serrano chiles

1 bell pepper

1 lb. tomato

1 lb. onion

Unwrap the cheese, remove the wax, cut in half and hollow out.

Cook the meat. Save the stock.

Peel the boiled eggs. Chop up the whites.

Prepare a recado by grinding together the garlic, oregano, clove and saffron.

Mince the pork. Mix in the egg whites. Fry with a bit of the recado. Add generous amounts of raisins, olives, capers, and 3-4 oz. of the scooped-out part of the cheese.

Take off the fire and mix in the two raw eggs and the saffron. Stuff the cheese with this mixture.

Seal the cheese shut with the flour (made into paste with a bit of water).

Wrap in a cloth and steam (or boil, but the water coming up only an inch or so) for an hour (adding water if necessary). Don't worry if it falls apart. It often does.

Serve with a sauce, as follows:

Roast the chiles, tomatoes and onion. Skin. Chop fine and fry in lard. Add the meat stock and the rest of the recado. Add more capers, olives and raisins. Thicken with a bit of flour.

Cut the cheese in quarters and cover with the sauce.

The flavor of this recipe depends heavily on the use of a lot of recado, capers and olives. Otherwise, it is bland and greasy to a serious degree.

Variant: Shrimps and other sea foods are sometimes used for the stuffing.

Stuffed Squash

A dish with Spanish and, ultimately, Moorish roots, adapted to New World squash. Very similar dishes are prepared by more recent Arab immigrants, especially of the Lebanese community that developed in the late 19th century in Yucatan; see below. Moreover, this dish has rebounded to the homeland; stuffed Mexican summer squashes, prepared with recipes very similar to this one but substituting lamb for pork, now universally join the original stuffed eggplants and so on, throughout southern Spain, the Middle East, and the Arabic world.

6-8 summer squash

1/2 lb. ground pork

4 cloves

Small stick cinnamon

6 leaves oregano

4 cloves of garlic, roasted

Vinegar

Pinch of saffron

Around 20 raisins

1 tsp. capers

Olives, as desired

Almonds, as desired

4 tomatoes

1 onion

2 xkatik chiles or 1 bell pepper

Lard or oil (olive oil is traditional, and best)

Pork stock

Salt and pepper to taste

Blanch the squash and hollow out.

Fry the ground pork. If it is fat, enough fat will render out to fry it; if it is lean, add a little lard or oil.

Grind the spices, except the saffron, and make into a recado paste with a little vinegar. Add to the pork.

Add the vegetables (chopped finely; the onions first), then the saffron (not all of it), raisins, olives, almonds and capers.

Stuff the squash with this mix. Bake, or cook on stove top in a pan with a little water, until squash is soft.

Prepare a sauce by cooking down the stock with some vinegar, saffron, salt, and, if wanted, a little flour to thicken. Pour over the squash. Some form of tomato sauce is often used with or instead of this sauce.

Variants: the raisins, olives, almonds, and capers can be left out. The sauces can also be dispensed with.

Variant: A Lebano-Yucatecan version uses lamb, pine nuts, tomato and cinnamon as the basic stuffing. It can be modified by adding the chiles, etc.

Tablecloth Stainer (*manchamanteles*)

One Yucatan variant of a very widespread and popular Mexican dish. The sauce is brilliant red and leaves an almost permanent stain, hence the name.

2 lb. pork loin (or other meat)

Lard for frying

Meat stock

4 dried ancho chiles

2/3 lb. tomato

1 onion

2 cloves garlic

1/2 tsp. cumin seeds

1 stick cinnamon

2 cloves

8 allspice berries
1 tsp. oregano
1 tsp. sugar
1 plantain
1/2 lb. potatoes
1 sweet potato

Cut up the meat. Fry in lard. Toast the chiles. Roast the tomato, onion, and garlic. Blend these with the chiles. Grind the spices and mix in.

Add these to the meat. Add the stock. Simmer till meat is done.

Separately, boil the plantain, potatoes, and sweet potato. When done, add to the meat.

In central Mexico this dish would usually have a lot more chiles, of 2, 3 or even 4 varieties. I prefer that to the Yucatan form. But the Yucatan form has more subtle, harmonious spicing and more vegetables, and the wonderful roasted tomato-onion flavor. Nobody says you can't have it all....

Tasajo with Chaya, I

2 lb. tasajo (salted air-dried beef), soaked and cooked for a very long time
3 cubes red recado
1 lb. chaya leaves
2 summer squash
1 bitter orange
1 roasted head of garlic
Juice of 2 limes
3 habanero chiles

Tasajo is the Spanish and Central American equivalent of jerky (which is originally Peruvian—our word comes from the Quechua Indian word *charki*). Tasajo is saltier and not quite so tough as real jerky.

Soak the tasajo for a long time in several changes of cold water. Then wash and cut up.

Boil with the recado for a couple of hours. Then add the squash (cut up), garlic and chayas. Cook another 15 minutes.

Take the ingredients out of the stock. Squeeze the bitter orange (or a couple of limes) over them. Serve the soup separately.

Seed and roast the chiles. Mash with salt and lime juice. Serve on the side.

Variant: The meat and chaya can be taken out of the stock before quite done, chopped finely and fried with onion or garlic. I like this better.

This recipe would work with corned beef or even with a tough cut of fresh beef.

Tasajo with Chaya, II

2 lb. tasajo (salted dried beef), soaked and cooked for a very long time

1 lb. chaya leaves

2 oz. bacon

2 oz. chopped ham

4 cloves

4 bay leaves

Salt and pepper to taste

Fry the meat, bacon, ham and flavorings. Add water and cook 30 minutes.

Boil the chaya leaves and blend. Fry this in a little oil. Put over the meat and cook.

Variants: This sauce is also ideal with fish. Add any other greens to the chaya. More or different spicing can be used.

Ts'aanchak (familiar as *dzanchac* in older spelling)

A traditional way to cook deer, from long before the Europeans came. Now adapted to Spanish-introduced animals.

1 lb. beef, any cut (this is a good way to use tough or bony cuts, etc.)

3 garlic cloves

1 onion, chopped

6 ears sweet corn (optional)

2 summer squash, cut up (optional)

2 limes

Salt and pepper to taste

Relish:

1 bunch radishes, cut up very finely

1 habanero chile, cut up

1 onion, cut up finely

1/2 cup cilantro, cut up

Juice of 1 bitter orange

Salt to taste

Boil the meat till tender.

When almost done, add the vegetables (if wanted—this is often just a meat dish).

Serve with the relish—the cut-up ingredients marinated in the citrus juice. Slices of bitter lime can be used as flavorful garnish, if you can get them.

The vegetables are optional; any combination can be used. The Maya village version is simply boiled deer meat with the relish.

The stock is critical here. Tough, lean, flavorful meat should be used, and simmered slowly for a long time, to produce a really good stock. It is eaten as soup, accompanying the meat, like the ancestral peasant form of French *bouillon et bouilli*. Naturally, this is also accompanied by a constant stream of fresh-made tortillas from home-grown corn.

There are many variants.

Ts'ik

1 lb. venison, cooked (any other meat can be substituted)

2 tomatoes

1 onion

Several radishes

10-20 sprigs cilantro

1 jalapeño chile

Juice of 4 bitter oranges

Cut up and boil the venison. Cut up the other ingredients and serve with the cooked meat.

This is better if the venison is marinated before cooking, and better still if it is cooked in an earth oven (*pib*) rather than boiled.

A very simple standard. This is the way ordinary Maya prepare the leaner types of meat—traditionally, venison—for a quick lunch.

By shredding the meat and mixing it with the relish, one creates the dish known as “balinche salad,” above, or by other names.

White and Gold Stew

A superb, elegant dish, this stew is thoroughly Spanish in origin, and thus out of place in this book—but too good to leave out!

1 lb. meat (anything will do)

4 cloves

Small cinnamon stick

1/2 tsp. cumin seeds

2 packets saffron, dissolved in a little water

1 tsp. ground oregano

1 tsp. ground thyme
1 head garlic, roasted
Salt to taste
2 oz. vinegar
Olive oil (or lard or vegetable oil)
1 bunch green onions, roasted
Green chiles, to taste
Sugar to taste

Grind the spices (or use ground ones to begin with). Rub into the meat, with the salt. Brown the meat over low heat. Add water, vinegar, oil, the sugar (if desired) and the vegetables.

Variants: a little sherry can be added. Red recado can be used.

Xakan jaanal

Maya for “mixed food,” which this certainly is. It is a particularly good and easy dish. In contrast to the foregoing, this is a solid village dish.

2 lb. pork ribs
1 10-oz. package frozen lima beans or black-eyed peas
3 garlic cloves
1-2 tsp. oregano
Salt and pepper to taste
Branch of epazote
2 chayotes
1 kohlrabi
1 head cabbage
1 onion, chopped
2 tomatoes, chopped

1 xkatik chiles, chopped

1 cup rice

Cook the pork. When it is nearly done, add the beans, garlic, oregano, salt, pepper and epazote.

Cut up the chayote, kohlrabi and cabbage. Add into the pork and beans.

Separately, fry the chopped onion. Add in the tomato and chiles. Add in the rice and fry a while. When it begins to stick, add in enough broth from the pork and beans to cover to depth of 1/2 to 3/4 inch. Simmer over very low heat till the liquid is absorbed.

Serve the pork and vegetables over the rice.

Variants: this dish is infinitely expandable. It can also be contracted perfectly well by leaving out the chayotes, kohlrabi and cabbage, or replacing them with any appropriate vegetable. Eggs are sometimes added to hardboil in the stock.

Yucatan Stew

1 lb. meat

1 head of garlic, roasted, mixed with juice of one bitter orange

1/2 tsp. pepper

1-2 cloves

1 pinch cumin seeds

Sprig of fresh oregano or tsp. dried oregano

1 small bunch cilantro

3 tomatoes or 6 tomatillos

1 large green chile

1 onion, chopped; and/or a whole green onion, leaves and all except the tough top ends

Cook the meat. When it comes to boil, add the spices. When it is soft, chop or blend up the vegetables, fry, and add.

Eat with Basic Relish.

POULTRY

Chicken Adobo

- 1 chicken
- 3 cloves garlic
- 1 1/2 tsp oregano
- Large stick of cinnamon
- 1 tbsp peppercorns
- 1 oz. red recado
- 1 lb potatoes
- 1/2 onion
- 2 mild chiles, chopped
- 1 lb tomatoes, chopped

Cut up the chicken and boil. Mash the garlic, oregano, cinnamon, and peppercorns together. Add these and the potatoes, cut up, and cook till chicken is nearly done. Then mix recado with some of the the stock. Fry the onion, chiles and tomatoes. Add these to the mix and finish cooking quickly.

Chicken Asado

This dish is great as is, but is far, far more commonly used as the start of something else. This is the cooked chicken that is used in panuchos, salbutes, tamales, and countless other snacks and made dishes. It was originally made with turkey, and often still is.

- 1 chicken
- 1 oz. red recado mixed with lime juice, lard or chicken stock, and more salt

1/2 onion, chopped

2 tomatoes, cut up

1 hot chile

Cut up and boil the chicken until almost but not quite done. Take it out of the stock; save the stock. Rub the chicken with most of the recado mix and roast it in a hot oven (ca. 375°). At this point, if you are making this chicken only to use in panuchos or the like, set the chicken out to cool and then pull the meat off it.

Then, mix the rest of the recado into the stock. Add the onion, tomatoes, and chile to the stock. Cook and serve as soup with the chicken if you still have it, or, if the chicken's destiny is otherwise, add noodles and/or potatoes and other vegetables and a little of the dark meat of the chicken to the soup and finish cooking.

This dish has to be carefully made if you use United States chickens, which are very tender. They tend to fall apart if boiled very long. This dish requires that the chicken be boiled only enough to tenderize it and sterilize it. If it falls apart, it can't be roasted properly.

Variant: this is made with black recado, too, especially if one is using turkey.

Chicken a la Motul

2 chickens

1/2 cup red recado

Juice of 2 bitter oranges

Lard

10 fried tortillas

3 large tomatoes

1 lb. refried beans

4 oz. cooked ham

Canned peas for garnish (or 1 10-oz pack frozen peas—untraditional but far preferable)

3 oz. grated Mexican sharp white cheese (if unavailable, use feta)

Salt to taste

Rub the chickens with salt and recado dissolved in the orange juice. Boil in a little water. Drain; fry. Take the meat off the bones and shred the meat.

Boil the tomatoes in a very little salted water. Blend and fry in the oil.

To serve: Layer beans on a plate. Put a fried tortilla on this. Add the shredded chicken. Then add the tomato sauce. Cover with another tortilla. Pour sauce over all. On the top of this stack, put the ham, peas, and grated cheese.

Variants: Turkey is more traditional, but very rarely found now in this dish.

The chicken can be cut up, and used bone-in, rather than boned and shredded.

This is only one of the architectural marvels of Motul cuisine. Motuleños love to pile foods on a tortilla and top with some peas. Possibly the Maya pyramids inspired it all. It is cooking for the eye as well as cooking for the palate.

Chicken a la Ticul

Ticul is a large town in southern Yucatan, famous for its pottery, shoemaking, and food.

1 chicken, cut up

Lard

2 oz. ham, chopped

2 heads lettuce, chopped; optional (I prefer it without)

2 potatoes, cooked, chopped

1 stick cinnamon

6 peppercorns

2 cloves

4 large oregano leaves (or 1 tsp. ground oregano)

1 onion

3-4 garlic cloves

4 tbsp. vinegar

Grated Mexican sharp white cheese (or feta)

Green peas (traditionally canned, but briefly-cooked frozen peas are far better)

Salt to taste

Boil the chicken. Drain, saving the stock. Fry in the lard with the ham, lettuce and potato.

Grind the spices, onion, garlic and vinegar. Add this to the stock and boil till it thickens.

Serve the chicken with this sauce poured over it. Top with grated cheese and peas.

Variant: The chicken can be breaded and fried. Fried beans are often an accompaniment. Other garnishes include red pepper strips, fried platano, etc.

(modified from Conaculta Oceano 2000b:45)

Chicken Chirmole

1 chicken

5 mulato chiles (or other dried chiles; mulato specified because the common ancho is a bit sweet for this recipe, but mulatos are rarely seen in Yucatan, so ancho is very often used)

1/2 cup sikil

5 toasted tortillas

5 peppercorns

1/2 onion

1 garlic clove

1/4 tsp allspice

2 tbsp. lard or oil

Salt to taste

Cut up and boil the chicken.

Blend the chiles (seeded, toasted and soaked), sikil, tortillas, pepper and onion. Note: the quality of the tortillas matters a lot in this dish. Get good, fresh ones.

Fry this sauce in the lard. Add two cups of the chicken stock. Add the chicken and cook till sauce thickens somewhat.

Variant: Ground blanched almonds make a very good substitute for sikil in this recipe.

Chicken in Bread Crumbs (Fried Chicken)

Not the most exciting dish, but too universal in Yucatan to ignore.

1 chicken, cut up

Lime juice

Salt and pepper

1 egg

Flour

Breadcrumbs

Oil

Boil the chicken. Then take out and marinate in lime juice, salt and pepper. Meanwhile, make a batter by beating the egg with flour. Dip the chicken in this, then roll in breadcrumbs. Deep-fry.

The advantage of this village method is that, since the chicken is already cooked, one leaves it in the boiling oil only long enough to crisp the outside into a shell. The result should be very crisp and not even slightly greasy.

Chicken Pibil

1 large chicken

1 cube red recado

2 tsp. pepper

1/2 tsp. ground allspice

1/2 tsp. ground cumin

Pinch of ground oregano
6 cloves garlic, roasted and mashed
Juice of 2 bitter oranges (or 4 tbsp. cider vinegar)
12 leaves of epazote
4 pieces of tomato
Chopped onion
Chopped chile
1 tbsp. lard
Salt to taste

Cut up chicken into quarters. Rub with spice mix (the spices dissolved in the bitter orange juice). Anoint banana leaves (or foil) in lard and wrap the chicken quarters—with a few epazote leaves, a slice of tomato, and a some chopped onion and chile on each quarter. Cook in a pib.

If baking in an oven, use a covered dish. The idea is to hold in all the steam, so none of the aroma is lost. Many a chicken pibil has been utterly ruined by baking without proper attention to this detail. One warning: If you do this, be sure the orange juice and the tomato don't supply too much liquid, or you'll get chicken soup instead of chicken pibil.

Naturally, one can vary the spice mix. Unauthentic but good is to add powdered chile pepper to the recado.

Chicken with Potatoes a la Quintana Roo

A very standard dish in the area where I lived and worked, out in central Quintana Roo.

1 chicken, cut up
Oil
5 oregano leaves
5 allspice berries
1 slice of onion

1/2 tbsp. black pepper
2 garlic cloves
1/2 cube red recado or achiote paste
Juice of one bitter orange
3 tomatoes, roasted and blended up
1 xkatik chile
1/2 bell pepper (optional)
1 jalapeno chile
1 lb. potatoes (small new potatoes, or cut-up larger ones)

Fry the chicken lightly in the oil, with the spices.

Blend up the onion, garlic and recado in the orange juice. Add to the chile and add just enough water to cook.

Separately, fry the tomato and the peppers, chopped.

Add to the chicken. Add in the potatoes and finish cooking.

Like many Quintana Roo dishes, this is very delicately spiced, and you may want to raise the amount of oregano, allspice and black pepper.

Chilmole

A relative of the “Turkey in Black Sauce” below

1 chicken, cut up
1 tsp oregano
4 cloves garlic
1 tbsp pepper
2 oz black recado, or make or approximate your own (see recipe above)
2 tomatoes
2 onions

Several dried chiles (1-2 anchos, or a few smaller chiles)

4 oz masa

1/2 c white flour

Boil the chicken. Grind the spices and garlic together, add to recado, add to stew. Roast the onion in the ashes. Add it and the tomatoes to the stew.

Toast the chiles (traditionally until completely black). DO THIS OUTDOORS, STANDING UPWIND; the smoke is intensely irritating. Add. Cook 45 min. Knead the masa and flour together. Add to stew, mix thoroughly to thicken stew, and cook for 10 min.

Variants: Pork can be added to this. The black recado can be left out, since it merely adds more to the toasted chiles and spices. Fresh chiles, roasted, can be used (but are not traditional).

Cuban Rice

A Quintana Roo dish, reminding us of the links between the Mexican Caribbean and Cuba. The Quintana Roo version seems generally to use more lime and herbs, less achiote and oil, than the Cuban.

1 chicken, cut up

Oregano, to taste

1 cube steak recado

7 garlic cloves

2 tomatoes

1 slice onion

1 bell pepper

3 cups rice

Lard

1 cup green peas (traditionally canned, but fresh or frozen are far better)

Juice of one lime

Salt and pepper to taste

Boil the chicken with oregano, the spices, and 5 of the garlic cloves.

Blend or chop finely the tomato, bell pepper, and onion. Fry. Add to stock.

Fry the rice with the other two garlic cloves.

Add the stock to this and simmer. When partly cooked, add the peas, chicken, and lime juice. Cook till rice is tender.

K'oolij blanco ("white stew")

1 chicken or (more traditionally) small turkey

White corn meal, stirred into stock to whiten it

1 small xkatik chile

2 cloves

Few cumin seeds

Few allspice berries

1 cinnamon stick

Head of garlic

1 tsp crushed oregano leaves

2 sprigs epazote

Salt

Pepper

Sprig of mint

1 onion, chopped

2 tomatoes, chopped

Roast chicken until almost done, on grill. Boil with corn meal and xkatik or bell pepper. Mash the spices and garlic together and add to stew. Add oregano and epazote. Add mint at end.

Separately fry the onion and tomato to sofrito. Add to stew near end of cooking, and cook just to get all mixed.

Mukbipollo

“Mestiza Maya”—Maya for “buried” (*mukbij*) and Spanish for “chicken.”

John Stephens’ account from around 1840 is classic:

“A friendly neighbour...sent us a huge piece of mukbipoyo. It was as hard as an oak plank, and as thick as six of them;...in a fit of desperation we took it out into the courtyard and buried it. There it would have remained till this day but for a malicious dog which accompanied them [the friendly neighbours] on their next visit; he passed into the courtyard, rooted it up, and, while we were pointing to the empty platters as our acknowledgment [sic] of their kindness, this villanous [sic] dog sneaked through the sala and out the front door with the pie in his mouth, apparently grown bigger since it was buried.” (Stephens 1843:21-22.)

Alas, all who travel in rural Yucatan, now as in Stephens’ time, encounter these oak-plank mukbipollos. They are the result of skimping on the fat chicken broth when you mix the masa for the crust, and perhaps of also baking too long.

The following is an elaborate village version.

1 chicken

2 lb. pork (optional)

1 cube red recado

1-2 tsp. steak recado (or just another half cube of the red)

Branch of epazote

Few oregano leaves

5” stick of cinnamon

Tsp. ground allspice or several allspice berries

2 cloves

5 roasted garlic cloves

4 tomatoes

3 onions

2 xkatik chiles

8 lb. masa

Salt and pepper to taste

Cut up and boil the meat in a lot of water. Grind the spices and add.

Separately cook the tomatoes and onions in a very little water with 1 tbsp. lard, and boil 10-15 min. till a sauce is formed.

Take out a cup of stock. Mix one fourth of the masa into the remaining stock and meat—slowly and carefully, so that lumps do not form.

Work the reserved cup of stock into the rest of the masa. If the stock isn't rich and fatty, you will have to add lard or oil, typically about 1/4 cup, or you will wind up with the oak plank. Again, work slowly.

With this mix, shape small pie shells like the familiar little chicken or steak pot pies of European and American cooking. Fill with the meat. Top with the tomato sauce. Cover with a top crust of masa. Rub over with thinned masa to seal. Wrap in several layers of leaves. Tie tightly to make a bundle. Bury these in the pib.

The feast from which this recipe comes was cooked in a pib 3' by 3' and 1 1/2' deep. My next door neighbors in Quintana Roo, Elsi Ramirez and her family, dug it in their front yard. Good firewood (the local equivalent of oak or mesquite) was put in, with large cobble-sized rocks on top of it. The wood was burned till it became ash and the rocks changed color. Then palm leaves were put over these until they were thoroughly covered. The mukbipollos, wrapped in banana leaves and then in palm leaves, were then put in. A metal cover was put over all, and dirt piled over it. It was left for 3 hours.

In urban realms where you can't dig up the yard: Line a baking dish with banana leaves or foil. Put the pies in, or just make one huge pie by pressing the masa against the banana leaves or foil. Bake in a slow oven, around 350o, for 3-4 hours. The exact heat must vary with circumstances. The idea is to get a soft bottom crust and tougher, somewhat crisped and toasted top crust.

Variants:

Ch'a-chaak waj (bread for the ceremony of praying for rain) is made as above, or one can fry achiote in the lard used in the recipe. The sauce should be thick so that the whole thing is more a cornbread than a pie.

The chicken can be shredded off the bones before use in the pie.

Dried chickpeas or lima beans, boiled till tender, can be added.

Spicing changes with the cook's taste at the moment.

Chekbij waj

Similar to a mukbipollo, but, instead of making yellow corn meal into a solid piecrust, one uses a very soft, wide, round cake of white masa with a lot of chicken-grease-rich-stock worked into it (making it quite red). The chicken is wrapped in this so the result is more like a tamale than a pie. It is baked or steamed in leaves like the preceding.

Pabixa'ak' (grilled or roast chicken)

Marinate chicken in red recado dissolved in bitter orange or lime juice, or in the spice mix for Cuban Rice, above. Marinate for an hour or two, then grill or roast.

Puchero

1 chicken

Lard

Black pepper

1/2 tsp. cumin

2-3 cloves

1 tsp. cinnamon

1 tsp. oregano

3 garlic cloves

1 white onion

2 tomatoes

1 small summer squash

2 chayotes

2 carrots

2 small bell peppers
2 potatoes
1 or 2 plantains
Cabbage
1 package (8 oz.) fideos noodles
Salt to taste
Sprig of mint

Cut up the chicken, scrub with lime, and fry in lard. Add salt, 1/4 of the onion, 2 tomatoes. When all have colored somewhat, add water. Make recado of the spices; add. Then add in the vegetables (the plantains cut up but not peeled). The cabbage goes in only when the other ingredients are fairly thoroughly cooked.

Saute fideos (thin angel-hair pasta) in a little oil. Add stock to cook them.

Angel hair pasta may be substituted, but look for Mexican fideos (thin noodles—from Arabic *fidaws*, old Andalusian pronunciation *fideos*, meaning “noodle”). They are thinner, cook faster and have more flavor.

Serve the puchero over these. Serve with Basic Garnish or close relative thereof.

Variants: The main one is that puchero is made with meat as often as with chicken. Pork or beef neck bones are particularly common and good. Pork ribs and pieces of stewing beef are also excellent. Pork and chicken, or pork and beef, are routinely combined in pucheros.

The vegetables, of course, are an open set. Garbanzos, sweet potatoes and other root crops are typically added. Sometimes turnips and kohlrabi (the latter surprisingly common in the Yucatan) find their way in.

Thai lime, cut up, is very good in this—served in the bowl, not cooked with the chicken.

Rice is also used. Any meat can be used instead of, or along with, chicken. Chicken and pork make a good—and frequent—combination.

Garbanzos are sometimes added.

Rice and Beans

A dish native to Belize—some would call it the national dish there. It has spread just across the border, and nativized in the Caribbean city of Chetumal, the capital of Quintana Roo.

1 chicken

Coconut oil

1 cube achiote paste

2 cloves garlic

Salt and pepper

1/2 cup rice

1/2 cup cooked red beans

1 plantain

1 onion

Cut up the chicken. Make a recado of the spices. Rub into chicken. Cut up chicken and roast the pieces or fry them in coconut oil.

Sauté rice in coconut oil. Add coconut cream thinned with some water and cook. Mix with the beans. (Excellent canned coconut cream may be found in any Asian-food market. If you feel compulsive, here's how to make it: Grate the meat of a very ripe coconut. Soak the gratings in warm water. Pack in a cheesecloth and wring out. This is great for developing the arm muscles.)

Cut plantain into thin strips and fry. Serve on the side.

Separately, slice and fry the onion. Serve over the chicken. Alternatively, make Marinated Onions (see above) and briefly fry them.

Serve the chicken separately from the rice-bean mix.

Accompany with boiled local vegetables (such as chayote), sliced; chopped cabbage marinated in vinegar, salt and pepper; sliced raw tomatoes; salsa cruda of onion, tomato, cilantro; and *xni'pek'* (habanero salsa; see above. Habaneros are just as popular in Belize as in Yucatan. In Belize they go by the English Caribbean name of "Scotch Bonnet" peppers.

Salpimentado ("salted and peppered")

2 chickens
1 lb. pork, lean, cut up
2 summer squash
2 potatoes
1 chayote
1 plantain
3 cloves
1 stick cinnamon
1 tbsp. oregano
1 red onion
3 bunches of spring onions (scallions)
2 heads of garlic
2 mild chiles
Salt and pepper to taste

2 white onions
1 cup vinegar
Pinch of salt
1 habanero chile
2 Thai limes (bitter limes)
1 bunch cilantro

Cut up the chickens. Set to boil with the pork. Skim, then cook for 15 min. Chop and add the vegetables. Grind the spices and add. Cook 20 minutes or more, until all are done. Meanwhile, roast the red onions, spring onions, chiles, and garlic. Add them into the soup at the end; cook a minute or so.

For the relish: chop the white onions very fine; add the vinegar

Turkey in Black Sauce

Here follow the traditional dishes of the four sacred colors. Turkey, the only large domestic animal in pre-Columbian times, was the ritual food, and still is to some extent. Chickens usually replace it now, being easier to raise.

1 turkey
1/2 lb. dried chiles
1 tbsp. black pepper
1/2 tsp. cumin seeds
1 tsp. oregano
15 cloves
1 1/2 tsp. achiote
4 oz. lard
2 onions, chopped
20 leaves epazote
3 lb. tomatoes, chopped
4 lb. ground pork
2 raw eggs
10 hardboiled eggs
2 limes
Salt and pepper to taste

Seed the chiles. Then toast them till they burn (literally catch fire). DO THIS OUTDOORS, STANDING UPWIND; the smoke can seriously damage eyes. Be sure no one is downwind. When the chiles begin to burn, stop the fire by throwing water over them; let them just blacken. Wash and grind with the spices. Then blend all in water.

Heat the lard. Then chop the onions and fry. When they color, add six epazote leaves and a pound of tomatoes (chopped). When fried, add the ground meat and half the ground chile mix.

Add the raw eggs and the chopped-up whites of the cooked eggs.

Meanwhile, clean the turkey and rub with salt, pepper and lime juice. Stuff the turkey with the meat sauce and the egg yolks.

Cook in a closed pot over a low fire. Add the rest of the ground chile, the tomatoes, the rest of the epazote, and some lard. Cook till turkey is done.

To make sure the chiles aren't overburned (producing bitter, scorched or sooty tastes), make them a day or two ahead of time, soak them, and discard the water.

Variant: The village form of this uses a lot of masa (about 6 lb.), stirred into the soup to lengthen it and make it suitable for pib uses. This makes a pretty stodgy dish, though.

Allspice berries can be added.

Turkey in Red Sauce

The red version of this quartet of traditional ritual turkey dishes.

1 turkey

1 tsp. black pepper

1 tbsp. oregano

8 cloves

1/4 tsp. allspice

2 tbsp. achiote

2 oz. dried chile

10 tomatoes

3 onions (and/or several cloves garlic)

10 leaves mint

3-4 oz. lard

1/2 -1 lb. masa

Rub the turkey with salt and leave for several minutes. Soak the dried chile.

Grind the spices (including the soaked chiles and the achiote) in a little water.

Roast the turkey till browned but not fully cooked. Cut in pieces. Simmer with the pork in 5 quarts water. Add the recado.

Chop the tomatoes, onion and mint. Fry in lard. Add to the above.

Thicken with masa. Cook till sauce thickens.

(modified from Conaculta Oceano 2000b:46)

Turkey in Yellow Sauce

The recipe for the brilliant yellow *k'ool* is about the same, with half the achiote and without the tomatoes and mint. Or use the very similar chicken stew from the mukbipollo recipe above.

Turkey in White Sauce

1 lb. pork ribs

1 turkey

1 branch oregano

10 peppercorns

3 garlic cloves (or more—up to one or two heads)

1 tsp. steak recado

1 tsp. red recado

Vinegar

Sliced onions

1 cup white corn meal

1 tsp. cumin seeds (optional)

1 tbsp. dried oregano

Boil the pork ribs in a large pot. Add the turkey, cut up. Add the spices, dissolving the recados in the vinegar.

Separate a few cups of the stock and dissolve the flour very carefully in it. Cook slowly till it thickens. Serve the turkey with this sauce poured over it.

Variants: it is possible to add quartered tomatoes, bay leaves, etc.

A much fancier version uses the classic Spanish combination of olives, capers, almonds, raisins, and a pinch of saffron.

A very interesting, and common, variant uses ground pork. It is fried, and when the fat has rendered out, the spices are mixed into it. (Some even chop tomatoes, onion, and chile peppers, and fry them in the mix, adding some of the almonds, capers, etc., but by this time we are dealing with a Spanish pork dish rather than a Maya turkey dish.)

If you can't find white corn meal, yellow will do. Some use white flour, but it merely thickens the sauce and makes it gluey, rather than adding the delightful texture and flavor of corn meal.

Turkey in Escabeche I: Simple Form

In most of the Spanish world, escabeche—from Arabic, and originally Persian, *as-sikbaj*, food cooked in vinegar—is something one does with vegetables and sea food. In Yucatan, it is first and foremost a poultry dish.

Marinate a turkey or chicken in a recado of cloves, cumin seed, cinnamon, black pepper, allspice, oregano, and garlic, mixed with a little vinegar (variants: water, lime juice, bitter orange juice).

Boil with salt and a chile or bell pepper.

Serve with sliced onions (as in recipe following).

Turkey in Escabeche II: Classic Escabeche Oriental

No one seems to have a conclusive account of what is “oriental” about this dish. One theory is that the name comes from the fact that the dish is typical of Valladolid in the eastern part of Yucatan state. However, a similar dish is called “oriental” in Spain, and it seems unlikely that influence from Valladolid (Yucatan) got that far, so I suspect “oriental” means “Moorish” or “Near Eastern” in this case.

1 turkey

1 tbsp cumin seeds
1 stick cinnamon
20 oregano leaves
8 cloves
1 tbsp. peppercorns
1 bottle vinegar
1/2 cup lard
8 xkatik chiles
2 lb. red onions
6 habaneros (!! Or fewer—or, if you can't deal with even one habanero, one mild chile)
4 roasted heads of garlic

The turkey can be cut up or whole. For the pib, it should be whole. Boil the turkey.

Grind up the spices and make a paste with the vinegar. Rub into the turkey. Put the turkey in large pot with the lard, garlic, and xkatik chiles (roasted). Bury in pib, or roast in the oven.

Cut up the onions and habaneros. Marinate in vinegar or lime juice, salt, cumin powder and toasted oregano leaves. Add some of the turkey stock. Serve as garnish.

Turkey Escabeche III

A variant, which I prefer, of the above.

3 lb. turkey parts, or 1 chicken
1/2 stick cinnamon
3 cloves
3 black peppercorns
4 cloves garlic
3 tsp. dried oregano
1 cube achiote paste

1 tbsp. lard

Juice of 6 limes

3 purple onions

Boil the turkey (or chicken) with a little dried oregano.

Grind the spices (including the rest of the oregano). Add 1/2 of the achiote cube and mix with juice of 1 lime. Score chicken and rub in this recado.

Slice the onions. Let sit for a while, then pour boiling water over them. Leave a few minutes, then drain and add juice of 5 limes and 1/2 tsp. salt. Or make the full Marinated Onions recipe with them.

Roast the turkey in a hot oven for 15 minutes, till skin is crisping. Or, if you have a pib, wrap it and cook it in the pib.

Add the rest of the achiote cube to the stock. Add 3 xkatik chiles (seeded and roasted) and a head of roasted garlic. Then add an onion, quartered.

To serve, chicken can be cut up and returned to stock. But, if one is eating it all with tortillas, the method is to take the meat off the bones, return the bones to the stock to boil some more, and eat the meat and soup separately. The onions are a side dish to add onto the meat.

Serve with jalapenos in escabeche or habanero chile sauce.

Variant: The above is a village form. Urban forms are apt to include canned green Spanish olives, capers, tomatoes, bay leaves, etc.

Fanciest of all is to use a turkey stuffed with *but'* (ground meat) and garnished with hard-boiled eggs. Increase spices accordingly.

Turkey San Simon

This dish is Yucatan food history in a nutshell. The turkey, tomatoes, chiles, and most of the spices are indigenous. The recado using bitter orange is Caribbean, specifically Cuban (itself a mix, about which I know far too little, of African and Native American elements). The bread thickening and the rest of the spicing is classic Moorish-Spanish. The plantains are a solidly African touch. The peas are a 19th-century Mexican garnish, derived probably from French usage. The roasted green peppers are a standard modern central Mexican garnish. And so on....

Recado:

1 tbsp. black pepper
1 tbsp. cumin seeds
1 tsp. cloves
1 tsp. allspice
1 stick cinnamon
1 head of garlic, peeled
1 tbsp. oregano

Dish:

1 turkey (ca. 10 lb.)
Lard for frying (1-2 tbsp)
2 heads garlic
1-2 tbsp. oregano
1 branch mint
Juice of 5 bitter oranges (or 1 cup vinegar)
1 oz. achiote
3 plantains, cut into long thin strips
10 slices French bread (or less—or even leave out)
1 10-oz. package of frozen peas
6 tomatoes, roasted and peeled
2 xkatik chiles
2 bell peppers, roasted and peeled
Salt to taste
20 green onions, roasted till beginning to brown

Grind all the recado ingredients together, dissolve in the bitter orange juice, and rub into the turkey. Marinate in refrigerator overnight.

Then, cut up and brown the turkey in lard with a roasted head of garlic, the oregano, mint and salt. Add water and cook, covered, till the turkey is almost done.

Separately, fry the plantains till soft; toast the bread; fry the tomatoes (chopped), and the chile and bell peppers (cut up).

Blend the tomatoes with the roasted head of garlic.

Now combine all ingredients except the plantains and bread. Cook 10 minutes. Then take the turkey pieces out of the sauce; serve the pieces and the sauce separately. Garnish with the peas, cooked and put over the turkey.

Serve with the plantains and toast on the side. Roast the green onions till soft and serve them on the side also.

(modified from Conaculta Oceano 2000b:47)

VEGETABLES

In general, the vegetable section of a Mexican cookbook is the shortest, if it exists at all. Yucatan is no exception. Vegetables are eaten as part of mixed stews, with meat, or they are garnishes. Still, there are a few vegetable dishes. Chaya, in particular, has been monographed by Jose Diaz Bolio. Some of the recipes below are inspired by his.

Alboromia

Another Arab dish—using Yucatecan recado! According to legend, Burun was a queen of old Baghdad, the wife of Caliph Al-Ma'mun, and she liked mixed vegetable dishes. Her name, variously distorted, applies to such, all over the Arab and Spanish worlds. She is especially associated with eggplant. Alboromia in countless forms is universal in Andalucía and Extremadura, and presumably came to Mexico very early, but one suspects, also, later Lebanese influence in this dish.

Such vegetable recipes as exist in Yucatan frequently turn out to be Lebanese. They are ideal for a vegetable course in a Yucatecan dinner, because they make an interesting contrast to the Maya and Spanish dishes.

1 eggplant

1 summer squash

1 lb. potatoes
1/2 tbsp. red recado
2 tomatoes
2 onions
2 garlic cloves, roasted
1 bunch parsley
1/2 bell pepper
2 tbsp. vinegar
Oil

Chop and fry the vegetables, starting with the onions, garlic and parsley. Add in the flavorings.

Variants: More spices and herbs can be added.

In both Spain and Lebanon, the ancestors of this dish lack the recado. In Lebanon, they usually have more herbs—mint in particular, and sometimes tarragon. These do not go particularly well with the recado. Leaving out the recado and using mint, tarragon and oregano or marjoram makes a good variant, similar to ones found among the Lebanese communities.

Bean Chirmole

1 lb. beans
25 small dried chiles or 4 dried ancho chiles
1/2 onion
1 lb. masa
2 cloves garlic
6 tomatoes
1 tsp. oregano
Cloves, to taste

Allspice, to taste

Lard (optional)

Salt and pepper, to taste

Cook the beans until almost done.

Toast and boil the chiles. Wash. Grind them with the spices. Add to the beans. Add the other ingredients.

Meat can be added to this, as can *abal* fruits (sour plumlike fruits; substitute sour plums). Both improve it quite a bit.

Black Rice

Chop and fry an onion and some leaves of epazote, and chile if wanted. Fry in a little oil. Add ½ cup rice and stir-fry. Then add liquid from cooking k'abax beans (enough to cover the rice to depth of 1 inch), and simmer, covered, over very low heat till done.

This is one of those simple but wonderful recipes.

Chaya basics

Chaya is much like spinach or swiss chard, and these leaves can always be substituted for it or combined with it. (Incidentally, “spinach” in south Mexico usually turns out to be New Zealand spinach or some other heat-resistant green, not “real” spinach.)

Boil chaya leaves. Chop and fry with onion. Salt, bitter orange juice, garlic, etc. can be added.

Variants: Scrambling eggs in with this mix is wonderful. Or an omelette can be made thereof. Adding chorizo, cut-up (previously soaked) salt meat, chopped ham, or comparable flavorings is even more wonderful.

Chaya is also good in any bean dish. Combining beans and chaya enormously increases the nutritional value of the dish, and tastes better, too. Chaya can also be put in any soup or stew, especially the ones with mixed vegetables such as puchero.

Chaya and Plantains

1 lb. chaya leaves

1 large plantain

1 bell pepper

2 garlic cloves

1 onion

2 tomatoes

1 tsp. cumin

Juice of 1 bitter orange

Salt and pepper to taste

Boil and cut up the chaya. Peel and boil the plantain and chop it up.

Chop up and fry the onion, garlic, pepper and tomatoes. Then add the chaya and plantain and the other ingredients and cook till hot.

This is a wonderful dish, very good with tender young Swiss chard or even turnip greens.

Chaya Rice

Fry onion in a bit of oil. Add the rice and fry. Add chopped chaya leaves (raw small ones or blanched larger ones), chopped tomatoes, and any other flavorings desired. Finally, add water to cover to depth of 1/2 “-3/4” and simmer.

Chaya Seafood Rice: Add shrimp and/or other seafood to this, along with the chaya.

Chaya Salad

Boil the chaya, chop, and eat with sliced onions and vinagrette dressing. Other vegetables can be added.

Chaya with Bacon

That old reprobate, Bishop Landa, when he was not torturing Maya to death in the Inquisition, was enjoying their food. (It is to the credit of the Spanish that Landa's cruelty earned him formal censure, even in that dreadful age.) Among other things, he noted that chaya was "good with much fat bacon." How did he cook it? History does not record, but here are some worthy possibilities:

1. Parboil chaya. Meanwhile, fry chopped-up strips of bacon. Drain off some of the fat. Then fry the chaya in the remaining fat, with the bacon bits.

Adding garlic and dried chiles to the frying bacon improves this version.

2. Boil the chaya with bacon strips, garlic cloves, and dried red chiles.
3. Boil slab bacon. Skim off as much of the fat as you can. Add chaya, garlic and chiles.

Being a Spaniard of his time, Landa probably went much more heavily into the bacon than we would do.

Chaya with Cheese

Boil chaya leaves in chicken stock. Sprinkle crumbled sharp white Mexican cheese over them.

Chaya with Eggs

1 large bunch chaya

1 onion

2 tomatoes

1 egg

Boil the chaya and cut up. Cut up the onion and tomato. Stir-fry the onion; add the tomato; then add the chaya; then add the egg. Stir-fry all.

K'abax Beans ("*Frijoles kabax*")

K'abax implies ordinary food without special seasonings. This is the everyday bean dish of Mexico. Cooked over a good wood fire on a Maya hearth, it is as fine a dish as anyone could want.

Put beans in water and bring to boil. Turn off and soak a few hours. Then (in the same water) boil till tender, adding salt, an onion, a sprig of epazote and perhaps some achiote. Eat with a relish of lime or bitter orange juice with chopped onion, cilantro, radishes and habanero chile.

Further manipulations include:

Blended beans: Cook beans as above. Blend, with their liquid. Add lard (Maya lard: see above) to taste. Or, fry in lard chopped onion, epazote and chile, and add into the beans. Boil. (This produces something very like the black bean soup of traditional United States cuisine.)

Refried beans: Mash the k'abax beans but without the liquid. Fry in lard. Add in above ingredients as desired.

Poor People's Paté

One of the Lebanese contributions to Yucatan's food. It is a variant of the "poor man's caviare" of the Near East and East Europe.

4 small eggplants

2 tbsp. chopped onion

6 chopped garlic cloves

1/2 cup chopped olives

2 bay leaves

3 tomatoes

2 cups cabbage, chopped
1/2 cup vinegar
1 cup yogurt (to serve separately)
Salt and pepper to taste

Peel and slice the eggplants. If you dislike the bitterness, leave in salted water for 20 minutes and then drain, but you lose some flavor doing this.

Fry the onion and garlic. Then add the eggplants, olives, pepper and one bay leaf.

Put the tomatoes in boiling water for a minute, to loosen the peels, and skin them.

Blend all the above (discard the bay leaf) with some olive oil.

Separately, make a cabbage salad: Cook the cabbage. Add vinegar, pepper and another bay leaf.

Serve, separately, the pate; cabbage salad; and the yogurt. Eat on pita bread.

Variants: infinite. Try leaving out the olives. The yogurt is optional.

Squash with Squash Flowers

Cook very small summer squash for a very few minutes. Add squash flowers and then maize kernels cut from fresh sweet corn ears. Boil for a very short time, until all ingredients are just tender. Serve with lime wedges.

DESSERTS

Fresh fruit and the universal Latin American flan are the commonest desserts in Yucatan, but they need no recipes here.

Yucatan produces excellent sorbets from local fruit; the best are guanabana, mamey, and chicosapote. They are just fruit pulp, sugar, and water. Use any sorbet recipe.

Candied ciricote

The ciricote is a small fruit that has to be cooked to be edible, rather like a small quince. It grows on a large tree whose wood is among the most beautiful of all tropical woods, but now cannot be legally cut because of the rarity of these important food-producing trees.

2 lb. ciricotes

2-3 limes

1 lb. sugar

Domestic fig leaves

Cook the ciricotes in water with some wood ash (a handful or so, to tenderize them). When cook, take out and grate.

Mix with lime juice.

Cook down in sugar syrup with some lime juice and the fig leaves. (The fig leaves produce an enzyme that further tenderizes the fruit.)

Simmer for half an hour. Take out the fig leaves and bottle.

This recipe will work for any firm, sour fruit. It is similar to that for *orejas de mico* (“monkey ears”—preserved wild papaya), etc.

Chayote Pudding

1 chayote

3 eggs or 4 whites + 1 yolk (untraditional but healthy and good)

2 oz. butter

2 oz. sugar

1 tsp. vanilla

1 tsp. ground cinnamon (or less if preferred)

Cook the chayotes, peel, and blend with the eggs, butter, sugar, vanilla and cinnamon.

Butter a mold.

Cook in the oven till done. (For a softer texture, some use a bain-marie. Basically, this is a dish of water in which the custard dish is set high enough so that the water does not come in, but rather steams the custard.) Doneness is indicated by a generally firm appearance. Don't wait till a knife stuck into the center comes out clean—if you do, the pudding is overdone.

In Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean, where apples cannot grow, nostalgic French cooks have found that chayotes make a very good substitute (if you use enough butter and spices). I have had excellent French apple cake, apple tart, and so on, using chayotes. There is even a restaurant totally devoted to the chayote. Admittedly, this is far from Yucatan, but the tip is too good not to pass on. Yucatan, like Reunion, is a tropical land where apples do not grow.

Cheese Pie (*Pie de Queso*)

Another very common dish, especially in Merida. Ancestrally, it is some unsung American's variation on cheesecake, but is in fact much better than cheesecake. The English word "pie" is invariably used. Sometimes the spelling is localized to *pay*, which just happens to be the Maya word for "skunk."

1 can condensed milk

4 eggs

1/2 lb. cream cheese or Cheddar cheese

1/2 cup sugar

Vanilla to taste (optional)

Piecrust (see below)

Blend the milk with the egg yolks, sugar and vanilla. Beat in the cheese. Beat the egg whites to peaks and add in. Fill into a regular piecrust and bake till firm.

Low-cholesterol version of the pie filling: 1 1/2 cup regular milk, 6 egg whites, 1 package cottage cheese, 1/2 cup sugar, vanilla. Blend all. Not very authentic, but good enough.

One might also try Jack cheese in this.

Piecrusts:

Standard version: 1 cup flour, 1 stick butter, tiny bit of sugar, ice-cold water. Cut the butter into the flour and sugar; rub in a while. Mix in the water—just enough to moisten—and roll out.

A Yucatan version: 1 cup flour, 1/2 stick butter, 1 tsp. baking powder, 1 egg, bit of cold water. Proceed as above.

Another Yucatan version: 1 cup flour, 1 tsp. baking powder, 1 stick butter, 1 cup condensed milk.

Low-cholesterol version: 1 cup flour, 1/2 stick butter, 1 oz. sugar, cold water.

The other classic Yucatan “pie” is “pie de nuez,” but it is just ordinary American pecan pie, migrant from the American south.

Coconut Flan

1 lb. sugar

1 can coconut cream

8 eggs

1/2 quart milk

1 tbsp. lemon juice (optional)

Vinegar

Simmer 13 oz. sugar with coconut cream (cans of it can be found at any Asian-food market) till slightly thickened. Cool. Separately, beat the eggs. Beat in the milk and lemon.

In a nonstick pan, melt 3 oz. sugar with a small amount of vinegar till the sugar begins to caramelize. Pour into a buttered flan dish and pour in the ingredients. Cook in a bain-marie till almost firm (about an hour). Refrigerate.

Simple way (not to say cheating): Throw milk, coconut cream, eggs, and sugar into a blender. Blend for several seconds at high speed. Line a pan with dark brown sugar (so you don't have to caramelize it). Pour the blended liquid into this and bake in the oven at 325° till almost firm. Take out and cool; it will finish firming up as it cools. Leaving it in the oven till firm, as most cookbooks advise, overcooks it.

Cocoyoles

An impractical recipe for anyone outside of a Maya village, but ethnographically too interesting to miss. Cocoyoles—*t'uk* in Maya—are the fruit of a palm. They are too hard to eat without treatment. They are boiled with water and lime—not the citrus, but the result of burning limestone—to soften them. The outer part becomes soft and sweetish. It is then boiled down with sugar (traditionally, honey) until candied. It takes very slow simmering for 12 hours to do this perfectly.

Corn and Squash Sweet

1 cup sweet corn kernels cut from very young ear, cooked very quickly

1 cup cooked meat from butternut or other sweet winter squash

Sugar to taste

Mix all while hot.

Allspice, cinnamon, vanilla and other appropriate flavorings can be added. Brown sugar gives more flavor.

This very traditional Maya sweet would originally have been made with honey, or simply relied on the sweetness of the young corn.

Fruit Salad with Xtabentun

Cut up tropical fruits. Melon, mango, papaya, mamey, banana, and citrus make a good combination. Squeeze lime or orange juice over them and sprinkle liberally with Xtabentun, the Yucatan aniseta liqueur. Of course you can use any liqueur, or dark rum.

Guava Paste

A universal Latin American delicacy, developed from the quince paste of Spain. Quinces don't grow in the tropics, but settlers quickly found that guavas are a perfect substitute.

1 lb. sugar

1 lb. guava juice (cook lemon guavas; strain. Force some of flesh through sieve)

Cook slowly, stirring constantly, till the mixture forms a paste (soft ball stage).

Mamey Paste

Local version of the above.

1 lb. sugar

1 lb. mamey flesh

Mix sugar and mamey meat. Simmer, stirring constantly, for several minutes.

This can also be made as in preceding recipe, but-unlike the guava-the mamey does not really need the cooking and straining.

Mamey is quite sweet enough without sugar, so this recipe is for preserving the fruit.

Posole with Coconut

1 lb. nixtamal kernels (corn kernels boiled in lime)

Juice of 2 limes

Meat of 2 small coconuts

1/2 c sugar (or less, to taste)

Boil the kernels in water with juice of 2 limes added. Grind these with the meat of the coconuts. Boil this with sugar, till thoroughly hot and sugar thoroughly dissolved.

Nixtamal kernels are available canned at any Hispanic market.

Queso Napolitano

The “national dessert” of Yucatan—the one you actually see everyone eating.

2 cans of milk

10 eggs

Vanilla extract

3 oz. sugar

Blend all except the sugar. Caramelize it. Turn out into a baking dish and pour in the liquid. Cook in bain-marie for an hour (or bake till firm—this one you don’t take out early, as with the preceding).

It is possible to use only egg whites in this, and thus keep the cholesterol down to virtually nil.

Ruined Dessert

Atropellado means “totally messed up.” The name honors the appearance of the dish. Fortunately, its taste is as good as its looks are messy.

1 lb. sweet potato

Meat of 1 coconut

¼ lb. brown sugar

1 stick cinnamon

1 tsp. ground allspice

Cook the sweet potato. Peel and mash.

Blend up the coconut.

Mix the sugar with some water and add the cinnamon. Put on fire. When it begins to boil, add the sweet potato and mix into the syrup.

Add in the coconut. Chill.

I'm usually too lazy to grate coconut. Canned coconut cream works fine! Store-bought grated coconut is okay too. Best is to use both. Standard in Yucatan is to soak grated coconut in a can of condensed milk.

Squash with Honey

The traditional Maya sweet.

1 winter squash

1 lb. honey

Cut small holes in the squash. Pour in the honey. Bake in pib or oven for 2 hours.

This dish is sickeningly sweet. A tiny amount is quite enough. More than that can produce severe hypoglycemia after a sugar "rush."

Spanish Cream

1 quart milk

6 eggs

1 lb. sugar

2 oz. cornstarch

1 tbsp. vanilla extract

Blend all. Cook in a nonstick saucepan over a low fire, stirring constantly.

Low-cholesterol variant: leave the eggs out. (Yes, this is traditional.)

Yucatan Marzipan

1 lb. sikil

1 lb. sugar

10 oz. water

Flavorings as wanted

Food coloring

Dissolve the sugar in the water. Simmer until a syrup forms. Slowly work in the sikil, stirring constantly. Add any flavorings.

Cool thoroughly. Now, model into small animal, fruit and vegetable shapes and paint with the food coloring.

This recipe is of purely ethnographic interest, to show the ingenuity of the Yucatecan culture. Almonds were far too rare in the old days to waste on marzipan-making. Thus, this form was evolved. It finds its chief use in providing pretty modeled toys and small items for children—something the ordinary person can buy for practically nothing in the market, to pacify a young child. This sikil marzipan is only marginally edible, like the flour-and-water marzipan of the rest of Mexico, and is more the equivalent of Play-Doh than a food.

DRINKS

The usual round of *licuados* (fruit smoothies) and alcoholic drinks occur, but are as elsewhere in Mexico.

Atole nuevo (green corn drink)

Kernels from an ear of fairly well matured sweet corn, soaked a day, then blended with a bit of sikil. This is often sweetened with honey, or otherwise flavored.

Baalche'

The sacred ritual drink—still as important as in ancient Maya times.

Water

Honey, preferably of native stingless bee (much more flavorful than European bee honey)

Bark of *baalche'* tree (*Lonchocarpus longistylus*; sometimes closely related spp. are used)

Mix ingredients, bottle, and let stand until honey ferments.

Today, the drink is often made with regular honey cut with sugar, and the bark is reduced to a bare minimum. The gods are said to be highly annoyed with this, and some would say the results are such events as Hurricane Gilbert and the droughts of the early 2000s.

If you are not given to brewing, but want to put on a Yucatecan dinner, be advised that Ethiopian *t'ej* is basically the same thing (flavored with Ethiopian hops instead of *baalche'* bark, but the difference is not earthshaking) and can be bought in markets carrying Near Eastern or African products.

Chaya Drink

This is a very common, popular drink. It is made quite sweet.

20 chaya leaves, boiled but not too soft

Juice of 3 limes

Sugar to taste

Water

Blend in a blender till a thick drink is produced. Serve cold.

Chocolate

2 lb. cacao (chocolate) beans

2 oz. cinnamon sticks

1/2 lb. flour

1 package sweet biscuits

Toast the beans till they begin to color. Heat the cinnamon stick. Toast the flour till golden. Grind up the cacao and cinnamon, and the biscuits. Form tablets and store. For drink, beat up in water, with sugar to taste. Note that commercial Mexican chocolate tablets are mostly sugar, while these tablets are unsweetened. Moreover, the taste will not be much like commercial chocolate; fermentation is needed to bring out the “chocolate” flavor known to the world outside Mesoamerica.

Coconut Pozole

1 kg. nixtamal kernels

Juice of 2 limes

Fresh meat of 4 small coconuts

1 cup sugar

Water

Cook nixtamal (whole kernels) for one hour with juice of limes. Grate the meat of the coconuts. Add this and the sugar to the mixtamal. Chill.

Tan Chukwaj (“thick chocolate drink”)

The traditional Maya ritual drink, still served at festivals, often with mukbipollos.

Tan Chulwaj is almost certainly what was in those Classic Maya chocolate cups with the owners’ names on the rim, but it would have had chile then—if anything—instead of the modern cinnamon and sugar.

1 tablet Mexican chocolate

1 lb. toasted corn meal, or ground-up sweet corn kernels

1/2 tsp. allspice powder (or more)

Cinnamon stick

Sugar to taste (traditionally, none was used; today there is usually some sweetening)

Mix up the tablet with the corn and spices. Heat. Serve hot or cold.

Variants: Other flavorings can be added; anise is traditional and good. The ancient Aztecs used chile powder, and one supposes the ancient Maya did too.