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## by Kathryn Holland Besser

Mexico is taking its well-deserved place among the world's best culinary destinations. Notwithstanding the stunning stretches of white sand, aquamarine waters and luxury hotels, traditional and modern regional cuisine is hotter than the Mexican sun. It's no surprise that two of the world's top restaurants—**Pujol** in Mexico City, and **Cosme** in New York, both by celebrated chef **Enrique Olvera**—have their roots in Mexico's thriving food culture. Reaching into centuries of history from both natives' and conquerors' points of view, Mexican-born chefs are producing intricate dishes that reflect a rich, national heritage. From humble street food to haute cuisine, there is ample opportunity to delve into what makes regional Mexican cooking so impressive. Knowing little about Puerto Vallarta aside from its appearance in the 1964 film *Night of the Iguana*, I attempted to discover some of the culinary treasures offered in and around this popular seaside resort. As it happened, one of the best ways to do it was simply to walk around the city streets.

### THE (FOODIE) STREETS OF OLD DOWNTOWN

One of the gems of our trip was **Vallarta Food Tours**, a food tasting and cultural walking tour through historic Puerto Vallarta. Foodie Guide Ricardo led our small group on a 4-hour eating and drinking adventure across the charming “Zona Romantica” in the old city center. Stop **(#1)** was at **Tacos Robles** for a succulent braised beef taco with all the fixings—spiced as hot as you like it and a terrific first impression. Stop **(#2)**, **Mariscos Cisneros**, was an astonishing surprise. At first glance, it appeared to be a slightly run down stand in front of a small restaurant. But what the kitchen turned out in terms of fresh, flavorful street food was incredible. The deep-fried, seafood-filled chile relleno with a spicy aioli was perfectly cooked with well balanced flavors. At three large bites, it was the right size to wake up our appetites. Before we could get too comfortable, however, it was on to the next stop for a quick palate cleanser. **(#3)** **Lix by XocoDivas** serves divine, home-made ice creams in refreshing flavors such as passion fruit, mango and coconut.





PHOTO COURTESY OF VALLARTA FOOD TOURS

Palates reset, we proceeded to another unassuming street stand (#4) **Taqueria El Cunado** for taco asado. Fat drippings help keep the meat moist and the heat level may be amped up with the accompanying sauces. Our guide constantly balanced the spicy stops along the way: (#5) featured a cooling respite at **Cesar's Coconut Stand** for 'whack-as-you-watch' coconut water and fresh coconut meat generously coated with chili spice. Witnessing Cesar expertly wield a good-size machete made me wonder how he was able to keep all his fingers intact. The next stop (#6) was **Cevicheria El Guero** for outstanding smoked marlin and local fish ceviche. The marlin was sweet and dense, resembling a soft jerky. Stop (#7) was at the town's main tortilla factory, **Tortilleria La Gloria**. In addition to observing fresh-ground corn masa transform into nearly uniform rounds, we learned that local families consume several pounds of tortillas each day. Noses full of the heavenly corn scent, we wandered over to a nearby square, presumably to take in the sights. It actually was a bit of a ruse by Ricardo since we unknowingly walked past our next stop (#8): a kind-faced, older gentleman wearing a white sun hat, casually standing next to a sealed plastic jug. In the jug was a delicious nectar from local legend, **Señor Concepcion**. Tuba is sap gleaned from

coconut palms, lightly fermented into an energizing drink. Concepcion's version is particularly noteworthy as his standards of cleanliness are very strict and he livens up his tuba with fresh-cut apples, strawberries and chopped walnuts. It is refreshing and addictive. We then made a brief detour through Puerto Vallarta's impressive church (not a cathedral, according to our guide, which would require a bishop and put the town in direct competition with other regions).

Stop (#9) was in the sole non-casual restaurant of the tour: **Gaby's**. On the uppermost floor near a breezy terrace, we enjoyed half-and-half green and traditional (dark) moles on a chicken enchilada. Both were superb; simultaneously rich and complex. The proffered tequila shots were probably not necessary at this point but our group enjoyed them all the same. Comfortably full, we assumed the tour was finished but Ricardo had one last surprise (#10): Mexican sweets at **Sabor Azteca**. The coconut and tamarind candies were a satisfying end to a long, but surprising tour. It's hard to imagine a better way to safely enjoy street food from unknown vendors. And if tequila is your preferred libation, Vallarta Tours offers a similar walk-around tour centered around local tequila offerings. Learn more at [vallartafoodtours.com](http://vallartafoodtours.com)



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## where to stay

### **GRAND VELAS RIVIERA NAYARIT**

Situated on the northern edge of Banderas Bay (about 15 minutes from Puerto Vallarta International Airport), Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit is an all-inclusive luxury resort that caters to both couples and families. Resort rates start at \$398 per person per night, based on double occupancy. The all-inclusive rates include luxury accommodations, a la carte gourmet meals at a variety of specialty restaurants, premium branded beverages, 24-hour in-suite service, taxes, gratuity and more.

Grand Velas offers 267 one, two and three bedroom suites with private terraces or balconies overlooking the ocean or pool. Decorated in contemporary Mexican style with warm woods and tropical accents, the suites feature dining and living areas, luxury bathrooms with space for spa therapies, indoor and outdoor hot tubs, and panoramic views of the Pacific coast.

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#### 4-COURSE TASTING 150 FEET IN THE AIR

Another standout experience was participating in the **Dinner in the Sky** at Casa Velas. At first, the idea seemed kitschy but the actual enterprise was a bit of crazy fun. The music started pumping as the 22-seat “restaurant” was lifted into the air by an enormous crane. It’s not easy to dance in your seat with two wide straps criss-crossing your chest but we attempted it anyway; the soundtrack was phenomenal and the chefs shimmied as they deftly plated each dish. It’s less actual cooking at 150 feet in the air but the ballet-like interplay of **Chef Alondra Maldonado** and her sous chefs was impressive nonetheless. The four courses arrived in rapid succession, necessitated by the fact that there is no zipping off to a bathroom while consuming the free-flowing wine pairings.

The concept of dining in the sky began in Brussels in 2006. Since then, sky dinners have popped up in over 50 countries and Casa Velas Resort was a 2017 host throughout the month of February. In addition to ~360-degree views of the property and nearby ocean, the real prize is the opportunity to get up close and personal with a local, celebrated chef. The menu for the February 19th Casa Velas dinner, designed by Chef Maldonado, highlighted her home state of Nayarit. The first course was jumbo shrimp, deep fried and served with an accompanying shrimp broth meant to be sipped like an aperitif followed by a succulent scallop ceviche in ‘leche de tigre’, then a main course of braised duck breast and a delightful dessert trio of sweet corn tamale, honeyed date cheesecake and coconut-jicama ball with a delicate tamarind sauce. Although faster than a regular dinner, it was delightful largely due to the infectious energy of the chefs. Learn more at [hotelcasavelas.com](http://hotelcasavelas.com)



Local chef, Alondra Maldonado has her roots in Nayarit, Mexico. For her cookbook “Flavors of Nayarit”, she interviewed more than 250 people in 45 villages. The stories, recipes and anecdotes she collected are part of an extraordinary journey in which Alondra rekindled her calling as an explorer, narrator and cuisine-lover.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CASA VELAS







SERVING A 4-COURSE MEAL 150 FEET IN THE AIR | PHOTO COURTESY OF CASA VELAS

## CULINARY DELIGHTS AND LUXURIOUS SPACES

The very grand finale of our Puerto Vallarta culinary tour came in the form of a seven-course dinner at **Frida**, one of 5 dining options at **Grand Velas**, a luxury resort along Riviera Nayarit. As a high-end all-inclusive hotel in the Velas empire, exquisite dining and entertainment options abound within the seaside property. While other restaurants serve French, Italian or other options, Frida is almost 100% Mexican haute cuisine, which we were excited to experience. Designed by **Restaurant Head Chef Luis César Arias Velázquez**, our tasting menu highlighted locally sourced seafood and native produce along with a number of Mexican wines. Over dinner with Grand Velas' Managing Director, **Lucy Ruiz**, we received a fascinating primer on how the resort sees itself as a personal concierge to each and every guest. Whether by relaxing in the spa, adventuring or sunning on the pristine beach, guests are served up the vacation of their dreams. Despite the resort being filled to capacity, the atmosphere was serene and mostly quiet. Chef Velázquez dazzled with his fresh, inventive creations and we left wanting to soak up so much more of the splendid flavors of Mexico.

### CHEF VELÁZQUEZ' TASTING MENU AT FRIDA

Goat cheese flan with caramelized pecans  
~  
Atlixto-style nopal cactus salad with panela cheese  
~  
Chorizo-crust red snapper, potato sofrito, cilantro salsa  
~  
Jalisco-style birria  
~  
Pomegranate-tequila sorbet  
~  
Charred avocado  
~  
Trilogy: churros, jericalla custard, Mexican rice pudding





Chef Luis César Arias Velázquez was born in Mexico City and learned how to cook by assisting his parents and grandparents in the kitchen. He takes inspiration from Pre-Hispanic cuisine and aims to keep his regional dishes as simple as possible by respecting the natural essence of each ingredient.

#### GOAT CHEESE FLAN WITH CARAMELIZED PECANS

##### INGREDIENTS:

1 oz Goat cheese  
2 tsp Caramelized pecans  
½ tsp Cilantro sprouts  
½ tsp Epazote sprouts  
1 oz Olive oil  
Salt and pepper  
Edible flowers to decorate

##### DIRECTIONS:

1. Gently mix the goat cheese until creamy and add the caramelized pecans to the center. Shape the mixture to prepare for baking.
2. In a blender or food processor, blend the olive oil and half of a pecan to make the vinaigrette. Set aside.
3. Dress the sprouts (cilantro and epazote) with olive oil and salt.
4. Bake the cheese at 400° F for three minutes.
5. Place the goat cheese on the center of the plate and decorate with the sauce, sprouts and flowers.

SUGGESTED WINE PAIRING: Villa Sandi Cuvee Oris, Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Superiore DOCG