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PHOTOS BY HOLLY WILMETH



## Fresh from the Yucatán

**A mainstay of home cooking** throughout Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula and a standard on nearly every restaurant menu in the region, *sopa de lima* combines zesty Old and New World flavors. The basic elements are savory chicken broth, fiery habanero chili, and a tart blast from the *lima* fruit. According to chef José Vázquez, a native of the Yucatán, the soup is a quintessential example of cultural fusion—centuries before the term was coined to describe a culinary movement.

The Yucatán is wedged between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, geographically isolated from the country's interior. "Historically, it has had a much closer relationship with Europe than has the rest of Mexico," notes Vázquez, who studied at the California Culinary Institute and returned home to become head chef at Hacienda Xcanatún in Mérida, the Yucatán state capital. And *sopa de lima*, more

than any other staple of local cuisine, represents the collision of indigenous Mayan foods with European, Asian, and Middle Eastern fare.

Pinpointing *sopa de lima*'s precise origins is hard, says Alejandra García Quintanilla, a history professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán in Mérida. "It was most likely derived from an ancient Mayan dish," she explains. The Mayan diet relied heavily on maize, squash, beans, and chili peppers. "But the Mesoamerican peoples are extremely creative and sophisticated in the kitchen," Quintanilla adds, "always trying new ingredients."

One of those ingredients—the soup's signature flavor—is the *lima*, a fragrant citrus fruit that arrived in the Yucatán with the Spanish in the 16th century. Its taste lands somewhere between a tangy Meyer lemon and a sweet key lime. Yucatecan chefs roast the *lima* whole on a hot *comal*, a heavy cast-iron skillet, before

extracting its juice. Chickens also came with the Spanish conquistadors, although Quintanilla suspects that the Maya probably first prepared the dish using broth made from native wild turkey. For their part, the Maya contributed habanero chilies and corn tortillas.

"There is a rule in Maya culture to eat as naturally as possible," says Vázquez. A simple dish with bold flavors, *sopa de lima* demands fresh ingredients. Vázquez uses ripe, aromatic limes (firm but not leathery) grown at the hotel's hacienda.

Limas can also be found at the Chedraui and Soriana supermarkets in Mérida. "These cater to people in the lower middle class who make Yucatecan dishes, so you are sure to have lots of local produce," Vázquez says. Or, he suggests, try the large Lucas de Gálvez market on Calle 56, south of the central Plaza Grande, or one of the neighborhood markets in such *barrios* as



The subtle potential of the Yucatán's iconic *sopa de lima* is fully realized in the version presented by formally clad servers at Mérida's Casa de Piedra. The restaurant is located in the Hacienda Xcanatún, where Francis Gamez (above) welcomes guests to the hotel.



Santiago, Santa Ana (just west and north of the Plaza, respectively), and San Sebastián (Calle 70, southwest of the Plaza). “*Mestizas* come in from the countryside every day to sell their produce in these markets,” Vázquez says.

Sopa de lima varies among family recipes and regional adaptations. It's sometimes seasoned with Yucatecan oregano (to impart a refined yet earthy flavor) or *chile dulce*, a cousin to the common green pepper, only smaller and subtler in flavor. In Mérida, sample Vázquez's interpretation of the dish at the restaurant

Casa de Piedra in the Hacienda Xcanatún (Calle 20 S/N, Comisaría Xcanatún, Km. 12 Carretera Mérida Progreso, 52/999-930-2140). Daniel Hoyer, who authored the cookbook *Mayan Cuisine*, suggests Eladio's (Calle 59, No. 425 x 44, 52/999-923-1087), a cantina that specializes in regional tapas. And at La Tradición (Calle 60, No. 293 x 25, 52/999-925-2526), chef David Cetina prepares sopa de lima from a time-tested recipe passed down from his grandfather, who ran La Botana restaurant in Mérida more than 50 years ago. **A**

## Sopa de Lima

(SERVES 6 TO 8)

*Adapted from chef José Vázquez's recipe for Casa de Piedra at Hacienda Xcanatún*

### INGREDIENTS

- 8 Yucatecan limas (or substitute key limes with a splash of orange juice and apple cider vinegar)
- 1 habanero chili pepper
- 10 cups clear chicken stock
- 8 stalks cilantro (tied with twine; removed at end of cooking)
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- 2 medium onions, sliced
- 1 green bell pepper, julienned
- 1 red bell pepper, julienned
- 1 large tomato, peeled, seeded, and cubed
- 1 cooked chicken breast, shredded
- 4 corn tortillas, julienned, fried, and drained on paper towels
- Salt and pepper to taste

### MAKE IT

- 1.** Roast six limas on a hot, cast-iron griddle until softened. **2.** Char the habanero whole over an open flame until blackened. **3.** Heat the chicken stock; add the charred habanero and the cilantro bundle; bring to a simmer. **4.** In an oiled frying pan, sweat the onions and bell peppers over medium heat until the onion is translucent. Add to the stock, cover, and simmer for 30 minutes. **5.** Juice the roasted limas and add the liquid to the stock. **6.** Add the cubed tomato to the stock; season with salt and pepper. **7.** Ladle into soup bowls. Add the shredded chicken and tortilla strips. **8.** Peel and dice one of the remaining limas; add a teaspoon to each serving. Garnish with a slice of the last lima.