

MAYAN MAGIC

A visit to Mahekal Beach Resort in Playa del Carmen let us in on the mystical culture of the ancient Mesoamerican civilization, with bold, flavorful food at the heart of it.

by Nicholas Nguyen

Most of the time, when people hear the words “vacation” and “Mexico,” they think of Cancun, Cozumel, Puerto Vallarta or Cabo. But there’s more fun to be had in Mexico, if you think outside the box. Case in point: My recent visit to Playa del Carmen, where I stayed at Mahekal Beach Resort. About 45 minutes south of Cancun, Mahekal has a laidback attitude that’s less “spring break” and more R & R under thatched roofs and bungalows.

The charming resort is built around tropical trees that make the place feel like it’s part of the jungle, even though the main street, Fifth Avenue, is just a five-minute walk from the lobby. Mahekal exudes a sense of serene seclusion—the guestrooms don’t even have TVs! But with the pristine beach just steps from my room, all I wanted was water, sun and sand. And food, of course!

When booking my stay, I opted for a meal plan to enjoy breakfast and lunch or dinner at the resort; that way, I had the chance to dig into the other fine eateries downtown. La Cueva del Chango (Monkey Cave) has a variety of chilaquiles to sample, and La Fisheria lives up to its name with succulent seafood. But back to the food at Mahekal: Its three restaurants are anything but disappointing.

At Fuego Restaurant y Cantina, you can opt to eat with a view of the beach and the resort’s “Sand Box,” an area for campfires and lounging. The Mexican “farm to fork” meals are prepared over wood-burning flames by Chef Crescenciano Nerey and his team. The man has nearly three decades of experience and is responsible for all the culinary delights at the resort. My first night, I had an unforgettable salad served with a gorgonzola mousse and passion flower vinaigrette to start, and for dinner, a Chilean seabass served over a bed of roasted vegetables that was just perfect.

For more regional specialties, there’s Las Olas Restaurant and Bar. Dine inside or outside by the breathtaking infinity pool. And if you’re living large and want a bite of everything, dine at Cocina, which offers a substantial dinner buffet of Latin-American cuisine. With so many options for food nearby and at the resort, there’s only one more thing that will make Mahekal a foodie’s paradise: a gourmet cooking class with a Mayan chef!

Set inside a patch of emerald jungle in the resort is Casita Maya, where I learned some new recipes that were unique to Mayan culture and the Yucatan region. Chef José is Mayan and spoke the language to us while another chef translated. Inside was a fire pit dug into the earth, where we cooked fish in a clay pot under the soil. Not only was this one of the best meals I’ve had, ever, it was also a memorable one that I’m so excited to share here. **CP**

TIKIN XIC (BAKED FISH)

Here, the chefs at Mahekal turned their authentic Mayan version of this dish into one home cooks will appreciate. A trip to your local international food store might be required, but it’s well worth it. Get ready to be transported straight to Playa del Carmen for dinner!

YIELD 4-6 SERVINGS **ZEST FACTOR** MILD
PREP TIME 15 MINUTES **COOK TIME** 30 MINUTES

2½ POUNDS GROUPER (OR OTHER WHITE FISH), FILLETED AND PAT DRY
SALT AND PEPPER TO TASTE
3 OUNCES ACHIOTE SAUCE (SEE RECIPE ON PAGE 66)
1/3 CUP BITTER ORANGE JUICE (SUCH AS GOYA’S NARANJA AGRIA)
1 BANANA LEAF, SOFTENED OVER A FLAME
1 GREEN BELL PEPPER, CUT INTO RINGS
1 TOMATO, THINLY SLICED
1 RED ONION, THINLY SLICED
1 TEASPOON DRIED OREGANO
3 CLOVES GARLIC, MINCED
OLIVE OIL TO TASTE

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
2. Season the fish with salt and pepper. Combine the achiote sauce with the bitter orange juice in a bowl and coat the fish in it.
3. Place the fish on the banana leaf and arrange the bell pepper, tomato and onion slices on top. Sprinkle with the oregano and garlic and drizzle with some olive oil.
4. Wrap the whole thing in the leaf and place in a casserole dish. Bake for 30 minutes, or until the fish flakes easily with a fork.
5. Serve hot with your choice of sides.



THIS PAGE: ABSORB THE MAJESTIC VIEW FROM THE INFINITY POOL AT LAS OLAS RESTAURANT AND BAR. **OPPOSITE PAGE, COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** THE FLAKY, TENDER FISH COOKED AT THE CASITA MAYA; CHEF JOSÉ DEMONSTRATES LAYERING THE FISH IN BANANA LEAVES; THE FIRE PIT WHERE THE CLAYPOT WAS BURIED TO COOK THE FISH.

POOL PHOTO COURTESY OF MAHEKAL BEACH RESORT

FOR WHEN YOU'RE NOT EATING...

Aside from shopping on Fifth Avenue, here are a few ways to keep busy at Mahekal and beyond.



GET WET

Mahekal offers kayaking and paddleboarding at the Vida Aquatic Dive Center. Depending on the season, you can go on a fishing tour for tuna, amberjack or marlin. There are two snorkeling packages available, both equally magical; explore the reefs or underwater Mayan tunnels. And as the name implies, you can take diving lessons before booking a tour to swim with the turtles and dolphins.

EXPLORE THE OUTDOORS

Outside of Playa del Carmen, make a day trip to Tulum or Chichen Itza to see Mayan archeological sites. Tulum is especially beautiful, located on a cliff that overlooks the ocean. Pack a picnic lunch to eat on the beach below the cliffs. In between Cancun and Playa, there is also Xcaret, a family-friendly theme park with water, cultural and nature activities.

REST AND RELAX

Unwind with a massage or an organic scrub at Mahekal's Revive Spa. Just make sure to arrive early to soak in the tranquil Jacuzzi. Then, stop by Itzi or Boli's Bar for specialty cocktails and refreshments. Both offer a huge selection of tequila, not to mention spicy drinks like the Jalapeño Margarita and the Sweet Heat, made with mango and habaneros, both perfect for chileheads.



ACHIOTE SAUCE FOR TIKIN XIK

While this bold, red sauce was traditionally used to season fish, try it with your other favorite grilled meats, too.

YIELD ABOUT 1 CUP
ZEST FACTOR MILD
PREP TIME 5 MINUTES
COOK TIME NONE

- 1/2** CUP RED ACHIOTE PASTE (ALSO KNOWN AS ANNATTO PASTE)
- 12** CLOVES GARLIC
- 1/2** CUP CHOPPED ONIONS
- 6** OUNCES BITTER ORANGE JUICE
- 3/4** CUP DICED TOMATOES
- 2** TEASPOONS SALT
- 1** TEASPOON PEPPER

Place all the ingredients in a blender and process until smooth.

MAHEKAL ROASTED HABANERO SAUCE

A spoonful of this sauce goes a long way. At Mahekal, it was a table condiment that made a regular appearance, adding fire to each meal. It was so good, we made a special request for this recipe since it wasn't demoed at the class!

YIELD ABOUT 1 CUP
ZEST FACTOR HOT
PREP TIME 10 MINUTES
COOK TIME 5 MINUTES

- 1** TEASPOON OLIVE OIL
- 10** HABANEROS
- 10** CLOVES GARLIC
- 1/2** CUP CHOPPED ONIONS
- 1** TEASPOON SALT
- 1/2** TEASPOON PEPPER
- 3/4** CUP LIME JUICE

- 1.** Heat a sauté pan over medium and add the olive oil.
- 2.** Add the habaneros, garlic and onions and sauté until tender, about 2 minutes.
- 3.** Transfer the mixture to a food processor or *mocajete*; add the salt and pepper. Process or combine until smooth.
- 4.** Add the lime juice and process to achieve your desired consistency.
- 5.** Refrigerate to cool before serving.

LIME SOUP

This soup is zesty, and the flavors of the broth are bright. Served with tortilla strips, think of this as the older, Mayan cousin to the Tex-Mex tortilla soup. The roasted habanero sauce (recipe on the previous page) is a great way to add more spice to the soup.

YIELD 6 SERVINGS
ZEST FACTOR MEDIUM
PREP TIME 15 MINUTES
COOK TIME 20 MINUTES

- 1** TABLESPOON OLIVE OIL
- 1** CUP CHOPPED GREEN ONIONS
- 2** JALAPEÑOS, SEEDED AND MINCED
- 2** CLOVES GARLIC, MINCED
- 4** (14.5-OUNCE) CANS CHICKEN BROTH
- 2** TOMATOES, SEEDED AND DICED
- 1/2** TEASPOON GROUND CUMIN
- SALT AND PEPPER TO TASTE
- 1 1/2** POUNDS BONELESS, SKINLESS CHICKEN BREASTS
- 1/3** CUP CHOPPED CILANTRO
- 3** TABLESPOONS LIME JUICE
- 3** MEDIUM AVOCADOS, DICED
- TORTILLA CHIPS, SOUR CREAM AND SHREDDED MONTERREY JACK FOR SERVING (OPTIONAL)

- 1.** In a large pot over medium, warm the olive oil. Add the onions and jalapeños and sauté until tender, about 2 minutes, adding the garlic at the last 30 seconds.
- 2.** Add the chicken broth, tomatoes, cumin, salt, pepper and chicken. Bring the soup to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Cover and let the chicken cook through, about 10-15 minutes, while stirring occasionally.
- 3.** Remove the chicken from the soup and let it rest on a cutting board for 5 minutes. Meanwhile, leave the soup on low to stay warm.
- 4.** Shred the chicken and return it to the soup. Stir in the cilantro and lime. Add the avocados before serving hot.

All recipes courtesy of Mahekal Beach Resort. For more information or to book a stay, visit www.mahekalbeachresort.com.



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: THE DIVE SHOP OFFERS A WIDE SELECTION OF WATER ACTIVITIES; RELAX WITH YOUR PARTNER DURING A COUPLE'S MASSAGE. **THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:** THE DELICIOUS LIME SOUP WITH ALL OF THE FIXINS'; DINE AFTER THE COOKING CLASS AT THE GORGEOUSLY SET TABLE INSIDE THE JUNGLE; DEPENDING ON THE TYPE OF ROOM YOU BOOK, YOURS MIGHT COME WITH A PRIVATE PLUNGE POOL RIGHT OFF THE BEACH!

DIVE SHOP, MASSAGE AND PLUNGE POOL PHOTO COURTESY OF MAHEKAL BEACH AND RESORT; TABLE PHOTO BY CHRIS WIMPEY