

# Spicy Mexican fare to warm up the big chill

Students showcase innovate twist on traditional, authentic meals



**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

Diane de Beer

**T**HE THING about students and why experiencing their food is so exciting is because they're the chefs of the future, the mind-shifters. They are cooking on the trend edge and showing us what is out there. They have to be trained not only in the basics and last year's favourites but also looking ahead at what might excite in the future.

That's why it is always a good decision to keep an eye on what they're up to.

Don't think school home economics classes, but rather fourth year students in the department of consumer science, University of Pretoria, who regularly present extraordinary menus or Prue Leith who runs a restaurant to give their students in-house experience.

Recently the Tuks students again presented one of their special dinners. The focus this time was on Mexican food.

We all think we know what this is, but once you are presented with the real thing, you realise that probably what you have been eating is the American version of Mexican food commonly known as Tex-Mex.

Apart from sampling the meal, I also had the help of masters student Ana Dinorah Bupo, who is of Mexican descent, and was the adviser for the students when preparing the menu and the meal. And her information was invaluable.

It's one thing to taste something and to discover what you like or not about the food, but quite a different learning curve to also be given the history of the cuisine and the cultural context of specific dishes.

Ana explains that Mexican food has become quite the hot topic globally even though it is centuries old dating back to a fusion between the pre-Columbian and Spanish heritage.

Recently, Mexican cuisine has been added to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by Unesco which also shows its depth in culture. And in the past year, as if to underline her personal findings, two Mexican restaurants have opened in Pretoria: El Pistolero in Constantia Park and Jo Mexican in the Silver Lakes area, and I'm planning to check them out.

It makes sense that Mexican food has spread across the world. It is a country of celebration, whether it be a wedding, birthday, christening or even death. When there's a celebration, there's always food and drink – and in Mexican tradition, tequila. Ana said the aim of the student



Tomatilla salsa tamale



Mexican churros with cajeta



Tortopos and selection of maize tortillas with toppings

dinner was to "showcase the colourful and fertile abundance of traditional Mexican food and flavours in a modern and authentic way".

The menu was designed by fourth-year student Donelle du Rand. Other players including Ana were Gaby Algraz who manufactures and imports Mexican products and supplied everything they needed, as well as lecturer Hennie Fisher.

It was a four-course menu paired with various Mexican tequila and beer. In typical fashion, it started with the traditional Margarita served with a *chicarrón* (pork crackling) followed by a tequila tasting with three different *Patrón* tequila served: silver, reposado and añejo.

As Ana tells it, tequila is made from the blue agave cactus is grown in the surrounding areas of Tequila, hence its name. Silver tequila is the youngest, minimally aged and has sharper flavours; Reposado means "rested" as the tequila has aged for approximately two months; and añejo meaning "vintage" is aged between one and three years. "Reposado and añejo tequila are more complex, with smoother and subtler flavours," she notes.

Many might know that Mexico was the first country to introduce chillies to the world, which is why it had to shine in their first course which featured chillies in *nogada*. Ana describes it as one of Mexico's most elegant dishes as well as a patriotic one as it contains ingredients which represent the colours of the Mexican flag: red, white and green.

It is made with poblano chillies stuffed with a mixture of pork and fruits, dressed in a walnut sauce and sprinkled with pomegranate seeds. It was an unusual but tasty dish and set us off on a marvellous adventure. It was served traditionally with a serving of tequila called *sangrita* (which means little blood). This is a customary partner to a straight shot of silver tequila to complement its crisp acidity and peppery citrus flavours as well as cleansing the palate between each sip. The *sangrita* is a ruby coloured, sweet and spicy mix of citrus juices and spices, alternately sipped with the tequila.

Next was the popular interactive course which, says Ana, is what Mexican culture is all about: sharing and celebrating together. It was

a dish with a variety of condiments and salsas served with tortilla variations. Toppings such as *cochinita pibil* (a slow roasted pulled pork from Mayan origin with the meat marinated in acidic citrus juices and seasoned with achiote seeds specially for the burnt orange colour), deep fried fish balls, *chipotle* (chilli pepper) mayonnaise, as well as black garlic (another hot ingredient) mayonnaise, char grilled corn (very familiar locally), refried beans (also familiar), different salsas, crema, and for freshness, coriander and radishes.

This was all accompanied by Mexican corn crisps and soft corn tortillas made from different maize products (Mexican maize, as well as tortillas made, of South African white and yellow maize, emphasising one of the strong commonalities between the two countries). It was served with Corona beer, Mexico's own and most popular beer served with a lime wedge to add tartness and flavour. It's a bit like eating *tapas* the Mexican way, with the many different tastes and textures.

It's also about creating your own flavours and choosing between the

white and yellow maize. The guest speakers, Deon Scheepers and Dr Marnus Gouse, from the UP department of agricultural economics, said that in South Africa, white was viewed by general consumers as a far superior product. I preferred the one made with a mix.

Putting your own bite-size flavours together is huge fun. The palate cleanser also reflected Mexico, *Agua de Jamaica* granita made from hibiscus flowers. Ana said this was reminiscent of the bright and flavourful popsicles seen at every seaside and in childrens' sticky hands.

The embroiders further: "Selected as a main, *Mole Poblano* de Guajolote, is a classic turkey dish with a chocolate chilli sauce prepared with more than 30 ingredients. The sauce is made with at least three different chillies (ancho, pasilla, mulato and chipotle), bitter chocolate and almonds.

"This dish was first created by nuns in a convent in Puebla who wanted to impress the visiting archbishop yet panicked as they didn't have anything to serve him. Little did they know



Margaritas with crisp pork rinds



Agua de Jamaica Granita



Turkey, bitter chocolate and chilli sauce

that they were creating one of Mexico's national dishes for feasts."

At our dinner, it was served with green rice infused with jalapeños, coriander and tomatillo tamale (a corn dough wrapped in corn husks and steamed) which didn't really catch my fancy but perhaps it's because I'm not a porridge eater and the texture was a bit like that.

The salad was made from cactus paddles (from the university gardens), quite delicious with a typical Mexican mixed vegetable dish (*ensalada de nopales*), and apart from being tasty it also is very nutritious and good for diabetics. A garnish of peanut brittle, a typical sweet seen in Mexican markets, as well as a fun element of fried crickets, commonly eaten in the south for their high protein content and buttery flavours. Ana said it was similar to how we viewed mopani worms locally. It was a talking point on the night which is what these dinners are all about and the kind of envelope students should push.

I had one and honestly no overwhelming taste, just a crispy bite which I suspect is similar to mopani worms. All this food was accompanied with the most intense tequila to complement the spicy flavours with smoothness.

It had to be churros (deep fried pastry rolled in cinnamon and

sugar), for dessert with a *cajeta* dipping sauce (a caramel made from goat's milk), prickly pear sorbet, watermelon and mint foam, and cotton candy, all flavours, concludes Ana reminiscent of a Mexican childhood and celebrations.

It was quite delicious. I couldn't let go of the churros, though my partner tried, with the caramel giving it extra punch because of the goat's milk. I was less enthusiastic about the foam even though the flavours were spot on, the texture was slightly gloopy but that's a foam for you. It doesn't always work perhaps that's why many are letting go of this particular technique and using it much more sparingly.

Mexican hot chocolate was presented in conclusion, a warm, sweet and spicy drink which the Aztecs consumed. That's after all where chocolate originated. It was a symbol of power and authority to the Aztecs, and the cacao beans were used as currency over gold!

"This drink was also called the royal drink and Emperor Montezuma used to consume it 50 times a day as a statement of power," says Ana. With the Mexican ambassador as a guest, the students had to know their stuff, but with this kind of support on the authenticity of their meal and heaps of imagination with fun, it was a spectacular evening.

**Events**

June 16

■ Eco Ministry Nature Hike, on June 16, at 7.30am at Faerie Glen Nature Reserve. Entrance R8 for adults, R5 pensioners and children under 12 years free. Bring along your bottle of water, binoculars and do not forget your picnic goodies. Call Alice 084 208 7583, Maki 082 4964715 or Zine 082 809 1588.

Talks

■ Evening talk by Carole Candiotes, *Is authentic empowerment fact or fiction in a spiritual lifestyle* on Sunday, June 12, at 7pm at Theosophical Society Lodge. Contact Tom Davis or Ivette at 012 329 3082 or 082 459 9047.

■ Evening talk by Clive Scott, *The energy of goodwill*, this Sunday, June 12, at 7.15pm at the Annie Ross Sanctuary, Sunnyside. Call 076 747 6728 or visit the website [www.spiritualsanctuary.co.za](http://www.spiritualsanctuary.co.za).

Festivals

■ Oyster wine and food festival, today, June 10, at 3pm, tomorrow, June 11, at 8pm and Sunday, June 12, at 11am at Montecasino. R140 per person, children aged 14 to 18 R100. Tickets available at Ticketpro. For more information contact Judith Lee on 082 687 0442.

Children's concert

■ A children's concert with Afrikaans narration, *Pieter en die Wolf* and *Karnaval van die Diere*, today, June 10, at 6pm, tomorrow, June 11, at 3pm and June 12 at 3pm at Brooklyn Theatre. Call Tertie Mashele at 012 460 6033.



Books

■ Books wanted for the Pretoria High School for Girls Spring Fair. Any fiction, non-fiction books, magazines, textbooks, dictionaries etc will be appreciated. Call Debbie at 083 310 3747 or e-mail: [danglej@netactive.co.za](mailto:danglej@netactive.co.za).

■ Living in the moment in a Christian way. Book launch by Dr Willem Nicol, title *Oop vir die oomblik*, on June 22 at 7pm, at Stellastraatgemeente, Stellastraat, Brooklyn. For more info, e-mail: [wnicol@mweb.co.za](mailto:wnicol@mweb.co.za).

Show

■ Ga-Rankuwa's annual show on June 14 at 6pm, at Ga-Rankuwa YMCA. R150 per person includes entrance and food. Tickets available at Papiki bottle store Zone 2, Garages Total Engen Zone 15 and Total Morula. Call 072 896 1790.



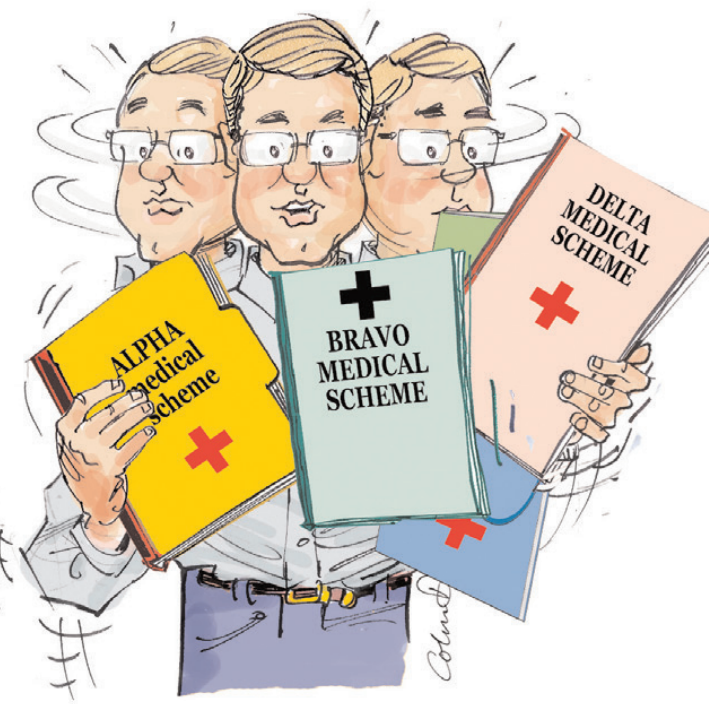
FIND 1 of 10 DORY stickers located throughout the centre, SMS "Kolonnade Found Dory", your name and Dory's location to 34110 to qualify.

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**THIS SATURDAY IN PERSONAL FINANCE**



If you don't know which medical scheme option to join, you may be tempted to pick one that came top in the recent GTC Medical Aid Survey. Unfortunately, it is not that easy, because, although the survey identifies scheme options that are worth considering, it does not take into account the many benefit and cost permutations across options or your own unique healthcare needs. This Saturday, PERSONAL FINANCE offers guidance on what can be a tricky decision.

**Also in this weekend's edition:**  
 ■ The advantages of beneficiary funds for your children.  
 ■ Answers to your financial queries, courtesy of Old Mutual Wealth.

PERSONAL FINANCE is published on Saturdays in these Independent Media newspapers: **INDEPENDENT SATURDAY STAR Weekend Argus INDEPENDENT PRETORIA NEWS WEEKEND**

Good advice for everyday people

