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Dining and Nightlife

Season to Taste

Riviera Maya cuisine fuses many of the world's great culinary traditions.

By/Por Jeff Borg

What would you call the gastronomic fusion of Mexican, Italian, Argentine, Maya, Japanese, Thai, French and American food? “Riviera Maya cuisine,” of course. Millennia before there was anything called “Mexican food,” there was a strong Maya culinary tradition. It starts with the basics — grilled meats, chicken and seafood — but the Maya’s true gift to diners is their improbable combinations of chocolate, honey, corn, chiles, peppercorns, coriander, achiote and cinnamon.

Scan local menus for *cochinita pibil*, meaning pork in bitter orange and red *recado* seasoning wrapped in banana leaves and roasted in a hole. Try the *frijol con puerco*, a stew of black beans and pork. The local *relleno negro* mixes turkey, ground beef and hard-boiled eggs into a rich black chili sauce. Try anything under mole, a dark rich goo combining chocolate and chiles.

Excellent Mexican coffee becomes dessert when laced with Kahlua and rum, or *xtabentún*, a Maya liqueur flavored with anise and honey. Mangos and papayas may be served flambéed, in crepes or as ice cream. Dark Mexican chocolate — sometimes mixed with honey, cinnamon and nuts — goes by the botanical name *Theobroma*, meaning food of the gods. When great coffee and chocolate come together, the effect is truly heavenly.

Now, centuries after perfecting this cuisine, local Maya have been joined by inspired chefs from around the world. They all practice their arts for grateful

rivierans. Dishes reflect not only the Maya tradition but also the chefs' imported cuisines and unique personalities.

After dinner, dance off a few calories in Playa del Carmen's hot and spicy discos, bars and lounges, throbbing into the wee hours. The epicenter of all nightlife is Quinta Avenida and Calle 12, drawing the party people from Mexico City, Miami and Milan.

Below we list our favorite spots — most in Playa del Carmen; some in Tulum, Puerto Morelos, Puerto Aventuras, Akumal and Felipe Carrillo Puerto — for fine dining, casual dining and nightlife that starts well before night. Experience Riviera Maya cuisine and leave the jacket and tie at home. Shoes and shirt will suffice.

Fine Dining

ALUX RESTAURANT AND LOUNGE. In a system of caves well off the tourist track, stalactites and stalagmites lighted colorfully act as dividers between the cave-rooms — some used for lounging, some for drinking, some for eating and some for dancing. The international cuisine is good too, although the setting is the star. Opens 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. (Avenida Juárez, Mz. 217, Lote 2, entre 65 y 70, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.2936, aluxlounge.net)

BUENOS AIRES. True carnivores seek out this authentic Argentine *parrilla*, serving U.S. beef Argentine style with great sauces and sides. (Calle 6 y Avenida 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.2751)

LA CASA DEL AGUA. From its comfortable second-floor terrace overlooking Quinta Avenida, la Casa del Agua is a place for serious seafood with the perfect wine. Mexican dishes mingle with international favorites under the soft amber glow of paper lamps. Opens for lunch 11:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and dinner 6:00 p.m. to midnight. (Quinta Avenida y Calle 2, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.0232/873.1216, lacasadelagua.com)

DI VINO. Lounge at the epicenter of Playa nightlife and watch the pretty people parade as you enjoy fine food and drink at this Italian restaurant, wine bar and gelateria. Opens for breakfast at 7 a.m., for lunch at noon and for dinner from 5 p.m. until midnight, although the bar keeps pouring until 2 a.m. (Calle 12 y Quinta Avenida, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.1270, divino.com.mx)

DIABLITO CHA CHA CHÁ. This little devil weaves a fusion of Mexican and Japanese cuisines that really works. Fresh tuna, mussels and oysters fly in from the Pacific. Favorite local fishes include red snapper and white boquinete. The chef applies regional serrano and habanero chiles to achieve something familiar yet special. The wide-open bar makes this a great place to see and be seen. (Calle 12 y Primera Avenida, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.3416/3695, diablitochachacha.com)

JOHN GRAY'S KITCHEN. In Puerto Morelos, this small eatery has a big reputation. John Gray, who represents Mexico in the 2010 South Beach Wine & Food Festival, serves a good tart margarita to start. His signature entrées include pan-roasted breast of duck with a chipotle, tequila and honey reduction and sweet potatoes; grilled coronado with mango salsa; and beef rib eye with roasted garlic butter, new potatoes and grilled asparagus. “We try not to be pretentious,” says Gray, “but you can have a rack of lamb with a great bottle of wine here.” The cooks are from Saban, a small Maya town, and occasionally Maya gods are implored to help out in the kitchen. Try the banana bread vanilla ice cream for dessert. (Avenida Niños Héroes, Puerto Morelos, 998.871.0665)

JOHN GRAY'S PLACE. This cozy corner, on cute Calle Corazón in Playa, offers good steaks and seafood with artistic presentation. Save the espresso martini for desert. It tastes like Kahlua and smells like coffee, but it kicks like vodka. (Calle Corazón, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.3689)

NEGROSAL. Owners from Florence brought architects from Italy to create this über-stylish setting for rich Tuscan flavors. The waiters swoop in with great flourish to unveil their offerings. Delicious fish ravioli arrive in long, white,

porcelain boats. Beef filets swim in a tangy Balsamic sauce. Patrons can peer through the glass floor into a wine cellar below, where a lucky few get to enter and inhale its wood-barrel aroma. (Calle 16 entre Avenidas Primera y Quinta, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.2448, negrosal.com)

PLAYASIA RESTAURANT AND WINE BAR. Evoking a Thai mountain village, with tree houses overlooking a koi pond and Moroccan glass lanterns casting a sensual glow, this open-air courtyard off la Quinta offers pan-asian cuisine, sushi and Japanese specialties. Start with a mango margarita. The restaurant was described by *National Geographic Traveler* as an “exotic jungle-chic fantasy.” Opens 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 10 y 12, Playa del Carmen, 984.879.4749/206.3350, blueparrot.com/playasia-restaurant)

SUR. Dine al fresco, upstairs or downstairs, on la Quinta at Calle Corazón, an optimal spot for people watching. At this fine steak house and wine bar, the spicy Spanish gazpacho — a kind of soup and salad in one — tastes *perfecto* with its touch of tequila. Excellent beef includes churrasco, a huge portion of soft, tasty meat. (Quinta Avenida y Calle Corazón, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.2995, restaurantesur.com.mx)

YAXCHE. At this temple to Maya cuisine, from which modern Mexican food evolved, the beautiful ambience and friendly service live up to the wonderful meal. Start with a premium Don Julio margarita. For an appetizer, *panuchos* tease the palate with complex flavors of crispy tortilla, turkey or pork, refried beans, avocado, and purple onion. The artistic fish enchiladas with green salsa taste fresh and mild. The *arrachera* — a grilled flank steak with sweet guacamole and charred onions — delivers a rich smoky flavor. Try the blackened turkey, stuffed with ground beef and egg in a burnt pepper sauce, which tastes of chiles, chocolate and attitude. (Calle 8 entre Avenidas 5 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.2502/3712, mayacuisine.com)

Casual Dining / Puerto Morelos

HOLA ASIA. Find this pioneer of Chinese, Japanese and Thai cuisines right on the town square, with sea views from the rooftop bar. (Avenida Tulum y el Zócalo, Puerto Morelos, 998.871.0679, holaasia.com)

LA MARINA EL CID. Worth a trip to Puerto Morelos, 3 km south of the town square. Try the seven-seas ceviche, a fascinating seafood sampler “cooked” by citric juice, as well as other sea-favorites, for breakfast, lunch or dinner. (La Marina El Cid, Puerto Morelos, 998.872.8999 ext. 6055)

Casual Dining / Playa del Carmen

100% NATURAL. The name sums it up: Fresh local grains, fruits, juices, and smoothies claimed to lower cholesterol, boost energy and cure hangovers. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 10 y 12, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.2242, 100natural.com.mx)

AH CACAO. These little coffee emporiums treat Playans to the best brew in town, especially their unique chocolate coffees. (Quinta Avenida y Constituyentes, Quinta Avenida y Calle 30, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.1541, ahcacao.com)

BABE'S NOODLES & BAR. At two friendly spots, refresh with minty mojitos, blueberry daiquiris, cool margaritas and fruit smoothies. Find tasty Asian fare like Thai chicken with peanuts, lemon grass and chile chicken, cashew shrimp, pad Thai and curries. Try the sweet and spicy chicken soup, a party in the mouth made with coconut milk and hot peppers. (Calle 10 entre Avenidas 5 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.120.2592; Quinta Avenida entre Calles 28 y 30, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.0056; babesnoodlesandbar.com)

IL BARETTO. A popular Italian eatery in the heart of the Italian district, this place serves good pasta, pizza, seafood and beef, plus coffee. (Quinta Avenida y Calle 26, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.0257, ilbarettoplaya.com)

BLUE LOBSTER. Pick your dinner from the lobster tank, then sit on la Quinta and watch the street life glide by as you flaunt your crustacean in this fixture of Playa

dining and drinking. (Quinta Avenida y Calle 12, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.1360)

CAFÉ SASTA. At this charming little dessert place with angels on the ceiling, people sip coffee and nibble pasteles as slowly as possible so they can watch the pedestrians parade along Quinta Avenida. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 8 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.3030)

CAFÉ TROPICAL. At the center of la Quinta, this two-story café offers a tasty range of breakfasts, lunches and dinners, plus fresh juices and smoothies. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 8 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.2111)

CARLOS'N CHARLIE'S. This is the fun place for great tapas, burgers, tacos, chicken and such, with giant margaritas. At the foot of la Quinta, a dining balcony overlooks traffic from the ferry dock and Paseo del Carmen. (Quinta Avenida y Calle 3 Sur, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.3498, carlosandcharlies.com)

LA CUEVA DEL CHANGO. This woodsy open-air palapa, with trees poking through the roof, features fruit, juice, yogurt, nuts and other healthy breakfast fare, plus equally good Mexican lunches and dinners. Opens 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., to 2 p.m. on Sunday. (Calle 38 y Primera Avenida, Playa del Carmen, 984.147.0271, lacuevadelchango.com)

JAVA JOE'S. Seek out this little coffee spot for a great espresso in the heart of Playa, open from 6:30 a.m. (Calle 10 entre Avenidas 5 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.876.2694, javajoes.net)

KAREN'S. A favorite *parrilla*: Come here for steak, seafood, pizza, classic Mexican fare and live music. This is big noisy place to have a little fun, a fixture in Playa since 1992. (Quinta entre Calles 2 y 4, Playa del Carmen, 984.879.4064, karens.com.mx)

MAKTUB. Plop down on a pillow and smoke from the hookah. For lunch or dinner, enjoy Middle Eastern specialties like gyros, stuffed grape leaves, tabouleh,

baba ghanoush and Turkish coffee. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 28 y 30, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.3886)

LAS MAÑANITAS. The Italian restaurant owners came to Playa for a visit, fell in love with the sun and sea, and decided to stay. The result is a tasty mix of Italian, Mexican and international cuisines prepared by talented chefs, accompanied by good drinks and served by trained waiters. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 4 y 6, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.0114, lasmananitas.com)

MEDIA LUNA. Locals come here for vegetarian offerings, fresh fish and chicken dishes, like the curried root-vegetable puree with cilantro cream and the black-pepper-crusting fish with sesame rice and mango salsa. The margaritas are hefty, and the vantage is good for people watching. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 12 y 14, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.0526)

LA PALAPA DE HEMINGWAY. Classic Maya and Mexican dishes are served under the gaze of a giant portrait of Papa. People watchers sip margaritas and enjoy the best guacamole in Playa, as waiters bring out the avocado and other fresh ingredients, then mash them together right at the table. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 12 y 14, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.0003/4)

LA PARRILLA. This boisterous home of sizzling fajitas and Mexican favorites, on la Quinta, delivers a side of mariachi music with every dish. (Quinta Avenida y Calle 8, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.0687, laparrilla.com.mx)

SEÑOR FROG'S. This high-wattage beach bar pumps out DJ and live music, hosts late-night dancing, and runs contests involving drinking, singing and the evaluation of body parts. Near the ferry dock in Playa, it serves just enough seafood, burgers and Mexican favorites to sop up the alcohol. (Centro Playa Marina L17,37,38,44 (Muelle), Playa del Carmen, 984.873.0930, senorfrogs.com)

ULA GULA. This casual dining emporium serves Argentine fare with just the right wine and a side of people watching along la Quinta. (Quinta Avenida y Calle 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.879.3727, ula-gula.com)

LA VAGABUNDA. This big palapa starts early with a hearty breakfast — standard American eggs and pancakes plus authentic Mexican and Italian starters — and great espresso and cappuccino. Lunch and dinner range from Mexican enchiladas and fajitas to Angus medallions and filets, ceviches in several styles and vegetarian dishes. (Avenida Quinta entre Calles 24 y 26, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.3753, vagabundaplaya.com)

ZABOR. A place right on the beach to enjoy breakfast with the sunrise or dinner with the moonlight. Find an Aztec fusion of seafood, meats and sauces. (Calle 8 y la Playa, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.0735, zaborrestaurant.com)

Casual Dining / Puerto Aventuras

The restaurants and cafés in Puerto Aventuras ring a central lagoon where dolphins jump and play. Richard's Quarterdeck serves steak, pizza, lobster and seafood. Gringo Dave's, Dos Chilis and Café Olé sling Mexican favorites. Mediterráneo offers Italian-Mexican fare. The Pub mixes Mexican and pizza. Tiramisu specializes in seafood, jumbo shrimp and fresh fish. Arigato does sushi and sashimi.

Casual Dining / Akumal

Some of the resorts in the town of Akumal welcome visitors to their restaurants. Take in the view, as well as the good Mexican food, at the rooftop La Terraza in the Villas DeRosa resort. La Cueva del Pescador is a good spot for a seafood medley and a soccer game on TV. La Buena Vida, with an eerie Day-of-the-Dead theme, serves Chilean and Mexican wines and good food. Qué Onda serves simple, tasty meals in an utterly serene setting.

Casual Dining / Tulum

ANA Y JOSÉ. Don't bother with shoes. This is Tulum, the floor is sand, the fare is seafood and Mexican, and the proprietors are welcoming. Try specialties like Sian Ka'an fish fillet in mango sauce with a touch of chipotle, or grilled lobster

prepared with tequila. To finish, order Maya coffee with xtabentún liqueur. (Carr. Tulum–Boca Paila km 7, Tulum, 998.880.5629/6022, anayjose.com)

DON CAFETO. With two locations in Tulum, a restaurant on the highway and a casual beach outpost, this place features authentic Mexican fare — smell the blackened poblanos and roasting meat — plus a full bar and the best espresso around. Opens 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. (Avenida Tulum 64 L12, Tulum, 984.871.2207)

ZAHRA. This Tulum resort welcomes all to come and enjoy seafood, steaks and Mexican specialties on the beach, served in a casual, open-air setting. At sister resort Cabañas Copal, the secluded outdoor restaurant features fresh lobster and shrimp. (Carr. Tulum–Boca Paila km 5, Tulum, 984.807.9520/25, zahra.com.mx)

Casual Dining / Felipe Carrillo Puerto

About 60 miles beyond Tulum, in the historic hamlet of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, stop at El Faisán y el Venado for Mexican and Maya fare and good fruit smoothies. Or just look for Luis, who sells *cocos fríos* from his bicycle cart in the town square. He pulls a chilled coconut out of his cooler, hacks off the tip with a machete, and pokes it with a straw. After you suck the nut dry, he splits it, carves out the rich white meat, and sprinkles pepper and lime over the succulent chunks. Voilà, lunch!

Nightlife

BÁSICO. Latin music wafts down from this way-cool rooftop lounge overlooking la Quinta, as gauzily shaded beach beds, deck chairs, hammocks, soaking pools and panoramic views of the Caribbean and Cozumel set a great mood. At night, black-and-white movies on the wall accompany piña coladas and Cuban cigars. The place gets progressively greener with time, now recycling 70 percent of materials. (Quinta Avenida y Calle 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.879.4448, hotelbasico.com)

BLUE PARROT BEACH CLUB. At party central down by the beach, find good tacos, burgers, chicken and seafood. DJs crank it up and patrons pack the disco well into the wee hours. \$6 covers two beers or one tropical drink, plus access to Playa's world-famous fire show. (Calle 12 y Primera Avenida, Playa del Carmen, 984.206.3350, blueparrot.com/beach-club)

COCO BONGO. This is the place to dance, scream, drink, laugh, hear pounding music, see flying acrobats and celebrity impersonators, and witness big shows with several hundred of your closest friends. Cover is \$20–50. (Calle 12 y Avenida 10, Playa del Carmen, 998.883.5061, cocobongo.com.mx)

EL DESEO. Climb the broad stone steps to this starlit rooftop at the center of Playa, with queen-size lounges and a small wading pool. The placid atmosphere allows friends to enjoy a quiet conversation, as classic Mexican movies play on the wall. (Quinta Avenida y Calle 12, Playa del Carmen, 984.879.3620, hoteldeseo.com)

DIRTY MARTINI. Linger over your favorite martini with cool lounge music in the background and enjoy a conversation with friends. (Primera Avenida entre Calles 10 y 12, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.0057)

DUBAI. In the center of Playa's bar scene, the dance standards blare loudly, and the colored searchlights move as frenetically as the twenty-something patrons. Cover is \$15, open 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. (Calle 12 entre Avenidas 5 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.2027, dubaiplaya.com)

THE GLASS BAR. Recently reopened with a new concept, in Playa's party district, this wine shop and bar, open 10:00–12:30 a.m., serves gourmet tapas after noon, and offers live jazz most evenings. (Calle 10 entre Avenidas 1 y 5, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.1676, theglassbar.com.mx)

KARTABAR. On Calle 12 in the heart of Playa, stop here for a drink, plate of hummus, stuffed grape leaves or other Middle Eastern favorites. (Calle 12 entre Avenidas 1 y 5, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.2228)

MAMBO CAFÉ. Dance music lures a big crowd of fashionistas, all drawn to the pounding disco beat. The A/C has to work overtime to cool this dance floor. Pay a \$5 cover charge or go for the \$27 open-bar ticket. (Calle 6 entre Avenidas 5 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.2656-7, mambocafe.com.mx)

MAMITAS BEACH CLUB. The beautiful people seem to gravitate to Mamita's Beach Club — maybe for the comfy beach lounges with gauzy sun shields fluttering in the breeze, maybe for the excellent white sand, maybe the volleyball. It could be for the DJs spinning tracks, the festivals and events, or even the drinks. Whatever. This is a top spot for pretty Playans to come and hang with friends. (Calle 28 y la Playa, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.2867, mamitasbeachclub.com)

MEZZANINE. This tiny boutique resort on the beach in Tulum welcomes all to its Thai-beach fusion restaurant and lounge. Start with a crisp martini or tart margarita at the bar, with soothing decor in deep reds and chocolate browns. Chic Friday fiestas attract musicians and deejays from London and Ibiza. (Carr. Tulum–Boca Paila km 1.5, Tulum, 984.131.1596, mezzanine.com.mx)

OM BAR. At this open-air multi-level palapa along the prime party promenade, young professionals from Playa, Cancún and Mexico City come to see and be seen. (Calle 12 y Primera Privada 195, Playa del Carmen, 984.114.0538, tulum-playa.com/omplaya.php)

LA SANTANERA. This bar pokes fun at some holy icons of Mexico. Upstairs, the decor celebrates *las calacas* (skeletons from Day-of-the-Dead festivities) and the heroes of *lucha libre* (Mexican professional wrestling). A portrait of Santo Condón greets patrons at the door. Over a well-stocked bar, a neon shrine to Jesús Malverde, the unofficial patron saint of thieves, watches over the chatting crowd of young professionals. Downstairs, an air-conditioned disco features hot DJs. Open till 6 a.m. Cover is \$5 most nights. (Calle 12 Mz.30 L2 entre Avenidas 5 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.2294, lasantanera.com)

SIESTA FIESTA. This pleasant outdoor enclave, under a big shade tree along la Quinta, makes a good place to enjoy a drink and watch the street life. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 8 y 10, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.1166, siestafiestahotel.com)

TEQUILA BARREL. The specialty bar at the heart of la Quinta serves 80 or 90 different tequilas, and waiters happily make recommendations. (Quinta Avenida entre Calles 10 y 12, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.1061, tequilabarrel.com)