

*Refined  
Authentic Cuisine*

Jorge Javier Romero\*





The State of Campeche Tourism Ministry

Campeche mixed its population well, and one of the best proofs of this happy mixture is its cuisine.

Where is Campeche? Relatively little known in both Mexico and around the world, this area has forged an identity of its own by absorbing a mosaic of influences: everything from Campeche is a culture unto itself, but with very close relatives.

Campeche's culture belongs to the great family of the Yucatán. In broad terms, the Yucatán peninsula is home to a single cultural unit, but a unit with a rich diversity of expressions. Undoubtedly, the peninsula's political division—first Campeche broke away in 1857 and then Quintana Roo in 1903—contributed to the emergence of local specificities and particular definitions. In Quintana Roo, for example, most of the population is made up of very recent immigrants: natives of Yucatán do live there, and there is above all a strong presence of the Mayan culture underlying everything from Yucatán, but Cancún and Chetumal are cities inhabited by people from all over. It was designed that way since Porfirio Díaz's 30-year dictatorship, the *Porfiriato*: the territory was used for colonization, based on subjecting the Mayas who until then were hidden away in their jungles. Today, Cancún and the so-called Mayan Riviera are symbols of the entire peninsula, injected with cosmopolitanism, even though Mérida is still



Elsie Montiel

ahead as the region's capital, cultural center and example of quality of life.

Campeche is different. Its population was already there. The Mayans lived there and then the Spaniards came, and the city was founded in the sixteenth century: a social unit with hierarchies and rules, whose members relate to each other in a common space of trade and social exchange. Campeche was a port—though never a deep-sea port, and with difficult high tides and enormous ebb tides—and an important trade site for goods entering the peninsula. In the seventeenth century it was attacked by pirates and the city was fortified, but the project turned out to be completely obsolete since, by the time the walls were finished in the mid-eighteenth century, piracy had disappeared. In the nineteenth century, the city was home to a society proud of its traditions and ability to live in harmony. A beautiful city facing a very singular, absolutely still sea. Despite being walled in, it was a tolerant, open society, with



Elsie Montiel

Stingray sold in Campeche's market.

\* Political Scientist and professor of Politics and Culture at the Autonomous Metropolitan University, Xochimilco Campus.

Photo previous page: Shrimp rolled in shredded coconut. Courtesy of the State of Campeche Tourism Ministry.



The influence of the flavors from overseas transformed Campeche food into one of the country's great cuisines.

its well-defined neighborhoods. A city that became dominated toward the end of the colonial period by everything Catalanian, or perhaps everything Valencian —studies would be needed to ascertain precisely and Mexican historiography has delved but little into nineteenth-century immigration: from the end of the eighteenth and during the nineteenth centuries the Yucatán peninsula, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico received a large number of immigrants from Catalonia, who ended up becoming the regional bourgeoisie.

Campeche mixed its population well. And one of the best proofs of this happy mixture is its cuisine. The Mayan ingredients combined with the Arab ones, which arrived with the Andalusian Moors who colonized the area in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the Lebanese, from early twentieth-century migrations from the decomposing Ottoman Empire, plus the Catalonians and the Valencians. The influence of the flavors from overseas transformed Campeche food



Elsie Montiel

into one of the country's great cuisines, though, like the region, it is not very well known outside the walls of the Gulf of Mexico.

To start, in Campeche, people eat the entire range of Yucatán cuisine. The northern part of the state is dotted

with towns very similar to those found in the state of Yucatán, with its strong Mayan culture, in some cases even monolingual. This is the land of *cochinita pibil*, of free-range turkeys cooked in *sac cool*, of *kitam pipián* or mountain pork, stews made of *tepezcuintle* rodent (*jaaleh* in Mayan) or the now very rare *weech* or armadillo in chili pepper paste or *adobo*. Of all the peninsula's wild animals, the one most coveted for food was the deer, until it became endangered. It is eaten fresh, stewed in *sanchac* or roasted in a *pib*, an earthen oven where *cochinita* and special ritual tamales are made for the Day



The State of Campeche Tourism Ministry

of the Dead festivities from October 30 to November 3, known as *pibipollos* or *mukbipollos*, hybrid terms indicative of the region's racial mix.

These enormous tamales are a kind of huge turnover made of corn meal mixed with lard and *achiote* paste, filled with chicken or pork stewed with tomatoes, onions and habanero chili peppers —what Jamaicans call “Scotch bonnet peppers”— and spiced with cumin, oregano, garlic, pepper and cinnamon. The tamale is wrapped in banana leaves, not only for their flavor but also because it prevents the tamale from sticking, and it is roasted in the *pib* overnight, so it can be included in the offerings to the dead on the lower of the three lev-



Papadzules.

Elsie Montiel





Mauricio Degollado

X'catik chili peppers.

els they always include representing the underworld, the earth and the heavens.

One gem of traditional, popular Mayan cooking is the *dzotobichay*, a special tamale distinguished from the enormous variety of tamales in Mexico and the rest of the Americas because it is eaten complete with wrapping. Naturally, it is not wrapped in banana leaves or in corn husks as almost all tamales are: the main ingredient of this delight is the nutritious *chaya*, or tree spinach, a leafy plant native to the region. For the *dzotobichay*, the leaves are chopped up and mixed with the corn meal dough; then the little tamales are filled with a paste made from squash seeds and boiled eggs and wrapped in larger *chaya* leaves. They are steamed and served whole, including the covering, softened by cooking, bathed in a tomato and onion sauce, sprinkled with ground squash seeds and chopped boiled eggs, and garnished with a toasted habanero chili pepper.

Together with these dishes of mixed heritage, but with a strong indigenous component, comes the clearly Spanish lineage of pork and beans, a relative of Spain's *fabadas* and stews, and a three-meat *puchero* stew, Madrid's *cocido* or Catalonia's *escudella*.

All these dishes are common to Yucatán cooking. But when you get to the city of Campeche, you also find varieties with the local addition, something from the sea, which enriches regional cuisine until it becomes one of the country's most varied.

*Cazón*, that tender, little, white-meat shark, previously very common in Gulf waters, contributes its strong flavor to extraordinary dishes. It is eaten fresh, cooked in tomatoes and onions, accompanied by the peninsula's enormous avocados, freshly cooked black beans and toasted habanero chili peppers: this is the flagship dish of Campeche's cuisine. However, it reaches its full culinary stature by being grilled, a tradition born of the need to preserve it due to the lack of refrigeration. Pieces of grilled shark are simmered in salt water with *epazote* leaves and sour oranges, drained and dried in a skillet until they become a white powder used to make *cazón* bread, another typical dish of the region. It is made with corn tortillas spread with refried black

beans, sprinkled with the shark dust, piled on top of each other and bathed in a tomato and onion sauce, naturally accompanied by the all-pervasive habanero chili pepper and avocado.

The most complex dish made with shark meat is stuffed *x'catik* chili peppers. Grilled shark is cooked in tomato and onion sauce and used to stuff locally grown chili peppers, relatives of Central Mexico's *güero* chili pepper or Basque *guindillas*, but the size of a red Bell pepper. They are then dipped in batter and fried, and served in a tomato sauce.

Pompano is another major player in food from the sea near the city of Campeche. It is



Elicé Montiel



Mauricio Degollado

Pibipollos or mukbipollos.



Elsie Montiel

A dish originally from Puerto Rico but recently adapted to Campeche is made from shrimp rolled in shredded coconut, arranged around a half coconut filled with a fruit sauce, almost always applesauce.

eaten fried or marinated and cooked in tangy *escabeche* sauce, clearly of Valencian origins; this way it can be preserved for months and used in other dishes like fish with rice (a soupy rice dish also inherited from the Iberian peninsula) or cooked in an aromatic green sauce made of parsley, sweet chili peppers, chives and roasted garlic. It is also stuffed with sardines —giving you a fish stuffed with another fish— or shrimp.

Yucatan's *chirmole* is made in Campeche with *esmedregal* or jack fish and crabs instead of turkey and its stuffing. Fried sawfish is a simple but tasty dish: the fish rounds are fried in very hot oil until a crust is formed, but without drying out the meat. It is accompanied by a *salpicón* made of onion, radish, habanero chili pepper and sour orange juice or a *chil-tomate* sauce made of grilled tomatoes and habanero chili peppers.

Campeche's other important city, Ciudad del Carmen, contributes jumbo shrimp to the regional cuisine. A dish originally from Puerto Rico but recently adapted to Campeche is made from shrimp rolled in shredded coconut arranged around a half coconut filled with

a fruit sauce, almost always applesauce. Also from Ciudad del Carmen —previously known as Laguna because it is on an island in the middle of the Laguna de Términos, the Términos Lagoon— are breaded oysters.

Going to Campeche is a very interesting gastronomical experience. In getting to know its culture, you must complement the vestiges of Mayan society and colonial and nineteenth-century architecture by a visit

to its markets to eat roast suckling pig, black stuffing or pickled turkey; to the capital's portals in San Francisco or San Martín, to eat mixed *panuchos* or a sandwich made of ham encrusted with cloves baked in sherry; or to elegant restaurants like La Pigüa,

where freshwater mullet eggs become Campeche's caviar and you can try the incredible *xc'atik* shark-stuffed chili peppers or pompano in green sauce. In Ciudad del Carmen, you must go to La Puntilla's restaurants, and, if you arrive early, in Hecelchak'an on the main plaza, you can eat the best pork à la *pibil* of the entire Yucatán peninsula. This culinary journey can be drawn out for a long, delightful stay. **NMM**



Elsie Montiel