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Fish Tacos “La Bufadora”

The fish taco defines the best of Baja, one bite at a time. And like all great street food, the perfect fish taco is very, very simple. Success relies on fresh ingredients, the technique of “double frying” described below, and most of all, speedy service. The fish must be cooked in front of you and eaten within a minute of leaving the fryer. It’s hard for a sit-down restaurant to pull off but easy to do in a home kitchen or at a backyard gathering.

This is a very authentic recipe: A *real* fish taco is always on a corn tortilla, never flour. It is always beer-battered and deep-fried, never grilled. And it must have cabbage on it, not lettuce, plus that runny white “secret” sauce (really no secret at all).

The double-frying technique is essential. It speeds up the final cooking (especially for a crowd) and makes for crisper fish. If you don’t double-fry, the fish takes a long time to cook and may become soggy instead of brown. Best of all, precooking allows you to do most of the work ahead of time and then at the last minute quickly reify the fish and heat tortillas to order—just like the cooks do at fish taco stands.

Makes 24 tacos, enough for 6 to 8 people

2 cups all-purpose flour
1½ teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon granulated garlic
¼ teaspoon cayenne
½ teaspoon dry mustard
½ teaspoon dried whole Mexican oregano,
rubbed to a powder
Kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
12 ounces (1 bottle) cold beer, plus more to thin the
batter if necessary
2 pounds firm, meaty fish (see page 52 for a list of
sustainable species)
Freshly squeezed lime juice, preferably from Mexican
limones (see page 30)
Vegetable oil, for deep-frying

TO SERVE

Fresh corn tortillas, warmed
Avocado Sauce (see page 34)
Lime wedges, preferably from Mexican limones
(see page 30)
Mayonesa Secret Sauce (see page 37)
Salsa de Chiles de Arbol #1 (see page 38)
Pico de Gallo (see page 30)
Finely shredded green cabbage (not lettuce!)
Cilantro leaves (optional)
Chopped white onion (optional)

- 1.** Make the batter: Whisk together the flour, baking powder, garlic, cayenne, mustard, oregano, 1 teaspoon salt, and pepper until well blended. Stir in the beer until there are no lumps. (Batter may be made several hours ahead and refrigerated.)
- 2.** Trim the fish of all blood lines and skin. Cut into pieces the size and shape of your index finger. Sprinkle with a few drops of lime juice and a little salt. (If not using immediately, wrap and refrigerate.)
Pour the oil into a deep, wide pan to a depth of 2 inches and heat over medium-high heat to 350 degrees. (See Safe Frying, page 248. I use a deep-fry thermometer, but I also test the heat by dropping a little of the batter into the oil. It should bounce to the surface almost immediately and be surrounded by little bubbles.)
- 3.** Pat the fish dry with paper towels. Check the thickness of the batter by dipping in one piece of the fish. The batter should be the consistency of medium-thick pancake batter, coating the fish easily but dripping very little. Add a little beer if the batter seems too thick.
- 4.** Add the fish to the batter. Using tongs or chopsticks, swish each piece to make sure it is thoroughly coated, then lift it out of the batter, let it drip once, and lay the fish gently into the hot oil. Cook a few pieces at a time

until they float and the batter is set but still very light in color. (Note: If a piece sticks to the bottom, leave it alone—it will release itself.)

5. Remove the fish to a rack to drain; reserve the frying oil. (The fish can be prepared ahead to this point, cooled on a rack, and refrigerated uncovered. Cool the oil and reserve.)

6. When you are ready to serve, reheat the oil to 350 to 360 degrees and re-fry the fish a few pieces at a time until crisp and golden brown.

7. To serve, hold a tortilla in your hand and add a spoonful of avocado sauce. Top with fish and squeeze lime over the whole thing. Then drizzle on a little secret sauce and a few drops of árbol sauce. Top with pico de gallo and shredded cabbage, and maybe a cilantro leaf or some extra white onions.

Notes: Typically a small shark known as *angelito* is used for fish tacos. Since sharks are thought by some biologists to be threatened, please choose a sustainable fish (see page 52) that is firm and meaty.

I use an ingenious Mexican pan for frying fish tacos. Called a *disca*, it looks suspiciously like a car hubcap with a very wide rim. You fry in the deep well and drain the pieces on the rim, which also keeps everything nice and warm. If you can't find a *disca*, cook the fish in a large frying pan or sauté pan; drain on a wire rack set on a rimmed cookie sheet.



FOOD ON THE RUN: PUESTOS, TAQUERÍAS, AND FONDAS

Anyplace you stand up and grab a bite to eat, whether it has wheels or not, is called a *puesto* (Spanish for post or stall). If it has no wheels and there is a seat or two, it becomes a *taquería*. Food here is always cooked to order.

Small sit-down restaurants known as *fondas* serve full meals of what is called *comida corrida* (food on the run), premade food such as *moles*, *birria*, and enchiladas dished up from steam tables and served in a hurry.

Cafeterías and *loncherías* are true restaurants, larger in size, with a long menu of full meals in a diner-like setting with table service.

Grilled Fish Tacos

Some touristy Baja restaurants offer grilled fish tacos, but they are an American invention, never seen at *puestos* or *taquerías*. Nothing will ever replace a true fish taco in my heart, though a grilled fish taco is significantly lighter and tasty—once in a while.

The fish is marinated in a zippy fresh citrus bath and quickly grilled. I like to serve these with, among other things, mango salsa (if you're going to break with tradition, you may as well go all the way). Pico de gallo and the usual rip-roaring bottled hot sauce round things out.

When you shop for fish, please choose a sustainable species (see page 52). I also recommend using a special fish grilling basket to prevent sticking.

Makes 24 tacos, enough for 6 to 8 people

MARINADE

- 2 tablespoons finely diced white onion
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice, preferably from a Mexican limón (see page 30)
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed orange juice
- 1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon chopped cilantro
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- ½ teaspoon dried whole Mexican oregano, rubbed to a powder
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt

1½ pounds boneless, skinless white fish fillets

TO SERVE

- Fresh corn tortillas, warmed
- Diced avocado, Avocado Sauce (see page 34), or Naked Guacamole (see page 34)
- Lime wedges, preferably from Mexican limones (see page 30)
- Mango Salsa (see page 47)
- Salsa de Chiles de Arbol #1 (see page 38) or bottled hot sauce
- Pico de Gallo (see page 30), shredded white cabbage, cilantro sprigs, and diced white onion (optional)

1. Combine all marinade ingredients. Cut the fish into several large pieces and add to the marinade.
2. Refrigerate for 1 to 3 hours (no longer or you'll have ceviche). Drain the fish and discard the marinade.
3. Half an hour before cooking, clean the grill thoroughly with a brush and wipe it down with an oil-dampened rag. Preheat the grill on high. Grill the fish until it is barely firm to the touch and opaque through the center. Do not overcook.
4. Remove to a platter and break into chunks to serve. Keep loosely covered.
5. To serve, hold a tortilla in your hand and add a spoonful of avocado. Add a few pieces of fish, a squeeze of lime, mango salsa, and árbol salsa; finish with the optional toppings.

Note: The fish may also be baked or sautéed.

Variations: Substitute Man Bites Shark marinade (see page 73) or Achiote Marinade (see page 142).

Shrimp Tacos

The only thing that comes close to being as good as a fish taco is a shrimp taco, and most stands sell both. The batter for shrimp tacos is spicier and thicker, and it fries up crunchier. Salsas and condiments are much the same, but some prefer shredded lettuce to cabbage and add chopped red onion. It's your taco, so do what you want.

Before frying the shrimp, make sure everything is ready to serve: The salsas and condiments are on the table, and the tortillas are warm.

Makes 24 tacos, enough for 6 to 8 people

2 pounds best-quality large shrimp, preferably Mexican, peeled and deveined
½ lime, preferably Mexican limón (see page 000)

BATTER

Scant 1½ cups all-purpose flour
½ cup rice flour (available at Latin markets)
1½ teaspoons baking powder
¾ teaspoon granulated garlic
¾ teaspoon cayenne
½ teaspoon dried whole Mexican oregano,
rubbed to a powder
1½ teaspoons kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
12 ounces (1 bottle) cold beer, plus more to
thin the batter if necessary

TO SERVE

Fresh corn tortillas, warmed
Avocado Sauce (see page 34)
Mayonesa Secret Sauce (see page 47)
Salsa de Chiles de Arbol #1 (see page 38) or
bottled hot sauce
Shredded iceberg lettuce or green cabbage
Pico de Gallo (see page 30)
Diced red onion mixed with chopped cilantro (optional)
Lime wedges, preferably from Mexican limones
(see page 30)

Vegetable oil

1. Cut each shrimp into two or three pieces. Spritz a little lime over the shrimp to moisten—don't overdo it—and refrigerate.
2. Make the batter: Combine the flour and seasonings in a bowl and mix thoroughly with a whisk. Add the beer all at once, whisk until smooth, and set aside at room temperature for 30 minutes.
3. Pour the oil into a deep, wide pan to a depth of 2 inches and heat over medium-high heat to 365 degrees (see Safe Frying, page 248).
4. Check the batter; it should be a thick coating consistency. If it seems too thick, add beer, water, or milk, 1 teaspoon at a time, until the right consistency is achieved. It's better to be slightly too thick than too thin!
5. Pat the shrimp dry and add to the batter. Fish out a few pieces at a time (I use chopsticks) and fry until golden brown. Drain the shrimp on paper towels.
6. To prepare hold a tortilla in your hand and add a spoonful of avocado sauce. Add the shrimp, a squeeze of secret sauce, and a healthy shot of árbol salsa. Top with lettuce, pico de gallo, and onion and cilantro. Squeeze lime over the whole thing.

Note: Save the shrimp shells to make Seven Seas Broth (see page 103).

THE BURRITO MYTH



In most of Mexico, a *burrito* is a small draft animal with long ears and a sweetly stubborn disposition, used to haul heavy loads. A friend's mother, who owned a tortilla factory, used to take a warm tortilla, squish it into a rope-like roll that she called a burrito (remember doing this with soft white bread?), roll it in sugar, and give it to him for a snack after school.

What we call a burrito probably originated in Texas and New Mexico, along the Sonoran border. Sonoran cooks make enormous flour tortillas to eat alongside the grilled meats that are local specialties. It wouldn't take too many cowboys to figure out how to fill one of these huge tortillas with beans, meat, and salsa, tuck in the ends, and roll it up to create a portable meal.

So, do burritos really exist in Baja? Tourist restaurants usually offer burritos. American-style "wraps" are appearing on menus as *tacones*, filled with anything from salad to turkey *mole*. Neighborhood *puestos* and *fondas* will give you a blank look if you order one. But there's nothing to stop you from making your own, as in the Puerto Nuevo-style lobster burrito (see page 59).

Cocktel de Mariscos

(SEAFOOD COCKTAIL)

Refreshing and light, *cockteles* are immensely popular at street stands and puestos everywhere in Baja. Cocktel (not to be confused with ceviche) is something like a chunky gazpacho combined with lots of fresh, lightly cooked seafood: Shrimp, octopus, calamari, clams, crab, oysters, and periwinkle are the most popular, singly or *campechana*—some of everything.

The seafood is mixed with its own chilled cooking broth, a splash of tomato juice, and a heaping spoonful of diced cucumbers, red onions, and tomatoes, all topped with perfect avocado, lots of fresh-squeezed lime juice, and a few dashes of fiery hot sauce. On the side, *gamesa* crackers (Mexican saltines).

For some reason, cart cockteles tend to taste better than the ones I've had in restaurants. My advice: Eat early in the day—the better carts sell out and close up before the day gets hot.

Makes 8 servings as a light appetizer

About 4 cups Seven Seas Broth (see page 103) or water

Total of 4 cups prepared seafood (choose four of the following items to combine; more than four gets confusing.)

8 ounces small squid, cleaned and cut into rings

8 ounces best-quality small shrimp, preferably Mexican (peel after cooking)

1 cup cooked octopus cut into slices

3 large scallops, cut into quarters

8 ounces snow, stone, or Dungeness crab legs, shelled

8 ounces fish, free of skin and bone, cut into 1-inch pieces (see page 52 for a list of sustainable species)

8 ounces periwinkle, cleaned and cut into small pieces

8 ounces farmed abalone, cleaned and cut into small pieces

8 raw or cooked oysters

8 raw or cooked cherrystone clams

2 cups Pico de Gallo (see page 30)

1 cup peeled, diced cucumber

½ teaspoon kosher salt

1 cup freshly squeezed lime juice (about 6 large limes, preferably Mexican limones; see page 30)

About 2 cups Clamato, tomato, or Snappy Tom juice

½ cup ketchup

TO SERVE

2 avocados, pitted, peeled, and cut into ¾-inch dice

Lime wedges, preferably from Mexican limones (see page 30)

Salsa de Chiles de Arbol #1 (see page 38) or bottled hot sauce

Saltine crackers or Tostaditas (see page 248)

1. Bring the broth to a fast simmer in a large pot. Add the seafood and cook at a bare simmer for 3 to 5 minutes, or until just barely opaque. Remove from the heat and cool the seafood in the cooking liquid. Chill.
2. Drain the seafood, reserving the cooking liquid, and mix with the pico de gallo and cucumber. Add the salt, lime juice, Clamato juice, ketchup, and reserved cooking liquid. (Can be made ahead to this point and chilled.)
3. To serve, spoon into small glass bowls, footed sundae glasses, or martini glasses (if poolside, use clear plastic cups). Add lots of the juice.
4. Top with avocado. Serve immediately, with lime wedges, árbol sauce, and crisp, salty crackers.

Note: If using clams or oysters be sure to reserve their juices and add to your cocktel.

Variation: To make Cabo Coconut Cocktel, omit the Clamato juice and substitute a 12-ounce can of coconut milk. Add 3 large serrano chiles (minced), 2 more tablespoons lime juice, and twice as much cilantro. Taste for salt; this variation needs to be spicy and well seasoned.

Ceviche, Ensenada Style

Ensenada-style *ceviche* is a celebration of absolute freshness and immediacy. It's made with raw, fresh-ground (not diced) fish combined with diced tomatoes, onion, cilantro, and chiles and then quickly tossed with freshly squeezed lime juice, creating something like a very substantial, fresh-tasting salsa. It should be eaten within several hours, scooped onto thick, crunchy tostadas, liberally seasoned with hot sauce and limes. At most cocktail stands, you can snack on fresh ceviche for free while you wait your turn.

Ensenadans make delicious ceviche with fresh tuna or generic white fish that has been put through a meat grinder; pans of the pink ground fish are offered for sale at fish markets. On the gulf side and in Cabo, fresh mackerel is often used. Stateside, sustainable fish choices for homemade ceviche include wild salmon, Alaskan halibut, pole-caught yellowfin tuna, and mackerel.

Whatever fish you use, pristine freshness is a must. Buy whatever saltwater fish is freshest from a reputable fish dealer. (Note that freshwater fish should never be eaten raw!) Keep the fish ice cold at all times and use it that day. Marinating in lime does not preserve or sterilize food.

When making ceviche, you don't want the fish to soak in lime juice until it turns white and rubbery—the true tender flavor of the fish is utterly lost amid a barrage of acid, spice, and onion.

If you prefer not to eat raw fish, the fish can be quickly cooked in lightly salted water or fish stock and chilled before proceeding with the recipe.

Makes 4 cups, enough for 36 tostadas, serving 6 to 8 people

12 ounces very fresh saltwater fish, with all skin, bones, and fat lines removed
6–8 limes, preferably Mexican limones (see page 30)
1–1½ teaspoons kosher salt
2 cups Pico de Gallo (see page 30)
3 or more fresh serrano chiles, quartered lengthwise and minced (wear rubber gloves)

TO SERVE

Round tostadas or thick home-style tostada chips
A variety of bottled Mexican hot sauces
Lime wedges, preferably from Mexican limones (see page 30)

1. Wash your hands, cutting board, knives, and bowls very thoroughly. Either grind the fish through the coarse plate of a very clean meat grinder, chop it finely by hand, or cut it into tiny dice, ¼ inch or less. Squeeze the limes over the fish, add the salt, and stir well. Refrigerate for 2 hours.
2. Just before serving, add the pico de gallo and chiles. Adjust the seasoning with lime juice or salt, if necessary, bearing in mind that you will be adding hot sauce to the mix. Stir thoroughly and refrigerate until ready to serve, ideally within 1 hour.
3. Serve in a bowl set on ice. Serve the tostadas on the side with an assortment of hot sauces and the limes.

Variations: Fresh scallops, shrimp, abalone, and calamari all make excellent ceviche. And finely diced raw beef is nothing short of phenomenal prepared in this style! Lean filet or sirloin is excellent, but so is flap meat, which is very finely shot through with bits of fat—deliciously, terribly *macho*.

Carne Asada Tacos

To find a good *carne asada* taco, look for clouds of fragrant, meaty smoke swirling down the street and follow your nose to a cart or *puesto* with a grill (*parrilla*) covered with swathes of grilling meat and *cebollitas* (green onions) over leaping flames. The busy *taquero* swiftly dices the meat with a great rattle of his knife, loads it onto corn tortillas with a smear of avocado sauce, and wraps each in a little square of absorbent gray paper that acts as both plate and napkin. On the cart will be quartered limes, chopped white onions and cilantro, pickled jalapeños and red onions, pico de gallo, radishes, and at least one hot sauce, such as chipotle salsa or salsa de chiles de árbol.

Carne asada is just as quick and simple to make at home, on the outdoor grill or in a grill pan. If you cook it indoors, turn on the fan—it will be smoky.

Makes 24 tacos, enough for 6 to 8 people

CARNE ASADA

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 garlic cloves, minced
3 tablespoons minced onion
1½ tablespoons best-quality Japanese soy sauce
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice, preferably from a Mexican limón (see page 30)
2½ pounds flap meat or skirt steak

TO SERVE

Fresh corn tortillas, warmed
Avocado Sauce (see page 34)
Cebollitas (see page 178)
Whole roasted jalapeño chiles or Pickled Jalapeño Peppers (see page 180)
Pico de Gallo (see page 30)
Chipotle Salsa (see page 40)
Diced white onion
Pickled Red Onions (see page 180)
Radishes
Lime wedges, preferably from Mexican limones (see page 30)
Cilantro sprigs

1. Make the carne asada: In a nonreactive bowl, combine the pepper, garlic, onion, soy sauce, oil, and lime juice.
2. Cut the meat into pieces about 4 inches across, add to the bowl, and mix well to coat. Marinate in the refrigerator for 4 to 6 hours.
3. Half an hour before cooking, clean the grill thoroughly with a brush and wipe it down with an oil-dampened rag. Preheat the grill on high. Grill the meat on one side until it is well browned and nicely marked—even slightly charred on the thin edges—about 5 minutes. Turn and cook briefly on the other side until the meat is done to your liking. (Tested with an instant-read thermometer, medium-rare will be 125 degrees, medium at 140 degrees, and well-done when it flaps like shoe leather.)
4. Remove the meat to a platter and let rest for 5 minutes or so, then slice across the grain. Cut the slices into small cubes.
5. Serve immediately on the tortillas with your choice of accompaniments.

Note: The best cut for carne asada is a wide, thin, well-marbled cut known as flap meat. Second best would be skirt steak. Both cuts are flavorful and juicy and have enough fat to withstand the high heat of the grill without drying out. Flank steak, which looks similar, is too lean and dry for this kind of full-bore cooking. Substitute a sirloin tip instead.

2
SILVER RAIN
COOKING FROM THE COAST

El que hambre tiene, en pescado piensa.
(When you're hungry, you can only think of fish.)

—Mexican folk saying

Separating the Gulf of California in the east from the Pacific Ocean to the west, the Baja peninsula is edged with almost 2,000 miles of unspoiled, steep rocky coastline that, even today, is mostly empty of human settlement.

In contrast, the waters offshore teem with life. The Gulf of California (also known as the Sea of Cortés), with its mangrove swamps, islets, and underwater seamounts, is unique—and one of the most ecologically diverse and important sites on the planet. On the Pacific side, huge forests of underwater kelp sway in the mingling of cold and warm currents over offshore canyons. Surrounding the entire peninsula are some of the richest fishing waters in the world.

Sardines and anchovies were once so numerous here that passing schools looked like a silver rain streaming beneath the water. With the little fish came their valuable predators: huge schools of yellowfin and bluefin tuna, albacore, and jack. It was the fishing industry built on sardines and tuna that brought settlement and prosperity to the Baja coast in the early years of the 20th century.

The waters of Baja California still yield abundantly.

By eight o'clock in the morning, Ensenada's fish market, the old Mercado Negro, has been in full swing for hours, two long rows of busy stalls, back to back, staffed by fishermen in white rubber boots and bright yellow aprons. Chill air creeps from the nearby harbor, where fishing boats, trawlers, and *pangas* rock in the swell from the Pacific.

The gleaming catch from hundreds of miles of coastline lies neatly stacked on huge wooden tables, species and prices scrawled on soggy pieces of cardboard. Fish is piled on large blocks of cloudy gray ice that melts

with a listless drip onto the wet concrete floor. The air is dense with cold and moisture. Smaller fish are stacked like cords of wood: corvina, surf perch, rock cod, calico bass, gulf snapper, lingcod, mackerel, even some small barracuda, still wearing a malicious glare in their cold black eyes. By the door two shovelnose sharks, each as long as a man, flop out of a wheelbarrow. Their odd thick skin is dry and gray-blue.

Smaller fish, like corvina and red snapper, are ready to fry, with deep slashes cut down the sides. Every table has a plastic dishpan full of rosy pink fresh tuna, ground like hamburger, ready to be turned into Ensenada-style *ceviche*.

One fisherman tosses onto his table a gleaming, bright-pink-speckled lingcod that's clearly just off one of the boats at the wharf. He stops to pluck a tiny octopus out of the gaping mouth of one of the fish and says, "See? He's still eating his breakfast!"

There's a white sea bass from the Sea of Cortés, a yard long and weighing at least 50 pounds. There are massive center-cut chunks of swordfish, more than a foot in diameter and 3 feet long. Whole yellowfin tuna loins cut in cross section show the quadrilateral muscle partitions. The flesh is a deep brownish color, not the luminous clear red of the sashimi grade favored by sushi chefs; that goes immediately to Japanese buyers at a premium.

Another table is stacked with white-bellied halibut, close to 3 feet in length, wide and flat, mouths agape with wicked, crooked teeth. Tucked among bullet-shaped yellowtails and the gleaming mackerel at one table are a dozen or so bright orange garibaldi—the state fish of California, but legal to sell in Mexico. "I guess that's why you call it El Mercado Negro [the Black Market]", says a passerby.

Huge flying squid, usually strangers to these waters, are a bonus this year from the *El Niño* current; there are heaps of these eerie tentacled visitors, along with fresh octopus, legs hanging limply over the edge of the tray. More plastic pans are piled with fillets of bat ray, *cazón* (shark), and smaller bass and rockfish. Buckets of huge pismo clams sit on the floor: the chocolate and the gray, also some deeply ridged clams from the bay at San Quentín. In tubs there are orange abalone, out of the shell; dark-gray periwinkles; black *choros*, or mussels, as long as your hand; heaps of mahogany-colored smoked tuna, marlin, and swordfish.

One fisherman has an iced basin of fresh sweet shrimp (*ebi*) to sell, an occasional catch from an offshore deep-water canyon. Another table holds fans of beautifully arranged shrimp in all sizes, from little-finger size to huge, fat San Felipe "blue" shrimp that instantly bring to mind the better uses of garlic and butter. Crates of blue crab, fresh sardines, and more clams sit helter-skelter on the ground.

Outside the fish market entrance, rows of busy fish taco stands are now doing a booming mid-morning business. The smell of frying fish and hot oil, toasting corn tortillas, and wet pavement permeates the air. One *puesto* has the tail of an enormous basking shark, as tall as a man, mounted on the wall. Another keeps a hunched, ratty crow in a cage, as beady-eyed as the fish in the market. Otherwise, the stands are nearly identical—brightly painted open-air *puestos* with wooden benches and shelves and rows of giant goblets holding an array of colorful salsas: *pico de gallo*, *chile de árbol*, creamy *mayonesa* sauce, roasted jalapeño salsa, bright green tomatillo salsa, lime wedges, and pickled jalapeños and carrots.

Bajacalifornianos love seafood of all kinds. Their cuisine is rich in quick, often ingenious preparations that enhance the simple pleasure of eating perfectly fresh seafood, and they often use less common fish and shellfish, such as sea snails or smaller fish. With its seafood *cockteles* and campfire-grilled spiny lobsters, its abalone chorizo and piquantly sauced fish steaks, its sumptuous shrimp and fat, sweet shellfish, Baja inspires you to regard—and cook—the sea's abundance in a whole new way.

RECIPES

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SUSTAINABLE BAJA



To me, Baja California *is* its coastline, rugged and clean, primal and untouched. Or so I thought. While researching this book, I discovered that some of the common fish and shellfish species caught in the Pacific and the Sea of Cortés are threatened, some to the verge of extinction, due to overfishing, environmental degradation from pollution, and destruction of “nursery” habitats, such as estuaries. The same scene is being played out all over the world. Mexico, along with other responsible nations, is taking steps to regulate and conserve its fisheries, but much remains to be done worldwide—and you, the consumer, are the key.

Serge Dedina, Ph.D., executive director of the conservation group Wildcoast, puts it this way: “What is good for consumers to purchase commercially and what is okay to eat at a fisherman’s house are two different issues.”

Each of the seafood recipes in this book notes the species commonly used in Baja, then suggests an alternative, *sustainable* fish choice.

Certified and sustainable fisheries aim to maintain sizable fish populations and assure the livelihood of fishermen and their families for generations to come. These fisheries work within set catch limits and seasons. Biologists monitor the fish populations. Fishermen use methods that reduce bycatch (accidental killing and waste of other species), avoiding gillnetting, long-line fishing, and drift netting, which are very destructive to all sea life.

The Alaskan halibut and American Dungeness crab fisheries are two successful examples of managed sustainable fisheries. Australia and New Zealand have announced long-term plans to make their export fisheries 100 percent sustainable.

How can you help? Make informed, sustainable choices. Educate yourself at one of the Web sites listed below about which fish are sustainable choices and about fishing methods. Know where your seafood comes from and how it was caught. Don’t buy, cook, or eat threatened species. Whenever possible in markets or in restaurants, choose fish from certified sustainable fisheries in the United States and worldwide that use responsible fishing methods. It’s urgent that we change our ways. Educate yourself—and vote with your dollars.

MONTEREY BAY AQUARIUM (www.mbayaq.org), through their Seafood Watch, maintains a handy printable consumer guide for shoppers and restaurateurs. This is the gold standard to use when shopping.

MARINE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL (www.msc.org) monitors fisheries worldwide and certifies sustainable species and fisheries.

WILDCOAST (www.wildcoast.net) is an international organization dedicated to the preservation of the coastal Californias and works extensively in Baja California.

PASSIONFISH (www.passionfish.org) fosters education and dialogue among fishermen, distributors, chefs, and consumers.

CHEFS COLLABORATIVE (www.chefscollaborative.org) provides a forum for chefs and consumers to learn about sustainable seafood and agriculture.

SEAFOOD CHOICES ALLIANCE (www.seafoodchoices.com) was founded by the seafood industry to reach out directly to consumers. There is not always full agreement between the industry and conservation groups about what constitutes sustainable fisheries, but informed consumers look at all sides of an issue.

Manuela's Roast Tuna Loin with Chipotles

Ensenada has always been home to a large tuna fleet, so tuna is an important part of the area's culinary heritage. When you have tons of tuna, imaginative preparations are always appreciated! A third-generation Ensenadan told me about this tuna "roast"—the kind of thing you'd serve for Sunday dinner, if you had a 200-pound tuna handy. Try to buy the fish in one large piece; the narrow part toward the tail works well, but don't use the very end—it can be sinewy and tough.

Sustainable choices for preparing this at home include pole- or troll-caught bigeye or yellowfin tuna, albacore, farmed sturgeon, or Alaskan halibut in season.

Oven-roasted potatoes are the perfect side dish.

Makes 6 servings

2½ pounds tuna in a large, thick piece

1 tablespoon kosher salt

3 tablespoons vegetable oil

8 garlic cloves, cut in half lengthwise

½ large white onion, cut into thin strips from root end to stem end

3 large fresh green Anaheim chiles, seeded and cut into thin 2-inch strips

¼ teaspoon dried thyme

2 bay leaves

1½ tablespoons finely chopped chipotles in adobo

3 ripe Roma tomatoes, cut into eighths

¾ cup white wine

Lime wedges, preferably from Mexican limones (see page 30)

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Season the tuna well with the salt and place it in a baking dish just large enough to hold it.
2. In a medium frying pan, heat the oil over medium heat and sauté the garlic until golden. Add the onion and Anaheims and cook until the vegetables just start to wilt. Add the thyme, bay leaves, chipotles, and tomatoes and cook for 2 minutes.
3. Spoon the vegetables over the tuna, pour the wine over, and cover with foil. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes (until the fish registers 140 degrees on an instant-read thermometer). Let stand about 10 minutes under the foil before serving. Serve with the lime wedges.

Fresh Tuna Salad

We eat so much fashionably seared-raw tuna that we forget how delicious fully cooked, moist tuna can taste. And for tuna salad, you may never go back to canned once you taste how fabulous it is with fresh fish.

This salad is terrific as an *antojito* (appetizer), on crackers or *tostadas*, in sandwiches, stuffed into long fingers of endive, or packed into a hollowed-out ripe tomato or avocado for a light lunch.

The sustainable choice: troll- or pole-caught bigeye, yellowfin, or albacore. Avoid bluefin tuna.

Makes 3 cups, enough for 36 tostadas

2 cups (about 1 pound) cooked tuna or albacore pieces (see below)

½ cup finely chopped red or white onion, rinsed in cold water

2 large ripe Roma tomatoes, seeded and finely diced

1 medium fresh serrano chile, minced (optional)

10 cilantro sprigs, stemmed and chopped

1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice, preferably from a Mexican limón (see page 30), or lemon juice

2 teaspoons red wine vinegar

2 tablespoons olive oil

½ teaspoon kosher salt, or to taste

¼–⅓ cup mayonnaise, to taste

Hass avocado, pitted, peeled, and diced (optional)

1. Prepare the tuna and set aside.
2. In a bowl, combine the onion, tomatoes, chile, and cilantro. Toss with the lime juice, vinegar, oil, salt, and mayonnaise.
3. Break up the tuna and add to the bowl; it will flake naturally into chunks. Stir to combine. Chill for 30 minutes and taste for seasoning. You may want to add more lime juice, salt, or even chiles—I like it spicy.
4. Even more delicious topped with diced avocado.

Variation: Leave out chiles and cilantro; add ¼ cup pitted and chopped green olives or capers.

Tuna Roasted in Foil

A rewarding way to use up small pieces or tails.

Makes 2 cups

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 teaspoon kosher salt

Juice of 1 lime, preferably a Mexican limón (see page 30)

1 pound tuna or albacore (not sashimi grade)

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Lay out a double thickness of foil, about 18 inches long. Spread the oil, salt, and lime juice in the center of the foil.
2. Roll the tuna around to coat, then wrap the tuna in the foil, sealing the ends tightly.
3. Roast the packet for 30 minutes, or until the internal temperature is 140 degrees when tested with an instant-read thermometer. Remove from the oven, poke a 1-inch hole in the foil, and cool for 15 minutes.
4. Refrigerate, still in the foil, until completely cold.

TUNA—CALIFORNIA'S SECOND GOLD RUSH



Tuna fishery has a long, proud history in the San Diego—Baja California region. In the past, tuna (which can weigh hundreds of pounds apiece) were caught by the three-pole method: three men, three poles hooked to one line and one huge hook. It was hard, bloody, dangerous work. Teams of fishermen stood in low troughs along the side of the boat. When the frenzied fish bit down on the hook, three men together would flip the fish out of the water and over their heads onto the deck of the boat, jerk the hook out of the fish, and throw the hook back into the water.

When the boat was full to the gunwales, the catch was brought ashore and sent directly to small local canneries, where the tuna was cleaned, packed in olive oil, and canned for sale across the country. (The vast olive groves outside Ensenada were planted to supply their local canneries.)

Tuna hunting today has gone high-tech. Huge ships use helicopters, satellite tracking, and sonar to pursue ever-dwindling schools of tuna all over the world. The industry has moved offshore, mostly to the South Pacific, to evade American regulation of catches and fishing methods. The huge tuna that fishermen once risked their lives to take have nearly vanished from the sea, victim to unregulated overfishing and insatiable worldwide demand. The tuna bycatch (marine animals and other fish killed and discarded by fishermen) is also a cause for worry. With these great fish dies a way of life that we will never see again.

Sustainable choice: Buy pole-caught or troll-caught tuna from a regulated American fishery and avoid bluefin tuna.

Fisherman's Sashimi

Slices of velvety fresh fish—raw and sweet—are dressed in an intriguing blend of Mexican and Asian flavors, meant to be eaten quickly and appreciatively. Whether you call it sashimi, ceviche, or carpaccio is up to you. As long as the fish is ultra-fresh (buy from a reliable fish market) and the knife very sharp, it's hard to go wrong.

Tuna from the “corrals” off the coast of Ensenada would be the fish of choice in Baja, but other fish are equally exquisite raw, such as fresh Alaskan halibut, wild troll-caught salmon, or very fresh mackerel or yellowtail. And these are all sustainable choices. A combination of different colored fish is lovely.

Makes 6 to 8 servings

1 pound extremely fresh, sashimi-grade saltwater fish
(see note above)

¼ cup best-quality Japanese soy sauce

1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice, preferably from a Mexican limón (see page 30)

¼ small bunch cilantro, stemmed

3 Italian parsley sprigs, stemmed

3 green onions, thinly sliced

1–2 fresh serrano chiles, sliced crosswise into paper-thin circles

1. Chill a large serving platter. With a very sharp, thin knife, cut the fish into slices roughly 2 inches long, 1 inch wide, and ¼ inch thick. Arrange the slices in an attractive pattern on the platter, wrap, and chill the fish until you are ready to serve.
2. Combine the soy sauce and lime juice.
3. Just before serving, roughly chop the cilantro and parsley. Pour the soy over the fish. Scatter the herbs and green onions over the fish. Serve the chiles in a small dish on the side.

SUSHI ON THE EDGE

South-of-the-border sushi makers sometimes incorporate salty/sour *chamoya* sauce as well as their traditional salsas into their sushi. Avocado, tomato, and tomatillo are favorite ingredients as well as grilled steak or chicken, corn, and cilantro along with the usual Japanese accompaniments of soy and wasabi.

Sashimi (thinly sliced raw fish) is also very popular, but in Baja they like to load on the chiles and cilantro and then dip it into soy sauce.

How does it all taste? Fantastic—neither Japanese nor Mexican, a delicious meeting of cuisines.

ENSENADA



To eat in Ensenada is to celebrate the best of land and sea. Long-established farms and ranches as well as a busy fishing port have fueled the economy for over 120 years. Local cooking centers on beef, chicken, vegetables, and fish. Wines from the Guadalupe Valley, just inland, are good and getting better.

Restaurant food is mostly home-style, though many local chefs cook with verve and originality. Seafood, even in the humblest establishments, is uniformly fresh, simple, and excellent. *Puestos* sell fish tacos, chicken *sopes*, grilled quail, seafood *cockteles*, *chirimoya* ice pops, spicy goat soup, and teriyaki tacos.

This last vividly exemplifies the culinary legacy of Ensenada's Asian heritage. Chinese and Japanese fishermen and itinerant workers settled here generations ago. Today their descendants are proudly Mexican, and Asian ingredients have been in common use since long before fusion cooking became popular. Soy sauce, for example, is a frequent ingredient in local specialties, from grilled chiles to *ceviche*. And the town is full of good Chinese restaurants.

This is a real working town, not a tourist construct. Any traveler venturing a few steps beyond the curio shops that fill the streets closest to the cruise-ship dock finds the real Ensenada: neat neighborhoods, schools and colleges, bustling shops, cafés, museums, and cultural centers. The old adobe Santo Tomás winery has been turned into an atmospheric dining room, with tables set among the enormous wine barrels. Across the street is the original bottling plant, which is built around a huge copper brandy still (*alambre*) from the 1930s and features work by local artists and artisans. This is the only place many of the rare vintages from local wineries are sold (outside of the wineries themselves).

On the road out of town is one of Ensenada's oldest street stands, built decades ago when the paved road ended here and travel southward was a *real* adventure. Batches of tamales steam all day long in enormous old kettles built into a platform of handmade adobe brick. In addition to the tamales—filled with cheese and green chiles, fresh corn, pineapple, spiced chicken, or succulent shredded pork—the *puesto* sells cool, syrupy coconut milk, right out of the green shell, made to order (the *patrón* whacks the top off the coconut with an ancient machete). The *puesto* also sells cured green olives and olive oil from local olive groves, giving travelers a taste of old Ensenada to take with them.