

Better Homes and Gardens Special Interest Publications

Better
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Mexican

*Authentic!
Delicious!*

Family-Style
Chicken Fajita
Platter p. 2

**MAKE the
BEST...**

- * GUACAMOLE
- * CARNITAS
- * TORTILLAS
- * RED RICE

mmm ...
**PERFECT
MARGARITAS,
SANGRIA
& MORE!**

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TASTES OF
ARGENTINA,
PERU,
BRAZIL

2015
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Baja Spa
Cuisine



Rancho
La Puerta

STORY BY CARLOS ACEVEDO
PHOTOS BY BLAINE MOATS



Years ago, guests at the Rancho La Puerta spa would have slept in tents and dined on frumpy casseroles. But over time, the austere conditions at the Mexican retreat evolved into posh villas, snazzy gyms, and a world-class menu of light Mexican cuisine.

Recently, I traveled to the popular spa, located on the arid Baja California peninsula, to learn more about this style of healthful Mexican food and pick up a few pointers at the newly constructed cooking school.

Called *La Cocina Que Canta* ("The Kitchen that Sings"), the school was erected on a far corner of the 3,000-acre ranch. The adobe-colored facility includes a lavish showcase kitchen, brick patios, and a beautiful fountain.

Guests can hike there several times a week for classes taught by visiting chefs or the school's own executive chef, Denise Roa. A native of Mexico City, Chef Denise worked at restaurants in Mexico and the U.S. before taking the reins at *La Cocina Que Canta*.

"I don't teach extremes here," Chef Denise says with a smile. "I want people to start with small changes, listen to their bodies, and cook and eat with moderation but enjoy their food."

A key component of the school is the adjacent *Tres Estrellas* ("Three Stars") garden filled with vegetables, fruits, and herbs.

This hardworking 6-acre spread is the chef's personal grocery, and she shops the rows of produce at will to pick the ripest chiles, zucchini, carrots, lemon basil, cilantro, epazote, purslane, limes, persimmons, and scores of other ingredients needed for her classes.

"I always start with ingredients that are in season," Chef Denise says. "Work with what's freshest. You shouldn't try to eat pumpkin in the middle of July!"

In fact, this is one of several principles at the heart of the Rancho La Puerta dining program. Other tenets include no meat except for seafood, and more fiber with less fat at every meal (see Chef Denise's tips, page 90).

The ranch also encourages but does not enforce smaller portions—guests are welcome to eat as much as they like. "The biggest misconception people have who come here is that they are going to starve," Chef Denise says. A typical day's meals might include cubed fresh melon with a minty *agua fresca* for breakfast, corn tortilla quesadillas and a lightly dressed salad for lunch, and steamed sea bass with Spanish brown rice for dinner.

At the school, around 15 guests at a time take hands-on classes, such as "Salsa and Salsa," where they learn how to prepare fresh salsa and dance to salsa music. Chef Denise teaches a weekly class on how to prepare paella, and visiting chefs generally teach full-course dinners, all healthfully prepared by the guests under the chef's guidance.

Try one of several recipes from the ranch and school, listed here. For more information on the ranch and *La Cocina Que Canta*, check out the website at rancholapuerta.com.





Chef Denise Roa

If you crave the rich dishes of Mexico but want to eat healthfully, don't despair, says Rancho La Puerta Chef Denise Roa. Here's how the popular spa bends the rules of this delicious cuisine without breaking them.

USE HEALTHY FAT While many dishes in Mexico rely on lard, Chef Denise always uses olive oil, which has heart-healthy monounsaturated fatty acids, as a replacement. "I even make tamales with olive oil. They are delicious!" Use an equal amount of olive oil in recipes where lard is called for.

USE LESS FAT Fried dishes are full of fat, so the chef prefers to bake: tortilla chips and chiles rellenos taste just as good from the oven, she says. Instead of topping dishes with cheese, the chef uses fresh herbs or nuts.

NO MEAT! Rancho La Puerta keeps the menu light by serving only vegetable-based dishes, occasionally using seafood fresh from the Pacific. Dishes like tacos, burritos, and enchiladas that are typically filled with shredded chicken, beef, or pork get a flavorfully prepared filling of shrimp, beans, or squash instead.

EAT IN SEASON Choose recipes based on the season. The fresh tomato-based pico de gallo is best in summer. A hearty squash soup is more appropriate in winter. "You'll get better texture and flavor!"

WHOLE GRAINS In Mexico, rice is served with nearly every meal, but white rice is high in carbohydrate and low in fiber. Instead, the chef reaches for brown rice, quinoa, or farro.





FRESH!

The Tres Estrellas garden, in the shadow of Mt. Kuchumaa, is a four-season vegetable, fruit, and herb garden for the ranch and culinary school.

Simple Shrimp Tacos, Ranch-Style

PREP 25 minutes CHILL 1 hour

- 1½ lb. fresh or frozen large shrimp in shells
- 4 tsp. olive oil
- 1 Tbsp. lime juice or lemon juice
- 1 tsp. Mexican oregano or regular oregano, crushed
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 12 6-inch corn tortillas
- 1 recipe Cranberry-Persimmon Salsa
- Snipped fresh cilantro (optional)

1. Thaw shrimp, if frozen. Peel and devein shrimp, leaving tails intact. Halve shrimp lengthwise. Rinse shrimp; pat dry with paper towels. In a large bowl combine shrimp, 1 teaspoon of the oil, the lime juice, oregano, garlic, salt, and pepper. Stir to mix well. Cover and chill for 1 hour.
2. Preheat oven to 300°F. Wrap tortillas in foil and warm in the oven for 10 minutes. In a very large skillet heat the remaining 3 teaspoons oil over medium-high heat. Add the shrimp mixture. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes or until shrimp are opaque.
3. Divide shrimp mixture among tortillas and top with Cranberry-Persimmon Salsa. If desired, sprinkle with cilantro. **Makes 6 servings.**

CRANBERRY-PERSIMMON SALSA

In a small saucepan combine ¼ cup fresh cranberries and ¼ cup rice vinegar. Bring to boiling; reduce heat. Simmer, uncovered, about 1 minute or until skins pop. Remove from heat; set aside to cool. In a small serving bowl combine 1 cup peeled and chopped persimmon or seeded, peeled, and chopped mango; ¼ cup finely chopped red onion; ¼ cup snipped fresh cilantro; and ½ teaspoon minced fresh serrano or jalapeño chile pepper (see tip, page 12). Drain the cranberries,

reserving liquid. Stir cranberries into persimmon mixture. Season to taste with salt. Serve with Simple Shrimp Tacos and drizzle reserved liquid over shrimp.

PER SERVING 208 cal., 5 g fat (1 g sat. fat), 143 mg chol., 921 mg sodium, 23 g carb., 1 g fiber, 17 g pro.

Rancho La Puerta's Mexican Red Rice

PREP 20 minutes COOK 40 minutes
STAND 10 minutes

- 1 tsp. olive oil
- ½ of a small white onion, diced
- ½ of a small green sweet pepper or fresh Anaheim chile pepper, seeded and diced (see tip, page 12)
- ¼ cup finely chopped carrot
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 cup uncooked long grain brown rice
- 1 tsp. sea salt
- 1 tsp. ground California chile pepper (see tip, page 12)
- 1 medium tomato, pureed with enough water to measure 2 cups puree
- ½ cup cooked green peas or cooked sweet soybeans (edamame) (optional)

1. In a 2-quart saucepan heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add onion, sweet pepper, carrot, and garlic; cook for 5 minutes, stirring often. Add rice, salt, and ground chile pepper; cook for 1 minute.
2. Stir in the tomato puree. Bring to boiling; reduce heat to low. Simmer, covered, about 40 minutes or until all of the liquid is absorbed.
3. Remove from heat. Fluff the rice with a fork. If desired, stir in peas. Replace the lid; let stand for 10 minutes before serving. **Makes 6 servings.**

PER SERVING 134 cal., 2 g fat (0 sat. fat.), 0 mg chol., 388 mg sodium, 27 g carb., 2 g fiber, 3 g pro.

Baked Tostaditas

PREP 15 minutes

BAKE 20 minutes at 325°F

- 24 6-inch thin white corn tortillas
Olive oil in a spray bottle
Sea salt

1. Preheat oven to 325°F. Cut each tortilla into four to six wedges. Place tortilla wedges in a large bowl; toss wedges while spraying with olive oil.
2. Spread tortilla wedges in a single layer on baking sheets. Sprinkle lightly with salt. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes or until crisp and golden brown, stirring the tortilla wedges and rotating the baking pan once. Serve with Aztec Guacamole. **Makes 6 servings.**
PER SERVING 206 cal., 7 g fat (1 g sat. fat), 0 mg chol., 308 mg sodium, 32 g carb., 5 g fiber, 4 g pro.

Aztec Guacamole

START TO FINISH 20 minutes

- 1 cup frozen peas, slightly thawed
1 medium Hass avocado, halved, seeded, and peeled
1 medium tomato, seeded and diced
1 red or sweet onion, diced
1 fresh jalapeño or serrano pepper, seeded and chopped (see tip, page 12)
3 Tbsp. snipped fresh cilantro
2 Tbsp. lime juice or lemon juice (or to taste)
1 tsp. minced garlic (2 cloves)
½ tsp. sea salt
¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

1. Place peas in a blender or food processor; cover and blend or process until smooth.
2. In a medium bowl mash the avocado with a fork or potato masher. Add tomato, onion, chile pepper, cilantro, lime juice, garlic, salt, and black pepper. Add the peas and mix well. **Makes 6 servings.**

TIP If desired, instead of peas use 1 cup well-cooked broccoli, sweet soybeans (edamame), or asparagus tips.

TIP If the guacamole won't be served immediately, press a piece of plastic wrap directly onto the surface to prevent browning.

PER SERVING 67 cal., 4 g fat (1 g sat. fat), 0 mg chol., 213 mg sodium, 8 g carb., 3 g fiber, 2 g pro.

