

The Province

TRAVEL

travel@sunprovince.com

The Province

SNOW SCENE

Ski and snowboard guide
theprovince.com/ski



Taste of Mexico

At Capella Ixtapa, you'll get your fill of fun ... and food, too **PAGES D2-3**

Dining cliffside at Mexico's Capella Ixtapa is just one of the many experiences for guests at a resort considered to be one of the Pacific Riviera's most desired. — CAPELLA



Capella Ixtapa guests have oceanfront views and plunge pools, but it's also the interactive culinary classes that make this resort unique. — CAPELLA

Mexican getaways go gastronomic

Modern-day vacations are all about the surf, the sun ... and tips from top chefs



Miguel Baltazar and Rurik Salazar give complimentary culinary classes to Capella guests. SHANNON MELNYK

Shannon Melnyk
SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

Every year, a million and a half Canadians flock with their flip-flops to the beaches of Mexico.

Corona, tortillas and Jose Cuervo shots may be an authentic Mexican experience to some, but sculpted from the idyllic cliff sides of Zihuatanejo, there are hints of a transformation in the way Canadians are vacationing in one of our closest and most popular hot spots.

I arrive at Capella Ixtapa expecting a resort with oceanfront views, private plunge pools and exceptional menus; in the short five years since its inception, Condé Nast Traveller readers have already given the unspoiled sanctuary a No. 1

rating for both the resort and spa in all of the Pacific Riviera. But the high praise may also have much to do with the opportunity for guests to come away with a unique interactive culinary experience.

It's not every day you can hold a dinner party and casually mention you learned how to whip up the very traditional tiritas ceviche from a famous chef.

But like all visitors to Capella Ixtapa, I am invited to hobnob, shop and cook with two of the top culinary artists in the nation.

Capella must be thanking its lucky tomatillos to have executive chef Rurik Salazar and sous chef Miguel Baltazar on board.

They're two of the nine finalists in Mexico's most prestigious

culinary competition, Cocinero del Año México. While they'll be duking it out in Mexico City in 2014 for the grandest of honours, today they're an amicable team that's more concerned about their guests' experience and eager to share their knowledge of authentic Mexican fare, while also introducing an innovative touch with regional ingredients.

Miguel takes me to the Mercado Municipal to start our private culinary class.

There are no tourists in sight, but plenty of locals buying last-minute goods for their ancestral dishes and altars for the looming Día de los Muertos, otherwise known as the Day of the Dead, a colourfully spiritual and festive occasion

for Mexican families. We pass the Fondas serving pozoles and head to heart of Mexican flavours.

The 28-year old native of Morelia who spent time honing his gastronomic savvy in Nice, France, schools me with chilies 101 — we talk habaneros, anchos, chipotles and the guajillo — the dried mirasol chili with thin, deep red flesh has a green tea flavour with berry overtones.

"Chilis are in everything we do," he says, as he shows me an array of spices, chocolate, nuts and seeds.

"But for an example of how complex our cuisine can be, it is but one contribution in a traditional mole, which can be a five-hour process and have up to 52 different ingredients."

As Zihuatanejo is historically a fishing village, Chef Miguel teaches me how to choose a good local fish for ceviche.

"Look for bright eyes, taut skin and a non-fishy, fresh smell, he explains.

"We choose a ronco, similar to a red snapper, but a little more firm for our purposes. We head back to Capella for our class and I am put to work charring tomatillos, getting my hands deep in a bowl of masa for handmade tortillas, and pounding salsa verde the molcajete way, with a volcanic rock mortar and pestle native to Chef Miguel's hometown. We discuss the two ceviches we prepare, the tiritas special to the Guerrero region with the ronco, red onion, oregano, lime juice and Serrano chili. Of the bizarre variations that end up in touristy areas of Mexico, he smiles.

"Ceviche is not a dish, but a technique," he says. "No need to be pretentious with tiritas. It is local, traditional."

Now that I've seen and tasted the real Mexico, it's time to experience the contemporary twist that has escalated this humble pair to the national spotlight. Chef Rurik prepares a five-course explosion of flavours I do not dare try at home and now understand the reason for my more traditional nature of my class.

He personally presents me with dishes such as black AguaChile shrimp with cactus fruit, red cabbage and Serrano chili, braised short rib in mole Poblano with beans and radish salad, and deep dark green Pipián snails with roasted pumpkin seeds, creole tomatillo and fresh parsley - all on handmade Talavera ceramic plates.

The pièce de résistance arrives with an enormous foot-tall glass cover, and when unveiled, sends smoke wafting to the heavens. It's smoked sweet pumpkin with coconut ice cream, cocoa crunch and brown sugar honey. When I remark that the scent brings me immediately to my childhood in a campfire kind of a way, Puebla native Chef

Rurik is delighted. "My childhood was the inspiration for this dish," he says. "When I was a kid, it was very common to see the "smoke cart" in the parks serving smoked plantain, sweet potatoes and pumpkins with sweetened milk. And that childhood memory gave me the idea for this dessert."

Authentically Mexican, indeed, yet with the twist these chefs have made their name on. But it seems quite important to the pair come national competition time that their culinary art not be considered fusion. "I don't really like the word fusion," Chef Miguel explains. "At the end of the day it has to be Mexican."

And how does it feel to be compadres-turned-competitors on a national scale? Once an engineering student who took a very different turn in life, Chef Rurik plainly says it comes down to passion.

"Never in my dreams did I know this would be my path. I do this from my heart. It is my second time in the final and I am so happy Miguel will be there too. He is my right hand."

Chef Miguel is equally eager to share the spotlight.

"Nothing fulfills me more. I express myself through the food and it is an honour, as I look up to my executive chef so much."

No matter how they fare, the big winners will be guests of Capella Ixtapa. Bon appétit - or rather, buen provecho.

If you go:

WestJet to Ixtapa via Calgary

Capella Ixtapa is a 20 minute drive from Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo International Airport

All suites have direct ocean views and private balconies with plunge pools.

capellahotels.com/ixtapa



Chef Rurik Salazar's award-winning dish included insects, a traditional ingredient from Guanajuato, and duly omitted in classes for Capella Ixtapa guests. PHOTOS: SHANNON MELNYK



After a day of shopping and cooking, it's time for guests to enjoy the fruits of their labour.