



Culinary Craftwork Newsletter: May 2011

Cinco de Mayo

Celebrating South of the Border

Introduction

This issue of the newsletter celebrating Cinco de Mayo features a few of my most requested Mexican inspired recipes, along with a couple of new ones: **Simply Sensational Guacamole (Page 4)**; **Baja Fish or Shrimp Tacos (Page 6)**; **Spicy Chicken, Mushroom & Cheese Quesadillas (Page 9)**; and **Sweet Corn Tamalito (Page 11)**.

Culinary Craftwork is my business, which specializes in offering private and group cooking classes, as well as personal chef services and small-scale catering. The Culinary Craftwork experience is different in that the classes I offer are fully customizable to what you want. I teach the classes in your own home at a time that is convenient for you. And I do all the shopping.

It is my mission to give you the tools you need to prepare meals that will seduce you with savor and wow your guests.

My website contains many sample menus that focus on building different skills, but I am happy to partner with you and come up with something new. The classes are fun, informal, and informative—and you get to eat!

The Culinary Craftwork newsletter is a bi-monthly publication that focuses on seasonal fare with recipes and pictures. My newsletter also includes a section called "Ask the Chef," so please don't be shy—email me with your questions.

Look for the next newsletter in July. I invite you to view my previous [newsletters](#) and [recipes](#).



Professional In-home Cooking Classes

Culinary Craftwork offers professionally taught in-home cooking classes by a chef with over 20 years' experience in restaurants and catering.

The classes are designed to build basic skills and boost confidence in the kitchen. I teach the classes in your own home, offer themed menus, cooking class parties and catered dinner parties.

Full class descriptions and prices are available on my website.

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How did the Margarita Get its Name?



Ask five bartenders and you'll get five different answers, though most do agree that the margarita was created in Mexico between 1935 and 1940. The following version of the story seems to be the most accepted.

The Rancho La Gloria bar in Tijuana was a popular spot for tourists from the U.S. in the late 1930's. The bartender there was Carlos "Danny" Herrera, and fledgling actress Marjorie King was a good customer.

Marjorie, as the story goes, was allergic to most kinds of alcohol except tequila. However, she didn't like its taste. Herrera tried to concoct something that would appeal to her.

He blended three parts white tequila, two parts triple sec, one part fresh lime juice and a pinch of sugar. Grabbing a champagne glass, he dipped its rim in lemon juice and twirled it in a bowl of salt, then poured the frothy liquid into the glass for the starlet.

Marjorie loved it! Herrera then named the drink after her. ("Marjorie" in Spanish is Margarita.)

[Learn more about this story.](#)



This month, along with many other people, we're celebrating Cinco de Mayo (which contrary to popular belief, is not actually Mexican Independence Day). Mexico declared its independence from Spain on midnight, the 15th of September, 1810, but it took an additional 11 years for the entrenched Spaniards to actually leave.

So, what is Cinco de Mayo and why celebrate? The short answer is that Mexicans and Americans use the holiday to celebrate Mexican culture and our close and longstanding relationship. In fact, the holiday is not widely celebrated in Mexico, though it has become a tradition in Puebla and throughout the U.S. Cinco de Mayo has become to Mexicans what St. Patrick's Day is to the Irish: a great day to celebrate your heritage in America—and a great excuse to party.

The long answer involves the defeat of the French Army by the Mexican Militia at Puebla, against overwhelming odds. What follows is a little lesson in history.

According to an article I found in the Huffington Post online, in 1862 the French landed in Mexico (along with Spanish and English troops) under the pretext of collecting Mexican debts from the newly elected government of President Benito Juarez. The English and Spanish quickly made their deals and left. The French, however, had a different agenda.

Napoleon invaded Mexico with a well equipped and newly reconstituted Foreign Legion and quickly installed Maximilian, a Hapsburg prince, as the ruler of France's new Mexican empire. The French Army had not been defeated in nearly 50 years, and Napoleon felt secure in taking such aggressive action because we were embroiled in our own Civil War at the time. In fact, the French had been supplying the Confederate Army with arms and ammunition.

[Learn more about Cinco de Mayo and watch the video.](#)

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Under the command of Texas-born General Zaragosa, the Mexican Militia numbering some 4,000 troops and cavalry, engaged the French at Puebla despite being outnumbered 2 to 1. When the battle was over, the Mexican Army had triumphed; scores of French were killed or wounded and their cavalry was in ruins. The date was May 5, 1862.

On personal note, my husband and I will be traveling to Mexico next month and are looking forward to our stay in Cabo San Lucas and visiting San Jose del Cabo. We love the clear blue skies and emerald green waters of the Sea of Cortez. And we love investigating new places to sample the local foods. I'm particularly interested in visiting the organic produce market in San Jose del Cabo, as well as the many art galleries. While we have been to Cabo San Lucas twice in the past, this will be our first time in San Jose del Cabo.

While some people might argue that the Baja peninsula does not really represent Mexico, it is best to realize that Mexico is a very large and diverse country and were it not for the Mexican-American War, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California would still be states of Mexico.

Among the Mexican inspired recipes that I have included in this newsletter are a couple of previously published recipes along with a couple of new ones.

The Best Margarita Ever!



Makes 4 servings

Ingredients

- Kosher salt, for rimming the glass. (optional) You can also try Cumin Salt or Cayenne Salt.
- Ice
- 6 ounces tequila blanco, 100% agave
- 4 ounces Cointreau (or 4 ounces Triple Sec)
- 2 ounces freshly squeezed lime juice

Directions

1. If using salt, place in a shallow dish. Moisten the rim of a rocks glass with a dampened paper towel, then dip in salt.
2. Fill the glass with ice; add tequila, lime juice, and Cointreau; and stir a few times until chilled. Serve immediately.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)



[How to make a basic frozen Strawberry Margarita](#)

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A Note about Chips



Guacamole is typically served with tortilla chips, but not all chips are created equal. Recent experience reveals that some pre-packaged tortilla chips actually taste stale.

Heating the chips in a low oven, say 250 degrees, can definitely help; so can purchasing freshly made chips from a restaurant such as Chevy's, which sells their chips for \$3.99 per pound.

Chevy's chips are thin and light; they break easily, but they taste terrific with my guacamole recipe. There are many Chevy's restaurants sprinkled throughout the Bay Area, so you should be able to obtain fresh chips easily.

Simply Sensational Guacamole



I've eaten many guacamoles in my time, and I've come to the conclusion that simpler is better. I used to put garlic and cumin in my guacamole, but it overpowered the flavor of the avocado. Some people like to put sour cream or mayonnaise into their guacamole in an effort to extend or enhance the dip, but all that accomplishes is to dilute the delicate flavor of the avocado.



The key is to have fresh, ripe ingredients and serve the guacamole as soon as possible after being prepared. Although the avocados get mashed, it is important not to over-mash them. A lumpy texture is desirable.

I like to start by getting all the ingredients ready before dicing the avocados in their skins and scooping out the flesh.

Simply Sensational Guacamole

Makes about 2 cups of guacamole

Ingredients

- 3 ripe avocados, halved, pitted and diced
- 1 lime, juiced
- ¼ cup finely diced onion or shallots
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
- 1–2 Roma (plum) tomatoes, seeded and diced
- 1 teaspoon seeded, minced Serrano chili (optional)
- Kosher salt to taste

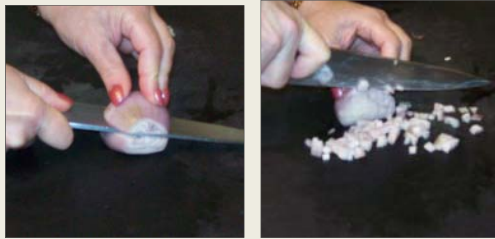
[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Step-by-step directions begin on the following page

A Step-by-Step Guide to Making Guacamole



1. Use the freshest possible ingredients.



2. Using a very sharp knife, dice the onions or shallots into ¼ -inch pieces.



3. Pare off the skin and outer flesh of the tomato into 4 or 5 sections. Cut into julienne strips, then align the strips and cross-cut them into ¼ -inch diced pieces. Discard the seedy center of the tomato, as it will make your guacamole watery.



4. Chop the cilantro into small rough-cut pieces.



5. Slit open the chili, and using the tip of your knife scrape out the seeds and discard.

Freshness is Key



If you are making guacamole for a party, the temptation might be to make the guacamole ahead of time and store it, refrigerated, with the pit mixed in.

Many people believe that keeping the pit in the guacamole helps keep it from oxidizing, but the jury is out.

Here's what I would suggest instead: Get all your ingredients cut up and ready in the refrigerator. Don't be tempted to chop them in a food processor.

Cut up the avocados as close to serving time as possible; then, just mix in the rest of the ingredients. Your guests will love your guacamole and want the recipe!

Dice the Avocados in Their Skin



Halve the avocados and pit them. Discard the pits.

An easy way to deal with dicing avocados is to hold the halved fruit in your hand then make a single cut through the flesh, down the center and several cross-cuts using a small knife.

Use a spoon to scoop out the flesh.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Making Guacamole Continued



6. Slice the avocado in half and remove the pit.



7. Using a small, sharp knife, cut the avocado into ½ - inch chunks without slicing through the skin. Using a large spoon, scoop the chunks into a bowl. Add the lime juice to prevent the avocado from oxidizing.



8. Mash the avocado with a fork or potato masher, but leave the texture lumpy.



9. Fold in the remaining ingredients. Mix well and taste for seasoning. You may need to add more lime juice to brighten up the flavors.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Baja Fish or Shrimp Tacos



My husband and I enjoy vacationing in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico and while there we binge on the local seafood. We especially enjoy eating tacos with fish or shrimp. Last year we were unable to get to Cabo, so we sought out fish tacos at several local restaurants. Of the various restaurants that we tried, only two made decent fish tacos: Rubio's (several locations) and Wahoo's in Santana Row; but I thought we could do a better job at home.

The following recipe is my take on the Baja fish taco. The recipe has several easy-to-make components, and the whole thing can be done within half an hour. This recipe is definitely a winner. The tacos are flavorful but light and healthy (especially if you omit the sour cream dressing); the garlic and chipotle seasoned fish and shrimp are pleasantly spicy without being hot. My husband loves newsletter time because he gets to eat very well!

Baja Fish or Shrimp Tacos

Makes approximately 4 tacos

Ingredients

- ¾ lb. fish (such as rockfish, ono, ling cod, mahi mahi) or shrimp
- 1 can of chipotle chilies in adobo

For the marinade

- 1 chipotle chili
- ¼ cup adobo liquid
- 2 cloves of garlic, crushed
- ¼ cup vegetable oil

For the dressing

- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- ½ cup sour cream
- 1 ½ tsp. adobo liquid

(Continued on page 7)

[Baja Fish Tacos: Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

[Baja Shrimp Tacos: Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Wahoo's Fish Taco Santana Row



Located near Maggiano's Little Italy

Wahoo's Fish Taco

3055 Olin Ave, #1030
San Jose, CA 95128
(408) 244-3991

[Click here for more South Bay Wahoo's Fish Taco Locations](#)

Wahoo's restaurant is the next best option to making fish or shrimp tacos at home. They actually use wahoo fish (also known as ono), native to the Pacific; the fish is fresh and firm, gently spiced, and grilled.

The tacos come with the usual accompaniments: pico de gallo, shredded cabbage and a sour cream dressing. Although the restaurant is set up as a fast-food enterprise, the food is of good quality, and it is very inexpensive.

Beverages from the soda dispenser, including iced tea, have unlimited refills and the staff is very friendly and helpful. When it comes to dining on Santana Row, where else are you going to get such good value?

[Click here to see what others have to say about Wahoo's.](#)

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Taco Serving Tips



Have all your taco fixins' ready to serve buffet style.



Heat the corn tortillas in a pan or wrap a bunch of them together in a clean kitchen towel and steam them in the microwave. The towel will help keep them warm and pliable.

Baja Fish or Shrimp Tacos (Cont.)

For the mashed avocado

- 2 medium or 3 small avocados, diced
- 2 Tbs. diced onion
- 2 Tbs. chopped cilantro
- ¼ tsp. ground cumin
- 2 Mexican (key) limes, juiced
- Salt to taste

For the pico de gallo

- 1 cup seeded, diced ripe plum tomatoes
- ½ cup diced red onion
- 2 Tbs. chopped cilantro
- 1 jalapeno, seeded and minced
- 2 Mexican (key) limes, juiced
- Salt to taste

For the tacos

- 1 cup green cabbage, finely shredded
- 1 cup purple cabbage, finely shredded
- 1 carrot, finely julienned

Directions

1. Cut the fish into several pieces that will fit easily in a grill pan (or if using shrimp, toss the shrimp with the following marinade). In a blender, combine the ingredients for the marinade. Puree well and spread on the fish to coat. Set aside.
2. In a small bowl, combine the sour cream, mayonnaise and chipotle liquid (adobo). Cover and set aside.
3. Make the pico de gallo: Combine the finely diced tomatoes, onions and jalapeno with the chopped cilantro and lime juice. Set aside.
4. Shred the green and purple cabbage and mix with the julienned carrot. Set aside.
5. Mash the avocado with the diced onion, chopped cilantro and lime juice. Season to taste with ground cumin, salt and pepper.
6. Heat a **non-stick grill pan** over medium-high heat. Season the fish/shrimp with kosher salt. Cook the fish. It will cook very quickly; turn over to cook on the other side until just done.
7. Heat the corn tortillas in a pan; turn over and heat through on the other side. Place inside a clean kitchen towel to stay warm. Continue to cook the rest of the tortillas one by one in the pan or steam them in the microwave till hot.
8. Assemble the tacos: Take two corn tortillas and lay them on a plate, doubled up. Cut the cooked fish into strips. Place several strips of fish in the tortillas and top with pico de gallo. Place a small amount of shredded cabbage and carrot in the tortilla. Top with sour cream dressing and fold over the tortillas to form a single taco. Serve with mashed avocado on the side (or in the taco). Serve immediately.

[Baja Fish Tacos: Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

[Baja Shrimp Tacos: Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Spicy Chicken, Mushroom & Cheese Quesadillas



Quesadillas are easy to make and very tasty. They can be as simple as cheese only or contain a variety of ingredients (authentic to Mexican cuisine, or not so much). The key is to have your filling ingredients ready ahead of time, and then you can layer them between two flour tortillas and bake the quesadilla on a griddle. Cut up, quesadillas make a great snack or even a meal.

I developed this recipe when I had a craving for a more satisfying quesadilla than I typically find offered in restaurants. You can make it as spicy or mild as you like. Try it, and let me know what you think!

Spicy Chicken, Mushroom & Cheese Quesadillas

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 4 Tbs. olive oil (+/-)
- 1 (8-ounce) package mushrooms, sliced
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- Salt and freshly ground pepper
- 2 cups chopped onion (1 large onion)
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1-3 jalapeños or Serrano chilies, chopped (Serranos are hotter)
- 2 Roma tomatoes, diced
- ¼ cup sliced pimento stuffed olives
- 2 Tbs. cilantro
- 12 ounces chicken tenderloins
- 6 (8-inch) flour tortillas
- 1 1/2 cups (6 ounces) shredded Monterey jack and/or mozzarella cheese

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Flour vs. corn tortillas



Flour tortillas

Flour tortillas are typically used for quesadillas and burritos. They are made from unbleached white flour, shortening, baking powder, salt and water. They are usually larger than corn tortillas, which makes them a better choice for filling and griddling.



Corn tortillas

Corn tortillas come in a variety of colors: white, yellow, and blue corn. They are made from masa harina (Mexican cornmeal), salt and water.

Use chicken tenderloins



Chicken tenderloins are narrow strips of white meat attached to the breast. They cook quickly and are more tender than regular breast meat.

Spicy Chicken, Mushroom & Cheese Quesadillas (Cont.)

Directions

1. In a large nonstick skillet, heat 2 Tbs. of olive oil over high heat. Add the sliced mushrooms and sauté until lightly browned. Season with salt and freshly ground pepper. Remove mushrooms to a plate or bowl.
2. Heat the same skillet and add 2 Tbs. of olive oil. Add the onions and a bit of salt; cook till softened and transparent. Add the garlic and cook for a minute or two. Add the chopped chilies, cumin, paprika, olives and diced tomatoes. Continue to cook for about five minutes, or until the tomatoes have softened and the mixture is fairly dry. Add the sautéed mushrooms back into the pan and add the chopped cilantro. Taste for seasoning. Scrape the vegetable mixture into a bowl and return the skillet to the heat.
3. Add the chicken tenderloins to the pan and season generously with salt and pepper. Cook over medium heat until golden brown; turn over and continue cooking until firm. Remove the chicken and cool slightly. When cool enough to handle, cut the chicken into small, thin slices.
4. Heat a griddle or grill pan over medium-high heat. Assemble the quesadillas. Lay a flour tortilla on the griddle and spread a thin layer of the mushroom mixture over it, leaving a half-inch border around the edge. Lay a handful of cooked chicken over the mushroom mixture. Sprinkle the shredded cheeses over the chicken and top with another flour tortilla. Press down on the tortilla with a large spatula to bind the fillings. Lower the heat to medium-low and cook the quesadilla until the bottom tortilla is lightly browned and crispy. Flip it over carefully, press down and cook on the other side till crispy. Remove the quesadilla to a cutting board and slice into 6 wedges. Serve immediately.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Sweet Corn Tamalito



This recipe is from Chevy's, where they serve it as a side dish with their fajitas. It is sweet and buttery—best eaten in small quantities, but also good for breakfast or dessert. The recipe that I saw on the internet called for margarine, not butter, but since I make a point of **never** using margarine for **anything**, I figured I should mention the change.... 🍌

Sweet Corn Tamalito

Makes 8–10 servings

Ingredients

- 5 tablespoons butter, softened
- 1/4 cup masa harina
- 1/3 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup water
- 2 cups corn kernels, fresh or frozen, thawed, divided
- 1/2 cup cornmeal
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon milk

Directions

1. In a small mixing bowl, mix the butter, masa harina and sugar using an electric mixer until light and fluffy, about 1 minute.
2. In a blender container, blend half the corn kernels with the water until smooth.
3. Combine this mixture with the butter mixture, stirring well. Add the remaining corn kernels, cornmeal, baking powder, salt and milk and mix well.
4. Pour the corn mixture into an 8-inch square baking pan.
5. Tightly cover with plastic wrap and steam by setting atop a medium saucepan of water on top of the stove.
6. Bring water to a boil and steam corn mixture for 50 minutes to one hour (check to see whether you might need to add more water), until a wooden pick inserted in the center comes out clean.
7. The tamalito should have a smooth, moist texture.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

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Fresh sweet corn makes a difference



Use fresh sweet corn kernels when corn is in season for the best taste. Frozen corn kernels are fine too, but avoid using canned corn.

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Ask the Chef



I love hearing from people who have read the newsletter or taken one of my classes.

I enjoy the opportunity to answer your questions in this general forum, and I hope that my advice is helpful.

Please continue to send me your questions, comments and ideas. They really make my day.

And don't forget—you can post your questions on the Culinary Craftwork Facebook fan page.

Thank you!

Alyssa

Ask the Chef (Q&A)

Keeping fresh herbs fresh

Sallie asks, "What is the best way to store fresh parsley and cilantro?"

Reply: Immerse the bunch of parsley (or cilantro) in cold water to clean it, then shake off excess water. Wrap the parsley in paper towels and place in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. Alternatively, you can place the stems in a glass of water and slip a plastic bag over the top. Refrigerate. It should keep for about a week.

Buying fish

Lynn asks, "I don't buy fish often because I can never tell if it's going to smell fishy. How can you tell if the fish is fresh?"

Reply: When buying whole fish, look for a fish with clear, bright eyes and red gills. If the eyes are milky or the gills are grayish-pink, it's a pretty good bet that the fish is past its prime. When buying fish fillets, it can be difficult to tell without smelling the fish. Some fish fillets hold up better than others. Look for firm flesh that does not have open seams and is not sitting in juice. Fish should be displayed on ice.

Using fresh tomatoes vs. canned

Miguel asks, "When making a marinara sauce, is it better to use fresh tomatoes or canned?"

When tomatoes are in season (typically, mid-to-late summer) I make a simple marinara sauce with Roma tomatoes and fresh basil. At other times of the year, I prefer to use canned plum tomatoes as they have better flavor and are very versatile.

Buying ceramic knives

Tom asks, "I'm thinking about buying some new knives. Are ceramic knives any good?"

Ceramic knives have the advantage of being very hard and ground to a fine, razor-thin edge, which cuts cleanly. They are also dishwasher-safe and generally do not need sharpening. They are excellent for cutting fruits and vegetables that contain acid, as the acid can eat away at and/or dull a steel knife. These are all good things; however, the knives are not balanced well, and the handles are not that comfortable to grip. So, I'd recommend ceramic knives with reservations.

Look for the next newsletter in July.

Click here to view previous [newsletters](#) and [recipes](#).

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