

Chef Jetzabel Rojas Reinterprets Indigenous Mexican Cuisine

By Janice Nieder



The award-winning Viceroy, Riviera Maya continues to rack-up endless “best of” accolades, but perhaps their most powerful secret weapon is their talented Chef, Jetzabel Rojas Barragán. I managed to catch up with this busy young woman after she had just knocked them dead at the 2014 Cancun-Riviera Maya Wine & Food festival. It’s interesting (and a little sad in this day and age) to note that she was the only local female chef that participated in this gourmet event.

Jetzabel (which means “Queen”) grew up in a big family, surrounded by a bevy of females who cooked and were all fabulous cooks. One grandmother, who lived in Veracruz, instilled in her a deep respect for seafood, while the other granny, in Nogales, taught her how to use various chilies to produce amazing sauces.

Jetzabel, who realized early on that cooking was her life’s passion, enrolled in the Culinary Institute of Mexico in 1999 in Puebla, to further hone her skills. Upon graduation, she headed to the United States where she was exposed to a variety of new cuisines and talented chefs, namely Thomas Keller, who has greatly influenced her cooking style.

Since she started cooking at The Viceroy, Chef Jetzabel Rojas Barragán’s mission has been to take back her culinary heritage. After having the pleasure of dining on her creative cuisine, I’d say she completed her mission with flying colors.

When did you first know you wanted to be a chef?

I always enjoyed cooking with my family. I was an only child so I hung around with my aunts a lot. My father grew up in Oaxaca with five sisters. When we went to visit, I would get up with them at 4AM to make masa for tortillas. My parents were both teachers, so we had two months off each summer where we would visit my grandmother on the coast in Veracruz and eat marvelous seafood. My mother wanted me to get a job doing something like being a reporter, but I always knew I wanted to be a chef. But she’s very proud of me now and loves my tamales.

Do you travel much?

Not really, because I’m too busy putting in long days here overseeing both restaurants, so now I “travel the web” for my inspiration. We have



Banana Leaf Steamed Halibut

many international guests here who have eaten all over the world, so I want to make them happy. I have traveled to the United States, particularly in Santa Monica. Although I didn’t get to meet him, one of my biggest influences is Thomas Keller. I like the way he works with his suppliers and growers and he really loves what he does.

Was that your proudest moment?

No, it’s probably when after trying my food, many guests beg me to write a cookbook. Also, I was very excited when Chef Daniel Boulud, who was being honored at this year’s Cancun-Riviera Maya Wine & Food festival, tasted my salad and said he really liked it and asked me what was in it. I told him, “Braised sweet potato salad, foam of goat cheese, ground of pumpkin seeds, native melipona honey and kastacan vinaigrette, oil of xcatic and chaya, fresh watercress”.

Is there a culinary trend that you would like to change?

Yes, I think people eat way too much meat. I would like to expose them to more seafood. Some years down the line, I would like to open my own seafood restaurant.

Is there a cuisine you would like to learn more about?

I would like to learn how to cook Indian food.

What three ingredients would you bring to a desert island?

Tomato, garlic and epazote (a pungent Mexican herb).

If you could cook for anyone, who would it be?

I would love to cook for the Pope.

What do you enjoy doing when you’re not in the kitchen?

I take my iPod and read on the beach

and then grab a bite at one of the seafood beach shacks.

What advice do you have for other women who want to become chefs?

Be very sure that you really want to do this because it’s very hard work. You have to work twice as hard as the men and give up a lot. You’ll be working holidays and will not be around for birthdays, anniversaries, and other family occasions. But if you’re prepared to work hard, it can be very rewarding.

If you were going to get a tattoo, what would it be?

I already have a few. My favorite is a big skeleton wielding a big knife and whip, saying “Born to be a chef.”

Slow Fire Pan Seared Sea Bass

This is one of the Viceroy’s most popular seafood dishes courtesy of Chef Jetzabel Rojas.

Total Time: 1hr
Active Time: 1hr
Makes 2 servings

1 Fillet of Sea Bass
Achiote (as need)
Amaranth
80g Plantain
15g butter
Ground Nutmeg
Ground Cinnamon
1 piece of red pepper
4 pieces of chaya leaf
Piquillo coulisse
Salt and pepper

Season the Sea Bass fillet with salt and pepper.

Marinate with the achiote. Set aside.

Bake de plantain with butter, nutmeg, and cinnamon.
Mashed and mixed with red bell

pepper on brunoise, add salt and pepper.

Blanching the chaya leaf and filled with the plantain puree.

Crusted the Sea Bass with amaranth seed and seared.

For the coulisse, with a red bell pepper take off the skin and seed, blended and stain, simmering with salt and pepper to check it the seasoning.

To serve put coulisse piquillo pepper on the bottom, then the chaya-plantain and finally on the top the sea bass.

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