



Honduras

Story and photos by
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Where Simple
Pleasures and
Complex Influences
Are Rooted in Nature

Sandwiched between the Caribbean, Atlantic and the Pacific, Honduras not only rests in the heart of Central America, but also in the midst of multicultural influences.

From roadside stands to fine dining establishments, the Honduran kitchen shares certain similarities with other Latin American nations.

This also applies to the country's restaurants and hotel kitchens, where corn, beans, white cheeses and grilled meats (chicken and beef in the central regions and fish in the coastal areas and islands) form the backbone of the average menu. However, considering Honduras' centralized location, other cultures including African, Caribbean,

Mayan, as well as Brazil and Argentinian also leave their mark on the dishes.

So do flavorful fruits and vegetables, such as papaya, pineapple, plums, zapotes, cassava root, passion fruit, yucca, locro, plantains and bananas, which are indigenous to Honduras.

By its very nature, Honduran cuisine is "fusion," especially when one observes the differences between how the foods of such regions as Copan (to the west), La Ceiba (on the northern coast) and inland at San Pedro Sula are prepared. What's certain is that there is more to Honduran food than what meets the eye. Coconut, for example, can be found in many recipes in La Ceiba and the Bay Islands (including Roatan), thanks to the Garifuna (Afro-Caribbean descendants)

and other groups who populate these areas. Conch soup, one of the most representative dishes of Honduran coastal/Caribbean cuisine, has a coconut base augmented with spices, yucca, cilantro, and green plantains in the north of Honduras, while in the south, the dish is less spicy and will often have a tomato base. To make offerings to guests as fresh and authentic as possible, many establishments, such as The View (an old destination restaurant that is now a part of the soon-to-open Nikki Beach in Roatan, which developer Todd Murray notes will be Honduras' first LEED certified resort), maintain their own gardens on property and buy as much as possible from local purveyors.

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When it comes to environmental concerns, developer Todd Murray says Nikki Beach will be Honduras' first LEED-certified resort. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating is a highly sought prize.

Some locals who think the real prize is Copan regional Honduran cuisine, and can best explain what makes it a true discovery, are Flavia Cueva, owner and founder of Hacienda San Lucas, and Jose Raul Welchez, director of the National Chamber of Tourism. He is also head of Hotel Marina Copan and is a member of the famed Welchez family, producers of some of Honduras' highest quality coffees. The properties and their owners have very different *raison d'être*. Hacienda San Lucas ventures into the budding genre of "Geo-Tourism," with food preparation and interactivity as a focus, while Hotel Marina Copan combines a boutique hotel focus with authentic family recipes worked into the menus. However, one critical thing they have in common is a reverence for Copan's Mayan-influenced regional cuisine and a desire to share its preparation with visitors.

Prior to her return to her native Honduras, Flavia Cueva spent most of her 30 years in Kentucky, as the owner of a successful catering business. But a need to rediscover her spirit through family roots brought her back to Honduras to revive the family homestead. When she returned to Copan in 1998, Cueva sharpened her hotelier skills, running a boutique hotel and developing a restaurant for it. In 1994, Hurricane Mitch left her homeless and with no choice but to transform what was left of the homestead into a wellness-oriented retreat resort that she says would lay the groundwork for what National Geographic later named "Geo-Tourism." This brings guests out of their own world and into the area's local community, culture, history and cuisine. While Cueva's vision includes yoga, horseback riding and massage services, she considers the restaurant and cooking program to be the focal point.



"Hacienda San Lucas and its kitchen just kind of evolved," she recalls. "I remembered the cooking that my father had missed from his younger days and (what I had) tried in Copan as a girl had unique flavors and ingredients that did not exist in the rest of Honduras. With those memories in mind, I worked with women from the Maya Chortí village (and did extensive research and interviewing) with a goal to revive the good cooking of the past and bring old forgotten recipes back to life. This has evolved into our special sauces such as Maya Adobo (similar to molé, but without chocolate)."

Cueva notes pointedly that although she has installed modern refrigeration and other appliances, everything prepared for guests is ground by hand, roasted in the firestone and comes

fresh from local resources using traditional tools and implements as much as possible. She also takes pride in the cooking program, where guests can simultaneously practice Spanish as they learn the generations-old techniques of tortilla, ticucos and tamal making from "head chef" Michaela and others working in the kitchen.

For main meals, along with an accompaniment of select South American wines, guests are immersed into the culture via such dishes as salad with fresh-picked local greens, citrus and savory fruits, velvety corn cream soup, tamals filled with an "adobo" composed of sesame and pumpkin, signature-roasted chicken topped with adobo, and light desserts containing local fruits enhanced with all-spice and cinnamon.

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“While some (eco-resorts) have evolved into Disneyland, they are not advancing ‘eco.’” Cueva explains. “(What) we’re doing, especially in the kitchen, involves practical solutions and real sustainability, preservation, conservation, a real cultural experience that is truly interactive. This is the place where people can have a cultural experience, but also will experience high standards of quality, service and food.”

In the center of town, Glifos Restaurant, the principal restaurant of the Hotel Marina Copan, offers a menu that can be described as “international.” However, as Jose Raul Welchez points out, dishes with local ingredients, including a mouthwatering Coffee Flan made with Welchez coffee, are the stars of the show. Anything on the menu marked with the restaurant’s logo is an original family recipe, boasting ingredients sourced from local vendors and possessing a definitive Mayan twist. The traditional refried red bean and cheese dip (what he playfully refers to as “Honduran fondue”), come alongside the bread with every meal. The house specialty, Pollo al Loroco, is distinguished by a cream sauce integrating loroco, an aromatic local edible flower. Other favorites include Crema Campesina (corn farmers’ soup), Maya Flambe´ Steak and Beef Pepito sandwiches.

“In Meso-America, from Chiapas through Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexican and Hondurans, the cuisines have similarities, such as the use of corn,” Welchez explains. “However, with Mexican cuisine, you have to properly address it by its regions, as each area has its own specialty. We inform our guests and some of our staff that the same goes for Honduras.” He adds that “one main difference, however, is we are drawing from a different set of ingredients and seasonings, and you won’t find peppers in the dishes. If you want more spice, you add it on the side with condiments.”

Welchez believes, “It is also a part of our culinary heritage to serve soup as a first course, as did all of our mothers and grandmothers. I have found through experience that visitors, particularly Americans, have fallen in love with the surroundings. Therefore, I wanted our kitchen to create items for the menu that will remind them of this feeling. That said, we also place an emphasis on recycling, a good water purification system and taking care of the environment.”

Perhaps the best way to sum up Honduran cuisine is to refer to the desayuno tipico served on Welchez’s Finca Santa Isabel tour. Each component, including fried plantains and tortillas are simple. However, what’s added becomes more than the sum of its parts, with the bonus that it’s made by a pair of proud hands. <



The icing on Hondurans’ culinary cake is the coffee. At its best, it brews with a chocolatey richness and natural smoothness. Cafe Welchez Gourmet Coffee can be experienced firsthand at Glifos Restaurant as well as at Finca Santa Isabel (the family coffee plantation that doubles as a nature preserve). It’s composed of 100 percent Arabica beans grown along shady mountains in rich volcanic soil.

Jose Raul Welchez credits his brand’s rich flavor and low acidity to both specific growing conditions and secret roasting techniques. Welchez also says the coffee is cultivated in a lush, forested habitat in a manner sustainable and good for the environment. Welchez coffee is now available for institutional purchase via the

Web site

www.cafehonduras.com/buy_coffee.html.