

MAS MASA!

*A hands-on discovery of the
magic of food in Baja California Sur!*

-by Joan Tucker & Paul Papanek | photos by Paul Papanek-

As the eight of us sat down at the large communal table at Cookin' Cabo's teaching kitchen, about to enjoy our first margarita of the day – at 11:30 am, mind you – Issi Radilla – chef, teacher and cultural ambassador - said to us “Chiles are a gamble, folks!”

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(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | This page: *It is always great to start a class with a margarita! La Gloria Tortillaria. Fresh tortilla chips at La Gloria Tortillaria where we went for masa. We were set loose in the produce market. Opposite page: Chef Issi passes around lard for us to smell before adding it to the masa. A basket of guajillo peppers waiting to be seeded. Carefully opening and seeding the guajillo peppers.*

This became our unofficial mantra for the three different cooking classes we attended in as many days in Cabo and San José.

Wherever we find ourselves, Joan and I always make it a point to take a cooking class. It opens up a window on a culture we might not be familiar with, it better acquaints us with the food we're eating, and it's just plain fun.

We've been coming to Cabo for over thirty years, and have been writing for this

magazine for the past eight. During that time, we've ridden camels on the beach, swum with dolphins and sea lions, strapped ourselves into off-road race trucks, driven the length of the peninsula, traveled through the mountains to find remote villages of vaqueros, crisscrossed all of southern Baja in search of artisanal food, caught rooster fish, and more.

But, crazy as it sounds, we had never even thought of taking a cooking class. Until now.



Day One – Cookin' Cabo

Following his emailed instructions, we all met at Puerto Paraiso mall and piled into Cookin' Cabo's big van. With Chef Issi behind the wheel narrating our journey through the back streets of Cabo, we headed to the first stop: the historic La Gloria Tortillaria – the first proper tortillaria in Cabo. Chef Issi told us that it's his favorite, and that they produce close to 1,100 pounds of tortillas each day. We bought some of their masa flour and the best tortilla chips we've ever had, and made our way to a local produce market where we all got our assignments: "Joan, get the avocados, Kate, find the best peppers, Shawn, pick out the limes!" The last stop was for a beautiful

organic chicken and fresh cotija cheese at a tiny shop on a side street.

Supplies in hand, we got back into the van and headed up into the non-touristy part of residential Cabo, finally arriving at Cookin' Cabo's kitchen.

We were an interesting group that hailed from LA, Kansas, Washington State, and Oklahoma, and the first recipe of the day made us all equals: the margarita. Guests Shawn, Sheryll, Alison, Kate, Karen, Chad, Joan and I all clinked glasses, and were now ready for whatever happened next.

Chef Issi reviewed the day's menu: queso fundido, pico de gallo, hand-made by us tortillas, guacamole, tamales in banana leaves with chicken adobo stuffing, chile rajas,

Mexican zucchini, and frijoles with chorizo. With our aprons tied, and our perfectly folded towels neatly tucked into our apron strings, we got busy.

Chef Issi brought out baskets of guajillo peppers and showed us how to seed them and soften them up in warm water. Guests Alison and Sheryll bravely volunteered, at Chef Issi's insistence, to make the masa for the tamales and tortillas. When the masa was done, we went into the kitchen to make the guajillo salsa. We toasted allspice, oregano, and peppercorns in a small pan and then Chad combined those in a blender with the

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(ABOVE) | Chad puts the softened guajillos into the blender. Toasting the allspice and peppercorns for the adobo sauce. Softening the banana leaves for the tamales by passing them briefly over a flame. The finished adobo chicken for the tamale stuffing. We spread the masa out thinly across the banana leaf, added the stuffing, and folded them up. Cooking the tortillas on the comal. Time for lunch!

peppers and some chicken broth. The next step was frying the sauce, and Joan and Shawn took on that task, putting the sauce through a sieve and into a frying pan on medium heat.

We mixed the adobo sauce with shredded chicken and went back to the big table to make our tamales. It goes without saying that no two looked alike, but in the end, they did in fact resemble tamales in banana leaves. They went into the steamer while we roasted pasilla peppers on the stove. Next up, we all took turns pressing little balls of masa into perfectly round tortillas. It struck some of us as a miracle.

Moving back and forth between the kitchen and the big table, we were in a non-stop whirl of cookery. We're happy to report that no one got hurt.

Lunch was finally ready, and so were we. We ate, we laughed, told stories, and enjoyed each other's company. It was relaxing and delicious.

Chef Issi – born and raised in Acapulco, and California School of Culinary Arts-trained, was a charming host and a terrific teacher who was warm, friendly, and very patient – especially with some of us whose knife skills could be considered somewhat lacking.

We also learned some fun facts along the way. First – it's great to begin a cooking class

with a margarita. Next, we learned to oil our hands before cutting and seeding chile peppers. The oil (we used grapeseed) acts as a natural barrier to the capsaicin in the peppers so rubber gloves are unnecessary. We were shown how passing a piece of banana leaf briefly over medium heat on the stove softened them and made them perfectly pliable for the tamales. And, of course, we learned that it's great to end a cooking class with another margarita.

Day Two – Los Tamarindos

Los Tamarindos has been growing fully organic produce since 2001, and they

opened their farm-to-table restaurant in 2011. Located just a mile from the Sea of Cortez in San José del Cabo, it sits on seventeen fertile acres that, during the 19th century, was one of the most important sugar cane farms in Baja. The original sugar mill building from 1888 now houses the restaurant and the teaching kitchen that both overlook the farm.

After navigating the well-marked dirt roads in the San José estuary, we, along with two other guests – Leah and Adam – arrived

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(BELOW) | The Los Tamarindos cooking school. The wood oven is in the background. General Manager Ubaldo Martinez shows us one of their several varieties of lemons. The sign marking the entrance to Los Tamarindos. Chef Issi. Organic key limes. Just a small part of the 17-acre Los Tamarindos farm.



at the farm. Enrique Silva, the owner of Los Tamarindos and the legendary Tequilas in San José, and Ubaldo Martínez, the general manager, greeted us warmly. After glasses of fresh iced lemongrass tea, Ubaldo gave us a tour of the fields – 28 varieties of tomatoes, five types of eggplant, multiple lettuces, root vegetables, limes, lemongrass, rosemary, thyme, Thai basil, mangoes, papayas – the list goes on and on. Their newest venture, the mixology garden with herbs specifically grown for making cocktail bitters, is so of-the-moment.

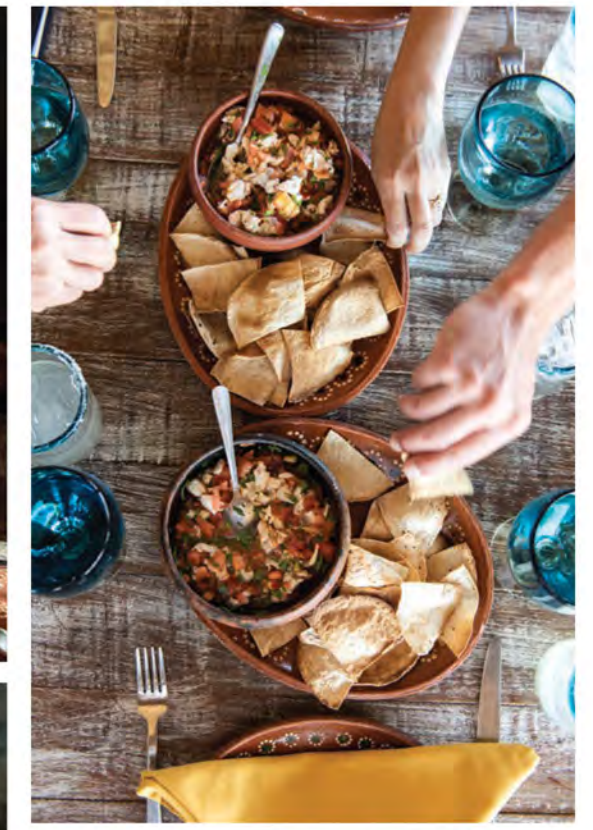
When we returned from the walk, we met Chef Gabriel Castillo who has been Chef de Cuisine at Los Tamarindos for five years, and was previously at Tequilas for eight. He

would be our teacher for the day. Having previously eaten at Tequilas, we were excited!

He led us into the kitchen, and we took our places at the large work table and donned our aprons as he arranged ingredients at the counter. We would be making ceviche, arugula salad, chicken with green mole, Mexican rice, wood oven roasted veggies, and a dessert tamale.

With only four of us, the class was a little calmer than the previous day. While the raised-on-their-farm organic chicken simmered in a clay casserole with onion, carrots, leeks, garlic, and herbs, we were instructed to finely dice garlic, Thai and regular basil, thyme, and rosemary, and combined it all with a 50/50 mix of olive

(BELOW) | Chopping basil. The blended green mole goes into the chicken pot. Chef Issi showing us how to assemble the mango paste and cotija cheese dessert tamales. It sometimes takes two people to brush marinade on the veggies.



and grapeseed oils for the veggie marinade. We chunked carrots, squash, and sweet potatoes – all from the farm – and, once brushed with the marinade, slid the tray into the wood burning oven for roasting. Then we started the rice. First, Chef Gabriel ladled broth from the simmering chicken into the blender with fresh tomatoes. Joan poured dry rice into a large, lightly oiled sauté pan and was instructed to stir until very slightly toasted. At the right moment, Chef Gabriel added the tomato broth, stirred, and covered the pan. That was it, and it was perfect. The simplicity of it was beautiful.

The green mole was next. Hoja santa

leaves, cilantro, parsley, garlic, blanched tomatillos, epazote, and cloves all went into the blender and then into a sauce pan to simmer for a few minutes. When Chef determined it was ready, we poured it over the chicken in the clay pot and waited for the magic to happen.

Lastly, we made the dessert tamales. We spooned house-made mango paste onto squares of banana leaves, covering it with shredded local cheese, folded them up, and popped them into the wood oven.

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(ABOVE) | Joan watched Chef Issi blend tomatoes and broth from the chicken for the rice. Chips and salsa always take the edge off while waiting for lunch. Tending to the chicken and green mole. The veggies go into the wood oven for roasting – along with tortilla chips. Lunch! Leah following Chef Issi's directions to a T as she assembles the mango paste and cotija cheese dessert tamales.



(ABOVE AND BELOW) | *Los Tamarindos owner Enrique Silva treats us to a tasting of his private-label mezcals – and a mezcal lesson! Crops at Flora Farms. Corn turns into flour! Azalia and her assistants school us on masa, showing us the corn kernels.*

Before we knew it, it was 1:00 and time to eat. “Margaritas?” a waiter asked. Why not! As we sipped, the restaurant waitstaff served the beautifully plated courses that we had worked so hard to create. Everything was delicious, and we were thrilled.

As we were finishing, Enrique arrived at our table and pulled up a chair. He could

see that we were having a good time, and his intention was to make sure we were having a great time. He wanted to share his latest endeavor – small-batch private label mezcal that he’s producing in Oaxaca. A short lesson on mezcal – accompanied by a tasting of three very different distillations – was the perfect way to the round out the afternoon.



Day Three – Flora Farms

Our last class was at Flora Farms - the first organic farm in the area. Founded in 1996 to supply Cabo restaurants with organic produce, they added their own farm to table restaurant – Flora’s Field Kitchen - in 2010.

We, along with 12 other attendees, were met by Azalia who would be our very cheerful and knowledgeable leader for the day. We followed her into the covered, open-air teaching pavilion behind the restaurant.

It was Wednesday, which meant it was tamale day at the school. Even though Joan’s brain was screaming “No mas masa!” we were all in!

Class started with Flora’s famous “Farmarita” - organic carrot juice, lime juice, orange juice, simple syrup, Cointreau, tequila, and a pinch of red pepper flake.

Insanely delicious! We decided that we could really get used to this tequila-before-cooking thing!

We stood at the cooking table that stretched the entire length of the building as Azalia introduced herself and her crew – Chef Elie Pedroche, and helpers Anita and Vania. Chef Elie was born and educated in France, and worked in Paris, Versailles, and Mexico City before landing in Cabo. In addition to working at the cooking school, he’s also a private chef.

The first order of the day was to mix the masa, and this task was left to Anita. She poured freshly ground masa, baking powder, and salt into a huge bowl, added butter (their

(ABOVE) | *All of us concentrating really hard as we do our best to make perfect tamales. Roasted garlic and toasted chile de arbol. The finished tamales on their way to the steamer. Anita shows us how to assemble the tamale. Chef Elie holds up a bowl of blanched tomatillos. Just one of many papaya trees on the farm.*

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(ABOVE) | Chef Elie shows us how hard it is to grind peppers, garlic, and tomatillos into salsa! Ah – the Farmerita! Delicious and refreshing! Grinding roasted garlic, chile de arbol, and tomatillos into salsa in a molcajete. A beautiful tamale – ready to eat!

class substitute for lard), cooked corn kernels, cilantro, and chicken broth, and began to mix the ingredients together. This is Anita's specialty, and she has the forearm muscles to prove it. When done, she showed us how to take a soaked corn husk, fill it with just the right amount of masa and shredded chicken filling, fold it, and tie it up.

Smaller bowls of the masa were then placed up and down the table along with corn husks and chicken, and we were set loose to make the best tamales we could. While they steamed in a large pot, Azalia handed us hats that were a cross between a sombrero and a farmer's hat, and took us on a tour of the farm.

We saw only a portion of the 25 acres and it was amazing. The combination of the rich soil, weather, well water, and the devotion of the farmers creates the perfect balance for a Mexican/Mediterranean farm and,

like Los Tamarindos, everything grows there.

A half hour later, we were back at our stations, ready to make chile de arbol salsa. There was a traditional volcanic rock molcajete placed in front of each of us along with toasted chile de arbol peppers, roasted garlic, and blanched tomatillos. Since we were making our own individual salsas, we could add as many, or as few, chilies to taste which was a really nice touch. However, Chef Elie encouraged us to be brave by saying "Don't be too cautious. No one has ever died from a chile." Joan didn't want to test that theory, adding a measly one pepper to hers while I added three.

What we learned: it takes a lot of strength to pound and mash those ingredients into a salsa with a mortar and pestle! We were assured, though, that mixing everything together this way resulted in a much more flavorful salsa than had we thrown it all in

blender. As we worked the tomatillo skins into a liquid, many of us were doubtful about that – until we tasted it. It was wonderful!

Guacamole with rosemary, a Caesar salad, and a hibiscus crème for the tamales were next on the to-do list, and by then, the tamales were done. It was time to sit down and eat.

The tamales came in a variety of shapes and sizes, as you might expect from a group of would-be chefs, but all were delicious.

When the plates were cleared, we were treated to a surprise dessert of mango tamales (more masa!) topped with house-made vanilla mango ice cream - a fantastic way to wrap up the class!

Each of the classes was great. They were all very hands-on, and we learned a lot about cooking, Mexican cuisine, and southern Baja culture. What made it even better was that all the teachers and helpers

made sure that we not only succeeded, but that we didn't take ourselves too seriously.

We were shown that Cabo isn't just about fishing, golf, and beach; she still has lots of surprises up her sleeve. The classes are a great way for couples and friends to spend a fun day together and to get a behind-the-scenes look at the culinary treasure that is southern Baja.

Personally, we had more fun than you could shake a pan at!

Contact:

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• **Los Tamarindos**

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• **Flora Farms** +52 (624) 142 1000

www.flora-farms.com/cooking-classes/ **El Fin!**

(BELOW) | Guacamole made with rosemary with a very spicy salsa and fresh tortilla chips. Dessert – mango tamale with house-made mango ice cream. Everyone gets a recipe book at the end of class! Chef Elie pours Mexican olive oil into the Caesar salad dressing. Lunch time. Doesn't everyone look happy?

