

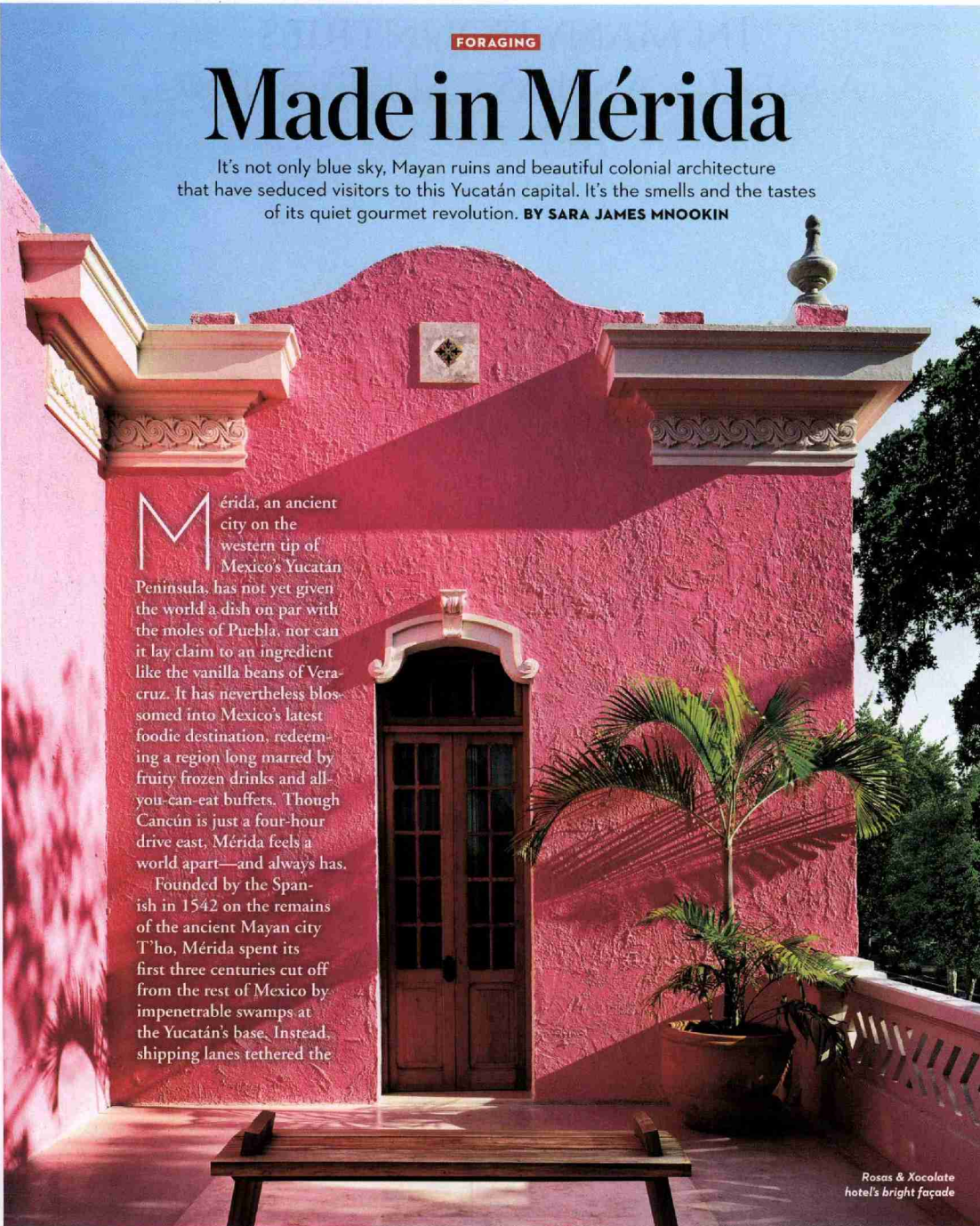
FORAGING

Made in Mérida

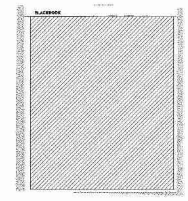
It's not only blue sky, Mayan ruins and beautiful colonial architecture that have seduced visitors to this Yucatán capital. It's the smells and the tastes of its quiet gourmet revolution. **BY SARA JAMES MNOOKIN**

Mérida, an ancient city on the western tip of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, has not yet given the world a dish on par with the moles of Puebla, nor can it lay claim to an ingredient like the vanilla beans of Veracruz. It has nevertheless blossomed into Mexico's latest foodie destination, redeeming a region long marred by fruity frozen drinks and all-you-can-eat buffets. Though Cancún is just a four-hour drive east, Mérida feels a world apart—and always has.

Founded by the Spanish in 1542 on the remains of the ancient Mayan city T'ho, Mérida spent its first three centuries cut off from the rest of Mexico by impenetrable swamps at the Yucatán's base. Instead, shipping lanes tethered the



Rosas & Xocolate hotel's bright façade



TRUJILLOPALMIER



The dining room at Las Dos, where David Sterling (left) teaches students how to make Yucatecan food such as the sikil paak vegetable dip (below; see "Sikil Paak").

city to Europe and, later, to New Orleans and Havana, influences still visible today in everything from the architecture to the cuisine. Though Mérida is called the White City, the narrow streets in its colonial Centro Histórico district are lined with candy-colored compounds, each wrought-iron balcony and lush interior courtyard worthy of a French Quarter address. Decaying limestone mansions along the Avenue Paseo de Montejo, near the National Institute of Anthropology and History, wouldn't look out of place on the Champs-Élysées.

Mérida's charm is as potent as ever, thanks to its stability, security and style. I was recently lured into town by Jeremiah Tower, the godfather of California cuisine who helped give Chez Panisse its panache in the 1970s and later founded Stars in San Francisco, the now-shuttered shrine to decadence where Mario Batali received his early training. In 2005, Tower, a notorious hedonist whose lanky slouch, ruddy complexion and wry English humor recalls a tanner Bill Nighy, decamped to Mérida. "After George W. Bush's reelection, I had to get out of New York. So I moved to New Orleans," he says. Just in time for Katrina, which hit while he was on a diving trip in Cozumel. "In one fell swoop," he says, "I lost 90 percent

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of my belongings." His house destroyed, Tower decided to stay in Cozumel. Then came Hurricane Wilma, a Category 5 storm that barreled into nearby Quintana Roo and caused severe devastation. "For 50 hours I was trapped on my bed, with the water lapping around the sides." The remaining 10 percent of his things obliterated, Tower headed inland to Mérida and never looked back. Now he occupies him-

self buying, restoring and selling antique homes, as well as writing travel and culinary books. (He studied architecture at Harvard before donning his first toque.)

"It's a magical place," Tower says of the city. "When you come here, it just gets under your skin." But food is never far from his mind, and over the course of a week we sampled the best Mérida has to offer, without a chafing dish or a blue daiquiri in sight.

Throughout Mexico, home cooks often surpass professional chefs, and the same is true here. An array of recently opened cooking schools are bringing *cocina casera*, Mexican home cooking, to the curious. Our search takes us to the kitchen of **Aliza Mizrahi**, a Mexico City native who studied environmental studies and forestry at Yale before moving back to Mérida. Three years ago she opened a cooking school on a one-acre microfarm just outside the city (from \$50 for a four-hour class; 52-999/167-5500). Mizrahi is outfitting her humble patch of turf with an irrigation system, planting it with papaya, mango and citrus trees, as well as organic greens and sprouts.

While surveying Mizrahi's spread, Tower and I stoop to inspect some flowering arugula before sampling the creamy white buds bursting with a delicate spicy-sweet

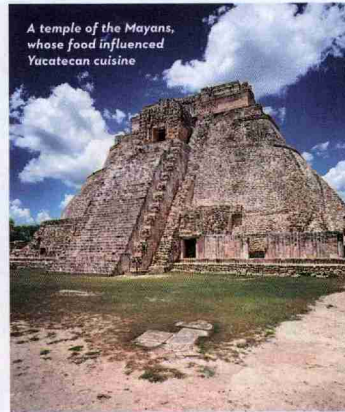


EDUARDO CERVANTES (3)

flavor. "This is very similar to the roquette in Provence," Tower says, noting the commonalities in the rocky limestone soil here and the dry, mineral-rich French coastal terroir—an auspicious indicator of Mizrahi's future yields. Until her small Eden matures, Mizrahi stocks up for her classes by visiting nearby markets like Cholul and the one in downtown Mérida. She takes an outsider's liberties with Yucatecan recipes, and her adjustments invariably improve upon the originals. Her version of the Mayan dish *sikil p'aak* (recipe below), for example, a savory spread made with a roasted pumpkinseed paste, or *recado*, seasoned with charred tomatoes and habanero peppers, is nearly addictive, thanks to liberal doses of *naranja agria*, the wrinkled sour oranges brought here by the Spanish, and a heaping handful of cilantro. Even Tower admits it's the best he has ever had, before reaching for another bite.

David Sterling, founder of the larger **Los Dos cooking school** (from \$160 for a five-hour class; los-dos.com) in the Centro Histórico area, is equally intent on restoring and preserving Mérida's local food traditions. Sterling, who is working on a book on Yucatecan cuisine for the University of Texas Press, helped start a Slow Food convivium, called Slow Food Yucatán, in Mérida in August 2009 (Mizrahi is a member). The group is now about 80 people strong, and among its collective efforts is Mercado Fresco de Slow Food Yucatán, a farmers' market that sells organic baked goods, as well as produce and food that can be found only in the Yucatán.

Sterling's brightly tiled kitchen is clean and inviting. Even though he has no formal training, he has hosted luminaries like cookbook author Diana Kennedy, the Julia Child of Mexico, and Chicago chef Rick



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Bayless, and Martha Stewart filmed an episode of her show at Los Dos in August 2008. He proves an entertaining coach on local staples like *panuchos* and *salbutes* (two popular Yucatecan snacks made with fresh tortillas, shredded spiced chicken and red onions macerated in sour orange juice) and *cochinita pibil*, easy to replicate back in the States. For the *pibil*, pork is marinated in a *recado rojo* (achiote, allspice and cumin) and sour orange juice, then wrapped in banana leaves and garnished with *epazote*, a local herb that smells like Clorox when raw but imparts a rustic earthiness during cooking. Sterling skips the traditional underground pit in favor of a stove-top Dutch oven. His

pupils also master the technique of charring ingredients over an open flame and get to know the full spectrum of aromatic *recados*, including the dark, earthy *recado negro*, a precursor to the mole made from grinding burnt *ancho*, or *de arbol* chiles with a mix of spices, garlic and vinegar.

"The Yucatecan table is densely layered," Sterling says during one of his tutorials. "You have the foundation of the Mayans, the Moorish influences of the Spanish, the Caribbean elements and other European influences on top. It's the first fusion of old-world and new-world traditions." He notes that these disparate tastes are neatly tied together by the preferred local condiment, fresh habanero salsa, which sits on Mérida tables like so many Yankee shakers of salt.

Other cherished daytime haunts for Tower are **El Cangrejito**, for delectable fish tacos (Calle 57, no. 523; 52-999/928-2781), and the downtown **Mérida market**, where he can usually be found at the intersection of calles 56 and 65, adventurously ordering *buche* (pig stomach), *morcilla* (blood sausage) or *chicharrón* (deep-fried pork rinds). Pick up pouches of prepared *mole*s and pots of Yucatecan honey—intensely flavorful and sharper than most varieties, verging on acidic. His black book is full of hidden gems like **La Palapa** (Calle 12, no. 105; 52-988/916-2063), in Celestún, for buckets of stone crab claws (when in season), freshly caught fish at Costa Azul in the fishing village of Chelem, and **Los Henequenes** (Malecón; 52-999/923-6220), on the touristy beach strip in Progreso. Mostly, though, Tower can be found in the kitchens of his friends when he's not cooking in his own.

MÉRIDA PROPER

Since 2000, clusters of white-tablecloth restaurants have materialized to cater to a new Mexican middle class: young travelers venturing off the Riviera Maya's beaten pathways, and American retirees now flocking to the city. (In 2005, *Fortune* listed Mérida as one of five foreign cities in which to invest and live out one's golden years.) Among the best places for a formal meal is **Nectar** (Calle 1, no. 412; 52-999/938-0838), whose ambitious young chef and owner, Roberto Solís, travels to a different country every year to apprentice in an important kitchen—from Per Se to Noma to The Fat Duck—all in

RECIPE

SIKIL P'AAK

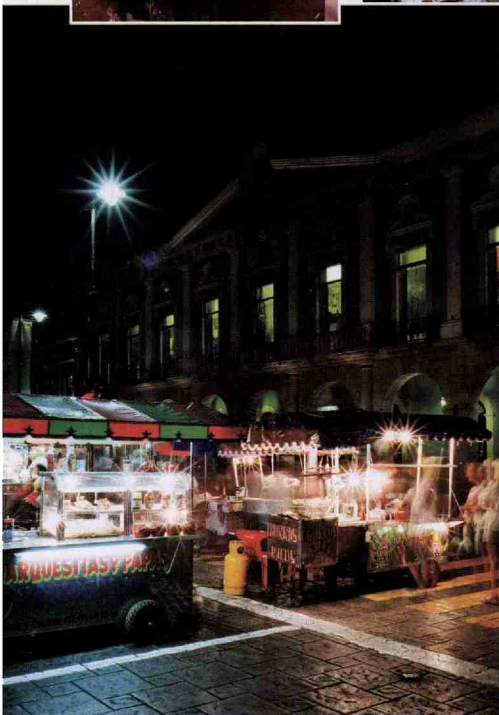
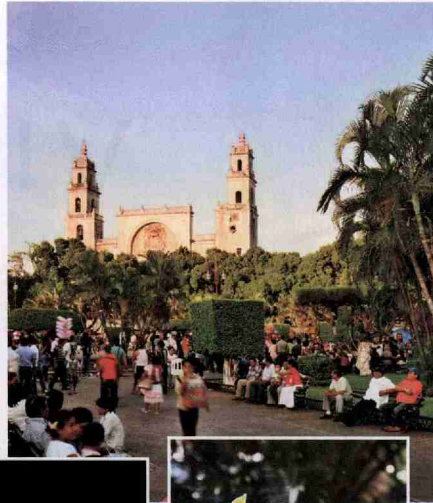
from Aliza Mizrahi

2 large tomatoes, charred over an open flame (a skewered tomato over a gas-stove burner will do)
 1 habanero chile, charred
 ½ onion, charred

1-2 garlic cloves
 250 grams pumpkinseeds
 1 bunch fresh cilantro
 1-2 *naranja agrias* (or 1 orange and 1 lime)
 Salt to taste
 Tortilla chips

Toast the pumpkinseeds on a comal (a small, flat griddle) or in an iron skillet until they turn color. Blend the seeds in a coffee grinder to form a paste. In the blender, purée charred ingredients with pumpkinseed paste. Add cilantro, finely chopped, including stems, and the juice of the *naranja agrias* (or orange and lime). Add salt to taste.

FROM TOP: TRUJILLO/PAUMIER; SHUTTERSTOCK



Fresh tortillas in Mérida; a plaza in the city; sopa de lima; Hacienda Petac; chef Rosaura picking squash blossoms for soup; street carts of Mérida's Palacio de Gobierno.

the service of expanding his cuisine. "We're starting a farm," Solis says of his efforts to purify his ingredients. "We're putting together deer, *haleb*, *cochino pelon*, *pecari*, and we are beginning to plant some herbs and edible flowers."

But the most exciting development in recent seasons is the opening of **Rosas & Xocolate** (rooms, from \$215; Paseo de Montejo 480 x 41; 52-999/924-2992; rosasandxocolate.com), a chic boutique hotel and restaurant designed by

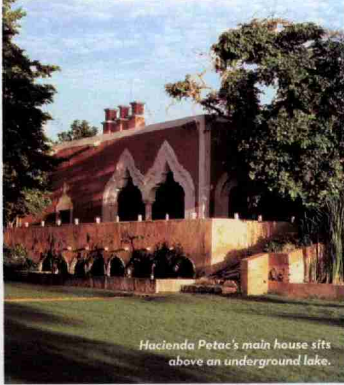
White-tablecloth restaurants cater to a NEW MEXICAN MIDDLE CLASS.

noted Mexican architect Salvador Reyes Ríos from the husks of a pair of derelict mansions. Guests are lavished with—what else?—fresh roses and rich confections from local chocolatier **L'Amandine** (see "The New Beantown"). It was the Mayans and Olmecs who first discovered the cacao plant and put its pods to use flavoring hot-water drinks. L'Amandine's Belgian owners, Mathieu Brees and Stephanie Verbrugge, came to Mérida to revive that chocolate tradition. While L'Amandine still imports milk from Belgium for quality, the couple purchased a plantation about two hours from Mérida in 1995 to grow their own cacao, and their goal is to use only Mexican ingredients. At Rosas & Xocolate's restaurant, executive chef Mario Espinosa, a veteran of Pujol in Mexico City, makes all his own breads and whips up clever creations like deep-fried octopus and tuna tartare with cocoa butter, *pepitas* and quail egg. Tower relishes a duck confit salad and a creamy seafood risotto before revealing it gives him "the old itch" to get back into the business.

Expats John Powell and Josh Ramos of **Urbano Rentals** (urbanorentals.com), meanwhile, rent beautifully renovated private houses around Mérida, some designed by Reyes Ríos. The newest, a three-bedroom home by Ramos, is an 18th-century colonial house that has, at its heart, two massive ceiba trees and a peaceful courtyard pool. As a bonus, Powell and Ramos are well-connected guides about town, keyed in to—and part of—a vibrant expat scene that includes film production designer

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: VIRGINIA MACDONALD, TRUJILLOPAUMIER; EDUARDO CERVANTES; PAM MCLEAN/COURTESY HACIENDA PETAC; TRUJILLOPAUMIER

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Ford Wheeler, artists Vija Celmins and James Brown, male model—cum—parfumer Nicolas Malleville (owner of the Coqui Coqui perfumery) and David Byrne and Cindy Sherman, who are currently house hunting.

HACIENDAS

Mérida's heyday was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when vast acreage was dotted with green henequen, a spiky relative of the blue tequila agave. Henequen fibers can produce a lethal liquor when distilled, but their primary use is for making rope. In the midst of an international shipping boom, Mérida became the rope-making capital of the world, and money poured in from Europe, the Middle East and the United States, making the city's landowners as wealthy as today's oil sheiks. Each plantation was crowned with its own hacienda, the grandest modeled after stately French châteaux. Many impressive piles are now crumbling and overgrown, but some remain private homes, a few have been turned into museums and an increasing number are being transformed into elegant small hotels.

The nearest hotel hacienda to the city is **Hacienda Xcanatún** (rooms, from \$260; Calle 20 S/N; 52-999/930-2140; xcanatun.com), a flashily renovated sisal processing facility 15 minutes from Centro, with 18 luxurious suites. Its Casa de Piedra restaurant, which was considered the best meal in town until Rosas & Xocolate opened, cooks up a modern international menu with Yucatecan flair. Owners Jorge Ruz Buenfil and Cristina Baker regularly bring in oysters, wines and other savories from Mexico City and work closely with local purveyors to

source more organic ingredients nearby—even in their own backyard. “The town of Xcanatún grows beets, cilantro, rutabagas, local squash and the Yucatecan cucumber, which is white, not green,” explains Casa de Piedra chef José Vázquez. “We use it to make a cucumber vichyssoise.”

Tucked into 250 acres, **Hacienda Petac** (rooms, from \$1,200 per night for four nights for one to five people; 52-999/911-2601; haciendapetac.com), about 30 minutes south of Mérida, has the feel of an authentic hacienda. A luxury resort in miniature, complete with a library, a gym, a game room and a spa, Petac is usually rented out by the week: up to ten people, with a staff of 23, though smaller groups are sometimes welcome for shorter stays. There are Mayan ruins on site, and the main house sits atop a cenote, one of the plentiful underground lakes that were the principal water source for the Mayans. The silky, cool, aquamarine liquid that is pumped up from the ground now fills Petac's lovely (and chemical-free) pool, once an irrigation tank for the surrounding henequen fields.

As so often happens in Mérida, the main event is in the kitchen here at Petac, where there are never fewer than four Mayan women busily cooking from dawn until dusk. The back screen door is always open, and guests are encouraged to come in, observe, help and learn, preparing dishes ranging from *sopa de lima* to an honest to goodness, parched-in-the-ground *pibil*.

Tower and I venture in one morning, and we are soon wrist-deep in masa, and the Mérida mystique has now captured me, too. Tower's long, bony hands are patting and stretching a circle of rough corn dough until it vaguely resembles a plump coaster for his cerveza—nothing like the slim tortillas Petac's kitchen crew is turning out in piles. “*Es gordo*,” Tower says, pointing to his pudgy, oblong pancake. He then inflates his cheeks and holds his hands out as if he were cradling a rather large belly, much to the amusement of the Mayan ladies, whose laughter continues as Tower flops his effort onto the hot comal (a smooth, flat griddle) and it fails to muster the puff of his cheeks.

Later, after we've been spoiled with *pok chuc* tacos, fresh coconut and guava sorbets brought in from Mérida's **Dulcería y Sorbetería Colon** (Calle 62, no. 500; 52-999/928-1497), and more chocolates from L'Amandine, it is time to retreat to the hammock—so I can start plotting my return to the White City. ■

FROM TOP: DAVID KATZENSTEIN; EDUARDO CERVANTES