



A TASTE OF THE YUCATÁN

Chef Jorge Vallejo of Chablé Resort is preparing Yucatecan cuisine in an authentic way.

STORY BY JEFF BOOK

CORPORATE CHEF JORGE VALLEJO
AND EXECUTIVE CHEF LUIS RONZÓN

LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH BY DEL SOL PHOTOGRAPHY, RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH BY WALTER VERA





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In the Yucatán Peninsula, Jorge Vallejo is flying high. For the third year in a row, his Mexico City restaurant, Quintonil, made the coveted World’s 50 Best Restaurants list. The young chef is a protégé of Enrique Olvera, who earned two slots on the list, for his Mexico City flagship, Pujol, and New York’s Cosme. The two met while training with René Redzepi at Noma in Copenhagen, a past list topper. Now Chef Vallejo has a new showcase: Chablé Resort, on Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula.

The Yucatán is a land apart. For some time after the Spanish reached Mexico in the early 1500s, they (and their maps) considered it an island, and until well into the 1800s it was easier for wealthy Yucatecos to travel to Cuba or Europe than to the interior of Mexico. It’s a place that conjures the magic realism of Latin American fiction, where lush jungle frames ancient Maya ruins and handsome old haciendas. The limestone below is riddled with underground rivers and natural sinkholes known as *cenotes*, held sacred by the Maya as portals to the rain god, Chaac.

This relative isolation helped preserve a strong sense of identity and pride of place—natives tend to think of themselves as Yucatecan first, then Mexican. The Maya left more than ruins, including their widely spoken language and

enduring cultural influence—especially on gastronomy. “I’ve always been so impressed and amazed with Yucatecan cuisine and Maya culture,” Vallejo says. “We really drew from that for the food at Chablé.” His former mentor, Danish Chef Redzepi, is also a fan of Yucatecan cuisine, so much so that last spring he helmed a pop-up restaurant in Tulum that celebrated regional flavors.

Their keen interest is easy to understand. Consider the wealth of pre-Columbian ingredients: plentiful wildlife, corn, squash, beans, chilies, cacao, allspice, vanilla, pineapples, avocados, and other, more exotic (to foreigners) fruits and vegetables. The Spanish brought pigs, vinegar (and pickling), citrus trees, capers, olives, almonds, raisins, black pepper, and other spices. Yucatecan cooks have long married indigenous and European ingredients and techniques to create distinctive dishes.

As savvy gringos know, the area still abounds in game—black-throated bobwhites that thrive in the subtropical scrub, ducks, teal, peacock-pretty ocellated turkeys, deer, javelinas, and more. Skilled guides and dogs are available. And Chablé—an easy 25-minute drive east of Mérida, the Yucatán’s appealing capital—makes a posh base camp. It centers on an elegant 19th Century hacienda that produced

rope and other products from the agave fiber sisal; in the pre-nylon era, this cordage was in great demand, and Yucatecan haciendas spun sisal into gold for their owners. Complementing the vintage buildings are clusters of sleek modernist casitas and villas and spa buildings. Each accommodation is a secluded retreat with its own pool, hammock, and indoor/outdoor shower. The spa is arrayed around a *cenote*, a primeval swimming hole that complements Chablé’s manmade one, a big, meandering lagoon.

Like the resort’s award-winning design, Chef Vallejo’s cuisine blends traditional and contemporary elements in a distinctly Mexican way. “I grew up in Mexico City, where you find restaurants serving dishes from every part of the country,” he says. “But developing the dishes for Chablé was a chance to discover authentic Yucatecan cuisine in a deeper way. As chefs, we need to be sponges, to learn from everybody and everything.”

He and ace Executive Chef Luis Ronzón (the two friends met while training at Noma) traveled around the peninsula, exploring its flavors. They ate their way around Mérida—a hot spot for culinary tourism—from street vendors to the teeming Lucas de Galvez market to restaurants such as popular stalwart La Chaya Maya and Nectar, known for the

rootsy but refined cuisine of chef Roberto Solís (yet another Noma alum).

“We looked at some cookbooks, but what was more important was talking to great Yucatecan chefs and cooks,” he explains. In the nearby village of Chocholá, they found Doña Eneida, whose knowledge of authentic regional dishes runs as deep as a *cenote*. She gladly shared it with the young chefs from the big city, and now has her own rustic, homestyle kitchen at Chablé, where guests can arrange to get a taste of her top-notch *cocina casera* (home cooking). “She makes a *pipian* (pumpkin seed) sauce with tomatillos that she serves with venison—it’s one of the most complex sauces I’ve ever had,” marvels Vallejo.

Complex sauces are mainstays of Mexican cuisine—most famously *mole poblano*, typically composed of 20-plus ingredients, including chocolate and chilies. “Instead of *moles*, the Yucatán is known for *recados*, which have the

A SENSE OF PLACE

A view of the *ka’anches* gardens (left) and the world’s largest private tequila collection at Ixi’im restaurant (right), both showcased at Chablé Resort and Spa.



OLD MEETS NEW

Chablé, which incorporates modern touches and traditional Mayan architecture, offers 38 casitas and two expansive villas, each situated in unique gardens so nature can be enjoyed.

same sophistication and complexity,” explains the chef. To ensure these aromatic blends are as potent as possible, his kitchen only makes them in small batches, using a traditional stone metate, or mortar.

Achiote (annatto seed) imparts the bright red hue of a *recado rojo*, composed also of toasted spices and roasted onion, garlic, tomatoes, salt, and *naranja agria* (sour orange) juice. This *recado* flavors the best-known Yucatecan dish, *cochinito pibil*, which Chablé prepares in the traditional way: the little pig (*cochinito*) is coated in the *recado* paste, wrapped in banana leaves, and slow-cooked over fire-heated rocks in a covered pit oven, or *pib*. Older than our Southern pit barbecue, the

Maya method achieves equally tender results (and, happily for American cooks, a Dutch oven and orange and lime juice can substitute for the pit and the sour orange).

Vallejo cooks duck using the same method. He puts this *pato pibil* on *panuchos* (plump fried tortillas) with quick-pickled onion *escabeche* and cilantro, which makes an excellent appetizer. He elevates a favorite Yucatecan soup, *sopa de lima*, with the use of diverse spices and herbs in both the broth and the turkey seasoning, and a red bell pepper confit that adds depth and color to the tang of lime slices.

Given the Yucatán’s thin, rocky soil, the Maya have long grown produce in raised planters called *ka’anches*. Vallejo and Ronzón quickly embraced the idea—a stroll on the grounds reveals groups of *ka’anches* serving as fertile kitchen gardens, and versions of them are found in Mexico City on Quintonil’s roof. They supply the cucumbers and fennel that go into a delightful salad along with “fabulous fresh stone crab from the Gulf and our version of the green tomato sauce or ‘salsa verde’ served in every Mexican home,” the chef explains.

He also draws from and supports regional producers of turkey, lamb, cheese, honey, and other artisanal ingredients. This thoughtful farm-to-table approach yields richly savory dishes such as veal shank braised with corn, chayote, pumpkin, and chilies, “cooked in the same pot, to give all the flavor to the broth,” Vallejo notes. Lamb—slow-cooked in a brick-lined pit—is anointed with an adobo sauce made with orange juice, chilies, and cinnamon and other spices and served with a charred cabbage and chickpea salad.

The former sisal factory, beautifully converted, now houses Chablé’s Ixi’im restaurant. There are more than 3,000 spot-lit bottles of tequila in floor-to-ceiling cases, making it the world’s largest private tequila collection. The bottles are not available for tasting, but guests can choose from other, highly sippable premium tequilas and mezcals, most of them rarely seen on this side of the border, along with bespoke cocktails. The perfect complement? *Sikil p’aak*, a Maya roasted pumpkin-seed dip—Vallejo’s version is as addictive as salted peanuts. (Another inspired match is chocolate: Chablé offers guests a sublime tasting of top tequilas and mezcals paired with ethereal Mexican chocolates.)

Much of the staff is of Maya descent, and Chablé evokes a strong spirit of place, in everything from food to spa treatments to the ceremonial purification of a *temazcal*, a pre-Hispanic sweat lodge. Vallejo’s dishes embody the resort’s balance of wellness and hedonism. “Maya cuisine has the seeds of a spa cuisine in it,” he says. “The great ingredients in Maya gastronomy have a lot of healthiness but also a lot of flavor.”

For this lauded chef, honoring the culinary traditions of the past paves the way forward. “Our goal as cooks is to make sustainable food, because we believe it is the future of food,” he declares. “We are very focused on that, on helping our suppliers take pride in what they produce, and on giving our guests a real taste of Mexico.” 🌿

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KARYN MILLET



HUNTING THE YUCATÁN

In the coastal Rio Lagartos area of the Yucatán Peninsula, Jordi Gene of Tankab Outfitters, offers an exciting hunt for a gorgeous little bird called the black-throated Yucatán quail.

Along the coast, the quail hunts take place on agriculture land and beat-up cattle pastures, edged with thick forest. On our hunt, we borrowed shotguns and a couple of very good English pointers to help locate the coveys. Regardless of the pointers’ ability, we never saw a covey that held for very long despite the steady dogs and good handlers.

The birds are beautiful and extremely fast, making this a challenging, wild hunt that would be exciting for any wingshooter. Hunting the black-throated quail—a subspecies recognized as part of the North American Quail Slam for the Safari Club International Record Book’s new Game Birds of the World awards program—were like hunting a cross between a scaled-quail and a bobwhite quail.

Coveys are no more than a dozen birds in each, unlike the big coveys of blue quail in West Texas. These birds will run about 10 yards before flushing, whereas a blue quail may run seemingly forever. Their flush is similar to those of bobwhite,

going in multiple directions all at once, and like (wild) bobwhite, they fly for quite a way. Following up on the singles after a flush is not that easy because once they hit the ground they run like crazy. These birds, like most quail, are outstanding table fare. However, they seem even a little more special sitting on the veranda of a beautiful ranch with an ice cold cerveza in hand.

TIPS FOR HUNTERS

All guns and ammunition are provided by the outfitter, as transporting personal firearms into Mexico can be challenging. The quail hunts are not physically demanding, but be prepared to walk a lot on uneven ground and in the hot sun. Bring plenty of bug spray, dress in light layers, and drink a lot of water as early morning hunts can be cool, but the air heats up quickly as the sun rises. Midday hunts on the coast are hot and humid. We would recommend wearing a hat, a light airy shooting shirt (not cotton), lots of sunscreen, light hiking shoes with some ankle support, and a good pair of brush pants or jeans. —Joe and Brittany Hosmer

LIME SOUP WITH LOCAL TURKEY BREAST AND BELL PEPPER CONFIT



Serves 4-5 TURKEY WITH RECADO BLANCO INGREDIENTS

1 pinch oregano
5 dried juniper berries
5 dried allspice berries
8 ounces onion, chopped
4 cloves garlic
3 xcatic chilies
4½ pounds turkey breast
4 ounces white vinegar
2 tablespoons salt
1 gallon water

TO PREPARE

1. Toast the oregano, juniper, and allspice. Char the onion and the garlic (with skin on). Char the xcatic chili separately.
2. Put all ingredients (except the chili) including the turkey breast, vinegar,

and salt in a pot and cook until it boils then put on low heat and let it cook, uncovered, for 4 hours. Add water when necessary.

3. Add the charred xcatic chili in the last cooking hour. Slice the turkey breast and reserve in the stock to keep it from drying out.

AROMATIC BROTH INGREDIENTS

1 pound beef bones
2 pounds chicken thighs
2 pounds chicken wings
1 gallon water
4 tablespoons salt
8 ounces onion, chopped
3 cloves garlic
10 pieces black pepper
2 pieces xcatic chili
2 sprigs cilantro
2 sprigs epazote

2 habanero chilies
5 lime slices

TO PREPARE

1. Roast the bones in the oven at 350 degrees F for 30 minutes. Remove the fat and put the bones into a pot full of water.
2. Slightly toast all the spices and the xcatic chili, then place in pot.
3. Put all other ingredients into the pot and let it simmer for 3 hours. Strain the broth through a cheesecloth and reserve.

RED BELL PEPPER CONFIT INGREDIENTS

4 red bell peppers, chopped
2 cups olive oil

To Prepare: Remove the inside ribs and seeds, chop and let it simmer with the oil for 30 minutes. Remove from heat and save for final preparation.

TORTILLA FRIES INGREDIENTS

2 pounds tortillas
9 ounces canola oil

1. Cut the tortillas in thin strips. Heat the oil in a pan until it reaches 320 degrees F.
2. Fry the tortilla strips for 1 minute, take out, and let them drain.

FOR THE DISH

1 tablespoon red bell pepper confit
½ cup turkey with recado blanco
2 pieces tortilla fries
2 sprigs cilantro
1 cup aromatic broth

To Prepare: Place the bell pepper, turkey, and tortillas in a bowl. Garnish with cilantro and lime. Pour aromatic broth over dish and serve immediately.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WALTER VERA



DUCK PIBIL PANUCHOS

Serves 3

DUCK PIBIL INGREDIENTS

½ tablespoon oregano, slightly toasted
5 cloves, slightly toasted
1 tablespoon salt
3 dried allspice berries
¼ cup recado rojo (achiote paste)
4 bay leaves
1 cup sour orange juice
½ gallon regular orange juice
2 banana tree leaves
1 fresh duck, cut into pieces

1. Blend the oregano, clove, salt, allspice, recado rojo, and bay leaf with both orange juices until you have a homogeneous mixture.
2. Toast one banana tree leaf and put it in a pot. Then add the duck in pieces, and stir in the previous mixture.
3. Cover the pot with the second banana leaf and cover with

aluminum foil. Put in oven at 350 degrees F for 6 hours.

PICKLED RED ONION INGREDIENTS

½ cup red onion
½ tablespoon habanero chili
½ cup lime juice
1 tablespoon salt
1 pinch dry oregano

1. Slice the red onion and mix with the habanero chili.

2. Stir in the lime juice and let it marinate overnight. Add salt and oregano.

PANUCHOS INGREDIENTS

1 cup black beans
¼ cup radish
½ tablespoon cilantro
½ tablespoon habanero chili
¼ onion, chopped
½ tablespoon salt
3 corn tortillas

1 cup canola oil

1. Cook the beans with the radish, cilantro, habanero chili, onion, and salt in a pot until they are cooked, approximately 1½ hours.
2. Blend all the ingredients until you get a smooth paste.
3. Make a cut on the side of the tortillas, fill with the bean paste, and then fry it in hot canola oil for about two minutes.

TO ASSEMBLE

- 3 panuchos
3 tablespoons pibil duck
1 tablespoon pickled red onion
1 sprig cilantro
1. Place the fried panuchos on a plate. Heat the duck, and put on each panucho.
 2. Finish them with pickled red onion and cilantro.