

# Taste of Puerto Vallarta

Sampling flavours a hands-on delight

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Six times in Puerto Vallarta and we still want to go back? "What's the big attraction?" people ask.

"We haven't done everything we want to do there yet," I answer. And while that's partly true, it goes deeper than that.

First, there's the food. Except ... I'd be lying if I led you to believe our annual trek is all about Mexican cuisine. We don't even eat Mexican food for much of the time we're there.

There are plenty of restaurants in Puerto Vallarta (PV). You might even call it a food lover's paradise with top-notch restaurants featuring chefs and foods from around the world.

But this year we wanted to pay more attention to genuine Mexican fare. A cooking class was the perfect place to start. And so, a few weeks before our trip, and with the aid of Google and some recommendations from TripAdvisor, we found Rosie (Rosaelia Romero Rodríguez). She's the master chef behind Rosie's Vallarta Cooking.

I'd seen signs for cooking classes previously, some offered by the chefs at those fine restaurants. But we wanted more. We wanted a real Mexican experience.

And so, for the hefty price of \$84 US per person, we were going to spend a few hours cooking in an authentic Mexican home. It didn't us take long to figure out the day was going to be worth every American dollar.

We took a bus from our boutique hotel, Casa Dona Susana, in the romantic zone (Zona Romántica) in old town PV. Unlike the more "Americanized" resort areas, this part of the city has a small-town atmosphere amidst a setting of cobblestone streets, white stucco, and red-tiled roofs — and this year, an overabundance of condos going up.

We were meeting Rosie a few miles away, at Starbucks in a mall near the marina. Yes, there's a Starbucks in Mexico. There's also McDonald's, Outback, Subway and other familiar chains — but we tend to avoid them.

Rosie was easy to spot, looking every bit the tour guide in blue jeans, a pale yellow polo shirt and identification on a lanyard around her neck. Later, she'd transform into a professional chef, complete with white hat and jacket.

After introductions, our journey into real Mexican food began.

Rosie had a comfy Chevrolet Van Express that she could squeeze into the tightest of spaces at Mercado Palmar de Aramara farmer's market, no small task considering the van seats 13. Though not brand new, the van is new to Rosie and she explains, as tour operators, they must have a new vehicle every 10 years plus they need a special licence to deal with tourists.

The traditional farmer's market is where you'll find the locals. You'll also find everything from fresh fruits, vegetables and spices to a fish monger, a tortilla factory and lots of food stands.

We strolled through, following Rosie as she stopped at various vendors. She knew what she wanted and she pointed out foods to us, sometimes getting samples for us to taste and explaining where the foods originated or how to use them.

After each purchase, she handed her grocery bags to the men to carry until we had more food than we could imagine eating and we made our way to her home in the traditional neighbourhood of Del Mar.

As the huge iron gate opened, we were struck first by the outdoor living space that greeted us. Strings of bright flags (papel picado) depicting icons of Puerto Vallarta hung overhead for decoration and the perimeter was filled with various vegetables and fruit trees growing to the open sky above. An outdoor kitchen featured an open oven (horno de barro) where a wood fire was already burning.

A table was set with a pitcher of fruit water and beyond, an island was set up for would-be chefs. The open space led into a room of the home, including a more modern kitchen area.

We were greeted, too, by Rosie's husband, Archivaldo, who works



Rosie Romero Rodríguez entertains guests with music and dancing.

as a tour guide but was off the day of our visit. Archie told us how he'd been ill a few years ago and got to thinking about how Rosie would survive if something were to happen to him. He convinced her to study English and they'd start the cooking business. She'd grown up around food so it was something he knew she'd do well. That was three years ago.

"She started doing so well, she told me to find something else to do and she runs the cooking business herself," he laughs.

Rosie estimates there are 65,000 Americans and 45,000 Canadians who've become permanent residents of PV, and that's not counting the nearly 4 million tourists who visit each year. Catering to them is good business sense.

While we talked, we set to work making guacamole with the avocados Rosie bought from two youngsters at the market.

"I buy from the children," she explained, "because when I was very young I had to sell vegetables. I was always so happy when everything was gone."

Selling wares is a way of life for many Mexican people and children start learning how at a young age.

Rosie, who moved to Vallarta because her hometown didn't have a junior high school, worked in her aunt's small restaurant in the downtown's Rio Cuale Market.

She says the best fruits and vegetables grow in her hometown, El Mapache in Tomatlan (tomato land) county, a village more than an hour south of PV.

At the market, she'd pointed out hot sauce made in Tomatlan. Later, she gave us each a bottle to take home.

As we worked, we learned not to overpound the avocado in the guacamole.

"Just a wee bit of garlic — not too much," says Rosie.

We learned that pico de gallo is not always made from tomatoes as we'd thought and the best salsas are made from vegetables that have been roasted over an open fire to dry up some of the water and make the juices more flavourful.

We cut corn tortillas into pie-shaped pieces, which Rosie fried to eat with our guacamole.

Then we made salsa de molcajete roja y verde (red and green molcajete sauces) to eat with our pastor tacos while the main dish cooked.

The main dish: Cochinita Pibil, pork seasoned with achiote paste and other seasonings, wrapped in banana leaves and left to steam on the stove. It would be spicy but not hot.

We talked about spices and looked at what Rosie has in her

kitchen.

And lastly, we removed white corn from the cob and watched as Rosie added it to a blender with cinnamon, tequesquite, salt and sugar to prepare her grandmother's gualdrapa, a crepe-style dessert in which a thin layer of the latter was cooked on a banana leaf, then rolled and topped with candy fruit.

"We used to eat gualdrapas with a glass of milk or a cup of coffee for breakfast or dinner in my hometown," Rosie said.

We had been eating for much of the day and as we languished at the table, Mexican music began to flood the room and then our chef appeared, transformed once again, from her white chef's outfit into a traditional dress from the Jalisco state. And she was holding a bottle of tequila.

That's how our day with Rosie ended, sipping tequila while our hostess performed a traditional dance for us.

Tequila sounds stereotypical but it is everywhere in Mexico.

One morning, the waiter at Gabby's who remembered us from last year, tried to convince us to buy his friend's special "medicine" tequila. We were afraid recycled bottles duct-taped shut wouldn't make the cut at Customs and so we declined.

Twice, we took friends to Casa Isabel, a Canadian-owned boutique hotel and restaurant high in the hills overlooking the city. Casa Isabel is also known as Madison South in reference to the owner's Madison Avenue Pub in Toronto.

At Casa Isabel, we drank margaritas, ate filet mignon and later had Mexican coffee because we'd heard the table-side preparation was worth it. It was. All the while, live music played in the background and we looked out over the table-side railing at the sunset and the city and ocean below.

The price of all this, well under \$60 Canadian for two.

On other nights we went to Café Bohemio, a small restaurant owned by nightclub performer Saul Rose who didn't do live shows at the local theatre this year and so performed for guests at the restaurant.

The food is magnificent. Every meal starts with the tastiest of homemade soups. The extensive menu features everything from salad in a parrmesan bowl to meatloaf and Mexican fare such as chili relleno and red snapper.

It's at Bohemio that we drank too many margaritas one night. And then we returned another night with friends when we learned the father of one of them was a big band performer with The Tune Toppers.



Gerry Clark makes guacamole at Rosie's.



Red snappers are sold at a farmer's market in Puerto Vallarta.

We knew our friends would appreciate the music and the wonderful cast of characters that make up Bohemio.

But we don't always go fine dining in PV.

One day we wanted something quick so we went to the Vayan Café, just steps outside our hotel, for all-you-can-eat spaghetti bolognese. For \$28 pesos (\$5 Cdn), we couldn't eat the first plate.

Margarita Grill has the best music, a band of brothers called Los Unos. I can't decide whether I like the music or the guacamole made table-side more.

One day, we have lunch at Los Muertos, a pizzeria and craft brewery. It's 70 pesos for a beer, pizza and salad.

Breakfast restaurants offer such choices as waffles laden with fresh fruit, traditional American breakfast (with refried beans) AND Mexican fare as well.

Everywhere, the restaurants have lineups, a confirmation that food is a big attraction there.

While we like to dine out, the bigger attraction lies in the friendships we've solidified over the years, over happy hour drinks that lead into meals and conversation that goes into the night until finally we say, "La cuenta por favor." ("The bill, please.") because here it's considered rude to bring the cheque before you ask.

This is a happy place where the locals work hard, yet never complain. They are happy people and their happiness rubs off on us.

We go there and we lose our stiff, formal ways. We learn to hug when we meet and when we say goodbye. We connect on Facebook so that we can stay in touch and we all vow to meet again, some time next year — if not before.

This year, even Rosie has connected with me on Facebook. And that's a good thing because we're pretty sure we're going to want to cook something up with her again next year.

If you'd like to visit, we can hook you up, too.

PHOTOS BY PAULINE CLARK/SPECIAL TO THE STAR