

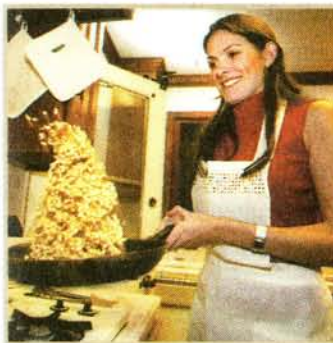
# Los Angeles Times

# FOOD

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Restaurants  
Wine & Spirits

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CARLOS CHAVEZ *Los Angeles Times*

**HOSTESS:** *Gina Pacheco toasts pine nuts for her entree.*

## Tastes of Mexico, with flair

By SUSAN LATempa  
*Special to The Times*

**T**HE cocktails are a real icebreaker at this dinner party.

Two couples have arrived almost simultaneously. They're greeted in Spanish and English by their hostess, Gina Pacheco, and her husband, Carlos Madrazo, and there's a flurry at the door of bouquets extended, jackets taken and acquaintances renewed. As the group steps into the spacious, high-ceilinged living room of this beautifully restored 1929 Spanish Colonial Revival apartment in Beverly Hills, the guests cheerfully accept an offer of margaritas.

Madrazo slips around the corner; the sound of the blender rises momentarily above the strains of Rebekah Del Rio on the CD player. When he reappears, with glasses filled to the rims with foamy pomegranate-red margaritas, the guests are pleased and curious.

"They're *margaritas de Jamaica*," explains Pacheco, and her friends laugh with recogni-

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Photographs by CARLOS CHAVEZ Los Angeles Times

**LEISURELY:** After a luxurious meal, hostess Gina Pacheco, center, and her husband, Carlos Madrazo, right, linger over a glass of Baja-produced Chardonnay with guests Beatriz Acevedo and Pedro Rodriguez, left, and Patricia Rodriguez, far right.

# Expats' taste of home

[Pacheco, from Page F1]

tion and toast her cleverness as the first sips are taken.

"When you grow up in Mexico," explains Beatriz Acevedo, who, like three of the four guests tonight, did just that, "they are always giving you *agua de jamaica*. It's a common drink for children, made from hibiscus flowers. Like lemonade or Kool-Aid here. Turning it into a margarita is inspired!"

If the preparation is novel — and Pacheco's guests expect unusual, highflying dishes at her dinner parties — the ingredients are familiar. That's because at this and other small, frequent dinners, Pacheco, a chef and cookbook author who currently appears in a weekly cooking segment on Univision, concentrates on reinventing Mexican cuisine for a discerning audience — Mexican expats who live in L.A.

"The menu depends on my guests. If they're Mexican, I try to do something Mexican that's very special," says Pacheco.

She has lived in L.A. since her marriage in 2002 to Madrazo, who is chief financial officer of TuTV, a company that operates and distributes a suite of Spanish-language television networks.



**TROPICAL ENDING:** Light and fruity, Pacheco's mango dessert is topped with a swirl of cajeta and served with a tequila liqueur.

restaurants opening."

Greiff tells how he and Acevedo, whose TV projects for their Emmy-winning company, HIP Entertainment Group, frequently take them across the border, decided to give Baja wines as business gifts one year. "That was a good idea until we realized you can only bring one bottle per person maximum across the border!"

The toasts are "*Buenos amigos*" and "*Salud!*" and Pacheco is saluted as hostess.

Plates are filled with stuffed squid, rice and peas and fresh green asparagus. Meaty slices of squid and *huillacoche* are swirled with forks through the rich, nutty sauce before each mouthful. The bright epazote-lime flavor of the asparagus dressing (a blend of chopped shallots, Dijon mustard, lime juice, lime zest, epazote and olive oil) contrasts happily.

Inspired by the wine story, talk turns to Mexican foods not available in the U.S. that these frequent travelers stock up on when they visit there.

"The last time I was in Mexico," says Patricia Rodriguez, a former model and mother of four, "I went with an empty suitcase. I brought back 10 kilos of *chamoy* candy [a sweet-sour fruit candy]. I'm not joking. I went to the cus-

"I don't cook something simple. . . . They know how to cook that themselves. Or their housekeepers cook. So I do the kinds of dishes I did at restaurants in Mexico, or that I might want to do in my catering menus here."

The *margarita de jamaica* is delicious. The rich color of the drink is matched by its intense flavor — herbaceous, not too sweet, made, explains Pacheco, with top-quality tequila. "The tequila must be aged," says Pacheco, and it must be 100% blue agave. As she sets out a spicy dip, she tells about how friends gave her and then-fiancé Madrazo a "tequila shower" just before their wedding.

"That's a great way to start your collection," says Pedro Rodriguez. Rodriguez, whose company distributes American films in Latin America, and his wife, Patricia, join Acevedo and her husband, Doug Greiff, in sampling the dip. It's dense and cheesy, with a kick of chile. What's in it? They all want to know. Ah, *pepitas* (pumpkin seeds).

### Skills of a restaurateur

**B**EFORE coming to the States, Pacheco — who holds a culinary degree from Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City and also attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. — opened two restaurants in Mexico City. She developed a Northern Italian menu for one and a nouvelle Mexican menu for the other.

Her first menus for her L.A. catering company, Gina Pacheco Catering, focused on Italian- and French-influenced dishes, but now she offers menus of contemporary Mexican dishes, often updating regional specialties such as tortilla lime soup or *xnipek*, a Yucatecan dish of *cochinilla* (roast pork) with annatto paste and sour orange served with a sauce made with red onions, oranges and habañero chiles.

The centerpiece of tonight's meal is a dish of squid filled with a musseline of *huillacoche*, the corn fungus known as the Mexican truffle. It's an extravagant ingredient that Pacheco's been experimenting

with for some months. Usually available only in deluxe settings in Mexico, it's seldom seen on tables in the U.S. and widely appreciated by her dinner guests.

"It's unique," says Pacheco. "You can't find this texture or flavor in any other ingredient in the world." *Huillacoche* has long been known in gastronomic circles in Mexico, and even here it is gaining attention. "Right now we're going back to our roots, using pre-Hispanic ingredients. Like *huillacoche*. Like *escamones*, red ant eggs."

Such ingredients are easier to find than they once were, in both Mexico and the U.S. Pacheco's mother purchased *huillacoche* seasonally in the market and made crepes with it "every two or three years" for a special occasion, Pacheco says. But she prefers to buy the fungus canned; it is available at some Latino markets and is of consistent quality.

The party splits for a moment along gender lines, talk going strong ("I'm sure you invited us because we're all good conversationalists. We're not shy!" remarks Pedro Rodriguez to Madrazo), and the margaritas disappear quickly. To make *jamaica* margaritas, Pacheco simmers one part *jamaica* flowers, available at Latino markets, in two parts water. The mixture is strained and cooled, then mixed with a simple syrup to taste. The pitcher of *jamaica* syrup stands next to the blender with ice cubes, lime juice and tequila.

Pacheco, explaining that she never repeats a recipe at her dinner parties, now serves another appetizer, shrimp albóndigas.

Cunningly presented in ramekins with three meatballs in each so that guests, still congregated in the living room, can simply set down their drinks and use cocktail forks to enjoy the warm hors d'oeuvres, this dish was inspired by a recipe from Patricia Quintana, whose restaurant Izote is one of Pacheco's favorites in Mexico City because of its "high-end approach to Mexican food."

"The shrimp albóndigas is her idea," Pacheco says. "The sauce is mine because hers is

all chiles. But I don't like things too spicy. So this sauce is tomatoes and *guajillo* and *chipotle meco* chiles and onion and garlic."

### Harmonious companions

**T**HE shrimp balls are amazingly light because, says Pacheco, they're made with fresh masa dough. They're cooked so perfectly that the fresh cilantro in the shrimp ball is still bright green, and the sauce has a delicate smoky flavor.

"I have to balance everything," she says. "I want to have some seafood for the appetizer because we're going to have squid for the entree. It gives harmony to the menu — a little seafood here and big seafood later, instead of meat and then fish."

Pacheco ducks back into the kitchen to finalize preparations for the dinner. The *huillacoche*-filled squid will be served with pine nut sauce and a rice side dish. Steamed asparagus will be lightly dressed with an epazote-lime vinaigrette.

"It takes many hours to cook Mexican cuisine," she explains. "There are several stages for each recipe. You don't put it all together in a pan and it's ready. There are a lot of processes."

Wearing high heels, a red tank top and a one-of-kind skirt by a Venezuelan designer, Pacheco has already toasted a pound of pine nuts in a large skillet (tossing them with skill and a double-handed grip), grilled and ground chiles for several dishes, grated a cone of solid brown *piloncillo* sugar for a Brie appetizer, stuffed the squid and made the several sauces.

The table is laid with white linen and white china, and white candles sit inside large glass holders with bougainvillea petals scattered at the bases. Madrazo is opening bottles of Chardonnay from Monte Xanic winery, a Baja producer in the Guadalupe Valley.

"There are neat things going on culinarily in Baja," says Acevedo as the group discusses Baja California wine country, "with young chefs coming over,

toms counter and I said, 'I want to declare this, because I don't know if I'm breaking any law.' And he said, 'It's OK, go ahead.' But I could hardly carry it. It was very, very heavy!"

"I check my bags every time I go to Mexico," says Madrazo, "because my mum — without me knowing — would put cheese in my suitcase."

Immediately several others know the cheese his mother would surreptitiously pack for him — "*Queso Oaxaca!*" they say — and it becomes a kind of toast.

Dinner is leisurely, and Patricia Rodriguez laughingly tells about adjusting to earlier American dinner hours.

"It takes some getting used to. At first, we invited some people over and they came and had dinner and said they were going at 10:30 or 11. I wondered what we had done wrong. In Mexico City, if your guests leave before 2 a.m., it's because you've run out of food or drink. We worried: Wasn't there any tequila left?"

Dessert is mango *maicilla*, a light pudding thickened with cornstarch (*maicena*). "We do lots of things with cornstarch in Mexico," says Pacheco. "Corn is one of our basic ingredients. This dessert is mango, cornstarch, milk and sugar — that's it."

Pacheco's *maicilla* — refreshing and creamy soft with a delicate fruit flavor — is inspired in part by traditional smoothie-type drinks called *atoles*. It's dressed up with a swirl of *cajeta* (the long-cooked sugar-and-goat's milk concoction known in the rest of Latin America as *dulce de leche*) and fresh mint.

*Cajeta* also shows up in the after-dinner drinks when Pacheco and Madrazo pour Dobel Licor Sabor de Cajeta con Tequila 1800.

The evening is apparently young by Mexican expat standards when we slip away. Later, we ask Gina how it all ends.

"Carlos and I start cleaning up. I always ask him how the food was. He's very nice to me. He always says, 'This is the best dinner you've ever had.'"

*Times staff writer Barbara Hansen contributed to this report.*