



NATHAN FONG



Rediscovering **RIVIERA MAYA**

Nathan returns to a favourite destination and discovers a new level of luxury.

by **NATHAN FONG**

THE FIRST TIME I VISITED THE RIVIERA MAYA on the Mexican Caribbean coast was some 30 years ago, when Cancun was in its infancy as a town and Playa del Carmen was still an intimate fishing village. Located in the state of Quintana Roo on the eastern side of the limestone Yucatan Peninsula, this region has since become renowned for its stunning talcum white sand

beaches, warm azure waters and the spectacular Mesoamerican Barrier Reef (the world's second longest) brimming with colourful sea life that attracts divers from all over the world, especially to the offshore islands of Cozumel and Isla Mujeres.

This historic and ecology-rich region, filled with sustainable mangroves and ancient Mayan ruins, was made a federal tourism project in 1974 and has since become one of the world's most popular holiday destinations. Besides the peninsula's gorgeous beaches, the hinterland is renowned for lush low lying tropical jungles that sit atop an intricate underground labyrinth of rivers and cenotes that intertwine for some 700 kilometers.

Once a small tourist town, Cancun is now one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in Mexico, anchoring a burgeoning tourism sector along the coast. From the mecca of bustling resorts that line Cancun's sandy beach and large lagoon, a string of smaller and more intimate resort towns runs south towards Puerto Morales and Tulum. It's in these regions that newer upscale resorts are being developed alongside smaller boutique hotels and the luxury shops that line the quaint Avenida Quinta in Playa del Carmen.»

THIS PAGE FROM TOP Ocean view from The Terrace at Las Brisas Restaurant, The Fairmont Mayakoba; Cocktails. **FACING PAGE FROM TOP** Yacht; Mangoes.





ABOVE FROM LEFT Lizard; Private terraces and soaker pool on the lagoon at The Rosewood Mayakoba room.



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MICHEL CHICONE LEFPHOTOGRAPHICA

ABOVE FROM LEFT Vendor; Pelican; Paradisus Caesar salad. BELOW Lagoon view and villas, The Fairmont Mayakoba.



MICHEL CHICONE LEFPHOTOGRAPHICA

«Once a small fishing town and the main ferry link to the coral reefs of Cozumel, Playa del Carmen has grown into another tourism centre on the Mayan Riviera, without losing its old charm and relaxed atmosphere. Just outside Playa del Carmen's city limits, beautifully designed and sustainably planned resorts have been developed amongst the mangroves, which protect their spacious and secluded beaches.

One of the newest properties, Paradisus Resort (from the Spanish Melia Hotel Group), opened in November 2012. Although most of the Mayan Riviera resorts are all-inclusive, the Paradisus Resort has set their standards well above the norm, offering 'luxclusive' comfort, service and cuisine. Set back from the beach among the mangroves, the resort is a stunning contemporary architectural showcase with flowing water canals, swimming pools and lush tropical gardens surrounding modern minimalist low rise buildings. Eye catching custom works of art and sculptures are scattered throughout the property.

The marble floored guest rooms are spacious, with white toned furniture accented with silver and black, and large bathrooms fitted with soaker tubs and glass enclosed showers. Many have large lanais overlooking the flowing swimming pools and some have double Jacuzzi tubs for intimate al fresco baths. Both the adults only La Perla and family oriented La Esmeralda sections of the resort also feature unique swim-up suites... walk onto your private terrace and jump right into the pool!

While Yucatecan cuisine shares indigenous foods — corn, tomatoes, chilies and squash — with the rest of Mexico, in this tropical peninsula the native Mayans adopted Old World ingredients and adapted their cooking to create a distinct Yucatecan cuisine. Sour oranges introduced to the New World flavour the region's famed *cochinita pibil* (pulled pork marinated in spices and sour orange juice). A fragrant chicken soup (*sopa de lima*) is infused with limes. These traditional dishes are found everywhere on the coast, along with wonderful ceviches using the sea's bounty marinated and seasoned with the cornucopia of ingredients from the region. In addition the new modern resorts are bringing in international cuisines.

Paradisus features a wide assortment of a la carte restaurants, including an outpost from Michelin-starred Spanish chef Martin Berasategui, who opened his beautiful Passions Restaurant in the resort last December. This stunning vaulted restaurant, warmly designed in natural wood tones contrasted with large white chandeliers and faux bookshelves, features menus from his famed Relais & Chateaux restaurant, adapted to local ingredients.»



SERVES 4 TO 6

Ceviche Blanco

CEVICHES ARE wonderful seafood dishes that originated in Central America. There are many different styles but ceviche is typically made with fresh raw seafood marinated in citrus juices and various seasonings, from chopped onion to chilies. Ceviche is usually served as an appetizer in Mexico with fresh crisp tortillas as a garnish. Here is the ceviche from La Palapa Restaurant at the Paradisus La Perla.

- Ahi, Albacore or Swordfish** 1 lb, cut into ½" dice
 - Fresh Lime Juice** 2 Tbs
 - Fresh Orange Juice** 1 Tbs
 - Dried Oregano** 2 tsp
 - Red Onion** 1 small, cut into fine julienne
 - Serrano Chilies** 1 or 2, seeded and cut into fine julienne
 - Salt** 1 tsp
 - White Pepper** 1 tsp
 - Extra Virgin Olive Oil** ¼ cup
 - Cilantro** coarsely chopped, ½ cup
 - Thai Red Chili** 2, seeded, finely minced (optional)
 - Orange** 1, peeled and segmented
 - Lemon** 1, peeled and segmented
- 1 MARINATE** the diced fish with the citrus juices for 30 minutes refrigerated.
 - 2 TOAST** the oregano in a small dry skillet over medium heat until fragrant. Remove and cool, then add to the marinated fish, along with the onion and serrano chili.
 - 3 SEASON** with salt, white pepper and olive oil. Divide and place into chilled martini glasses.
 - 4 GARNISH** with cilantro, minced Thai chili, orange and lemon segments.

Cook
with

SERVES 1

Habanero and Cucumber Margarita

THIS COCKTAIL using the region's famed spicy habanero chili and sweetened naturally with agave syrup is one of the signature drinks at The Fairmont Mayakoba Resort.

Lime Wedges

Chili Powder
mixed with **Salt**

Tequila Milagro Reposado
1 ½ oz

Cointreau ½ oz

Lime Juice
1 ½ oz

Cucumber ⅓,
peeled, seeded
and thinly sliced

Agave Syrup
a dash

Habanero Chili
veins and seeds
removed, finely
chopped, ¼ tsp
or to taste

Cucumber
thinly sliced, for
garnishing

- 1 RUB** rim of a chilled glass with a piece of the lime wedge.
- 2 DIP** the rim of the glass in a saucer of salt and chili powder until it is evenly coated.
- 3 MIX** all ingredients in a shaker or blender with cubed ice. Pour into the glass and garnish with a thin slice of cucumber.

*...These unique properties
are set within four
distinct ecosystems...*

RIGHT Fruit. **FACING PAGE** Ocean view from The Terrace at Las Brisas Restaurant, The Fairmont Mayakoba.

«It's been an education as well as a bit of a challenge, especially when you don't have all the ingredients that are available in Europe," says Paradisus Executive Chef Laurent Brouard. "We had to adapt as much as we could to what we can get locally."

Local is good, especially when it comes to the Gulf's wonderful warm water grouper, prawns and other seafood, not to mention the superb tropical produce. Other ingredients are sourced further afield, including oysters from the cooler Mexican Pacific coast and succulent micro sprouts from Mexico City.

Just a short drive north on the coastal Highway 307, the gated community of Mayakoba houses two of the region's most spectacular hotel properties, The Fairmont Mayakoba and the Rosewood Mayakoba. These unique properties are set within four distinct ecosystems — sandy dunes, water canals and cenotes, tropical forests, and mangroves.

Visiting the Fairmont Mayakoba some six years ago when it first opened, I was impressed that its sprawling grounds were designed with sensitivity to the environment, protecting the area's valuable mangroves, which play a crucial role in keeping the waters in the adjacent coral reefs clean. Entering the cavernous lobby, one has a sweeping view of the hotel's stunning location and beautiful property. Environmentally friendly golf carts whisk guests around the 47 acre retreat, which features 400 elegantly appointed guestrooms, including spectacular oceanfront suites and private casitas with lagoon or jungle views.

Although the resort features six excellent restaurants, there are two that shine. El Puerto, an elegant restaurant with spectacular views overlooking the lagoon, features fresh sustainable seafood, contemporary Mexican and international flavours. Specialties range from grilled *Sian Ka'an* lobster, locally caught by a regional cooperative that uses sustainable fishing methods, to chipotle glazed duck garnished with a Tequila *demi-glace*. The oceanfront restaurant Las Brisas, built in the traditional thatched palapa style with a stunning vaulted ceiling, sits at the edge of the briny rolling surf. From the elegant breakfast buffet and sublime lunchtime ceviches, to sunset cocktails and appetizers, this is one of the most beautiful locations to dine on the Mayan Riviera beachfront.

The other most luxurious Mayakoba property, Rosewood Mayakoba, offers gorgeous contemporary casitas built around the lagoon and hidden discreetly along the beachfront. This private and intimate property is certainly one of the most beautiful and unique resorts I have ever visited. Entering through an unassuming *porte cochere*, I'm entranced by the stunning design of the inner sanctum, a »

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MEXICO

SERVES 4

Tian of Pineapple and Citrus with Vanilla

THIS COLOURFUL and refreshing dish is served for breakfast at the La Palapa Restaurant at the Paradisus Resort in Playa de Carmen. Served in a stacked tian, the fruit is tossed with a delicate vanilla infused olive oil.

VANILLA OIL

- Extra Virgin Olive Oil** ½ cup
 - Vanilla Bean** ½
- 1 PLACE** olive oil into a small saucepan.
 - 2 SPLIT** open vanilla bean and scrape seeds into olive oil. Add scraped vanilla bean to the oil and slowly heat over low heat.
 - 3 STIR** until well mixed and allow to simmer for 10 minutes.
 - 4 REMOVE** from heat and allow to cool. Remove bean and discard. Pour oil into an airtight container, cover and chill until ready to use

TIAN

- Pink Grapefruit** 2, peeled and segmented
 - Oranges** 3, peeled and segmented
 - Fresh Pineapple** cut into ½" dice, 2-3 cups
 - Vanilla Oil** 4 Tbs
 - Mint Leaves** 6-8 cut into fine julienne
- 1 MIX** carefully all ingredients except mint in a bowl, making sure the vanilla oil covers everything .
 - 2 PLACE** a 4"x 3" ring onto a chilled serving plate. Starting with the orange sections, layer them on the bottom of the ring, then top them with a layer of the grapefruit. Top with the final layer of diced pineapple and remove ring.
 - 3 GARNISH** with julienne mint leaves.




ABOVE Churros and fried plantain. **RIGHT** Playa del Carmen street vendor. **FACING PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Bread; Fruit; French fries and chorizo with hot sauce; Spring rolls.



«postmodern symphony of glass, wood and concrete with spectacular water features flowing into a swimming pool surrounded by private bathing pavillions draped in white fabric.

This luxury oasis has two wonderful restaurants. Casa del Lago, the signature Mediterranean restaurant, overlooks the tranquil waters of the main pool and emerald lagoon below, while Punta Bonita sits at the edge of the beachside infinity pool and offers classic regional Mexican cuisine.

Although the resort restaurants offer excellent international and regional cuisines, the Mayan Riviera, like the rest of the country, is also known for its many holiday fiestas, from secular to religious, and the vast array of wonderful Mexican street foods that comes with them. There are classic *taquerias* with slow braised and aromatic shredded *carnitas* ready to fill fresh warm corn tortillas. Or fresh hot potato chips with local flavour, doused with hot spicy chili sauce and a liberal squeeze of lime juice. Or piquant grilled Mexican chorizos, much more flavourful than our North American hotdogs! For those with a lust for sweets, there are stalls filled with Mexican candies, from *dulce de leche* taffy wafers with peanuts to sour-sweet tamarind caramels and a rainbow of lollipops. For me, it's the hot oily *churros*, the long, fried choux pastry doughnuts, quickly dipped in sugar mixed with the local fragrant cinnamon (best eaten alongside a cup of Mexican hot chocolate, frothy and lightly spiked with cinnamon!)

Centuries ago, the indigenous Mayan people enjoyed the pleasure and beauty of this idyllic region and today it continues to be one of the world's most beautiful — and delicious — waterfront playgrounds. 



Paradisus Resort

www.paradisusplayadelcarmen.com

Fairmont Mayakoba

www.fairmont.com/mayakoba-riviera-maya

Rosewood Mayakoba

www.rosewoodhotels.com/en/mayakoba



Vancouver born **NATHAN FONG**

segued from cooking and catering to a brilliant career as a food and props stylist for culinary print and film advertising, with a distinguished international client list. He is celebrating his 22nd year as television host for his food and travel segments on GlobalTV and a columnist for *The Vancouver Sun* and writes his

popular blogs at www.vancouversun.com

and www.fongonfood.com 



SERVES 4-6

Seafood Paella

AT THE luxurious Rosewood Mayakoba, Chef Nestor Izuel showcased this delicious paella in a cooking class. Unlike traditional Spanish paella that sometimes includes escargot and chicken, this paella is purely local, using fresh sustainable seafood, enhanced with only aromatic saffron.

- Extra Virgin Olive Oil** ½ cup
- Onion** 1 large, finely chopped
- Garlic** 3 cloves, minced
- Saffron Threads** 1-2 g
- Bay Scallops** ½ lb, rinsed and dried
- Tomato** 1 large, seeded and cut into ½" dice
- Bomba or Canaroli Rice** 1 lb
- White Wine** 1 cup
- Chicken or Fish Stock** 4 cups
- Salt and Freshly Ground Black Pepper** to taste
- Calamari** ½ lb, cleaned and cut into ½" rings
- Snapper Fillet** ½ lb, cut into 2" pieces
- Lobster Tails** 1 or 2, split in half lengthwise
- Large Scallops** 4-6, quartered
- Clams** 8-16
- Frozen Peas** ½ cup

- 1 HEAT** the olive oil in a medium paella pan or large skillet over medium low heat. Add the onions and cook until translucent and then add the garlic. Crush half of the saffron with your fingers and sprinkle over the onions and garlic. Spread the bay scallops and chopped tomatoes over the surface and mix thoroughly, cooking for a minute. Raise heat to medium. Spread the rice over the surface, then pour over the white wine and stock and sprinkle with the remaining saffron. Do not stir together but allow the mixture to come to a boil and allow to boil 3 to 4 minutes, then reduce heat and simmer on low heat for 10 minutes.
- 2 SPREAD** the remaining seafood and peas over the rice, cover the pan completely with a large damp tea towel and allow to cook over low heat for another 10 minutes. Check seafood for doneness by lifting a portion of the tea towel. Garnish with chopped flat leaf parsley.