

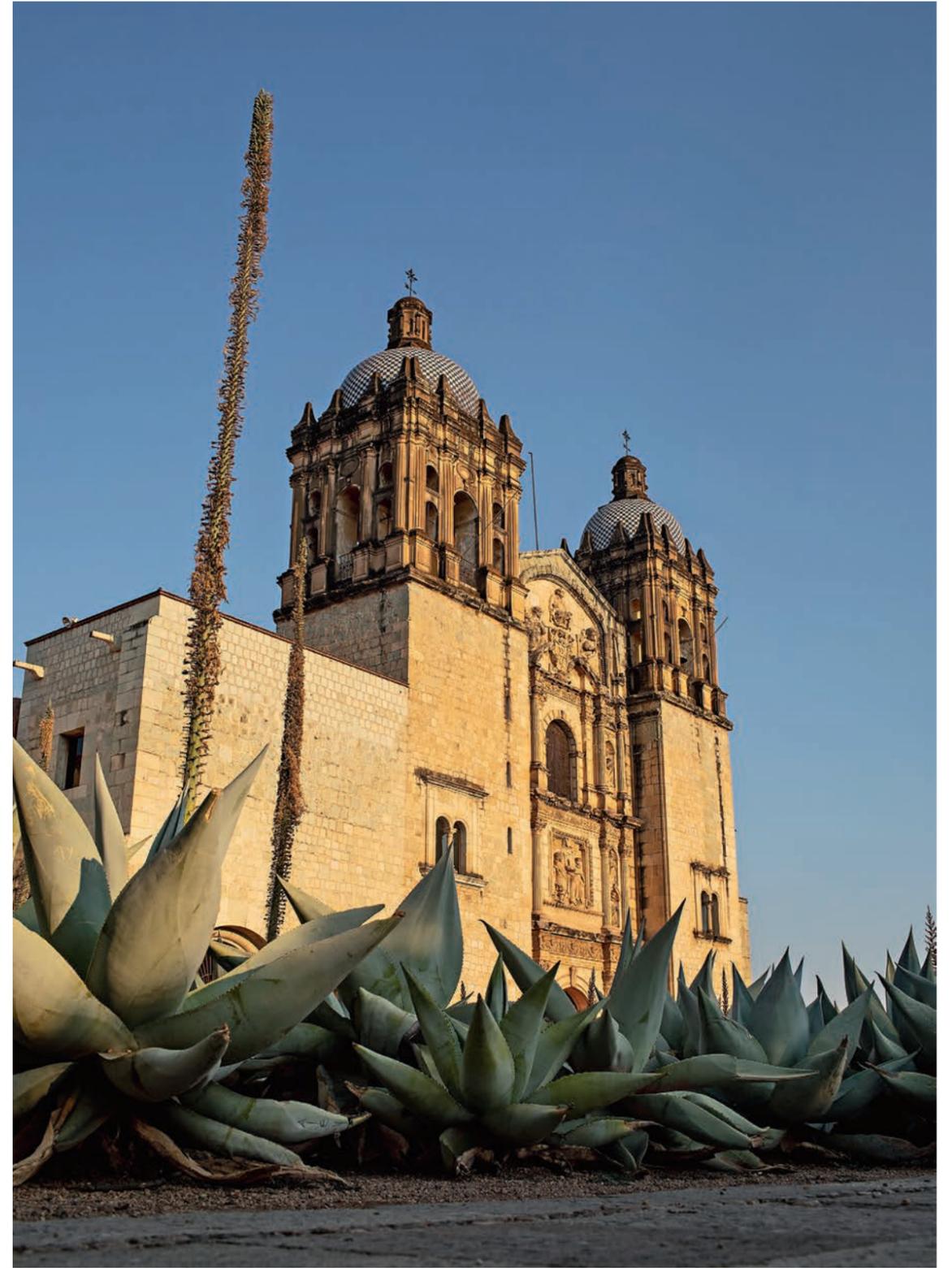
FOOD

Oaxaca

As Mexican cuisine continues its unstoppable rise on the global fine-dining scene, one region has emerged as the gastronomic capital. **Anne Fullerton** heads to Oaxaca de Juárez, the city on the tip of everyone's tongue.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW REINER



Criollo restaurant serves dishes such as roasted duck with pumpkin and yucca (left); the Church of Santo Domingo de Guzmán is one of Oaxaca's highlights (above)



CASA OAXACA EL RESTAURANTE

Bites that put Oaxaca back on the map

Alejandro Ruiz Olmedo is the man credited with breathing life back into Oaxaca's restaurant scene and the rooftop Casa Oaxaca El Restaurante (casaoaxaca-elrestaurante.com), which overlooks Santo Domingo, is his flagship eatery. Waiters in starched white shirts crush salsa with a mortar and pestle beside the table to your tastes – one of the less intimidating ways to incorporate dried, seasoned grasshoppers into a meal. The menu riffs on regional classics and uses sustainable local produce. You'll find squash flowers stuffed with king crab and a vegetarian lasagna that substitutes pasta with layers of yucca and huitlacoche (corn mushroom). Olmedo is a regular on the United States festival circuit and his restaurants routinely appear on the 50 Best Restaurants in Latin America list so reservations are essential.

The local markets in central Oaxaca present myriad delights for the senses (top); fresh local produce used to create the salsa at Criollo (right)

MERCADO DE ABASTOS

The markets where every dish begins

A short stroll south of the baroque cupolas of Santo Domingo church lies Mercado de Abastos (Lazaro Cardenas 2305, Oaxaca), the city's pantry. Oaxaca boasts nine microclimates, 500 edible herbs and 60 agave varieties – all of which are on display inside this rabbit's warren of stalls spruiking everything from chillies, beans and eggs to flowers, turkeys, pigs' feet and chapulines (grasshopper toasted with garlic, lime juice and salt). It's a quintessential experience and the best place to eat like a local. You may want to keep an eye out for the cheese and squash blossom tlayudas (Oaxacan-style tortilla dish) the late Anthony Bourdain called "the best thing I ate in Mexico".

CRIOLO

High-end dégustation without the stuffiness

Criollo (criollo.mx) is a joint venture between Enrique Olvera – whose Mexico City establishment, Pujol, is routinely among the world's top 50 restaurants – chef Luis Arellano and architect Javier Sánchez. It sits on a quiet street outside the historic centre and opened inside a colonial mansion in 2016. The interior, like Arellano's fixed-price, seven-course tasting menu, offers an elevated, modern interpretation of the cuisine's humbler beginnings. Guests enter beside the open kitchen, as in a traditional Mexican home, and the experience is designed as an upscale casa – tables run along the edges of the courtyard, where leaves



IT HADN'T occurred to me that a food story might be dangerous but that was before I stepped into the vibrant, open-air kitchen of Juana Amaya Hernández, where paper-thin rounds of maize are cooking atop an enormous wood-fired comal (griddle). It's time to flip the tortillas, according to Hernández, who's casually scooping delicate corn discs off the burning surface with her bare hands. She turns to me expectantly; the key is to use your whole hand and do it very quickly. I ask our interpreter if students often singe their fingers, Hernández deflects the question with a laugh, "un poquito".

Though you wouldn't know it from her disposition, more loving *madre* than haute chef, Hernández looms large in the Oaxacan cuisine renaissance. When Copenhagen's Noma, one of the world's most acclaimed restaurants, hosted a US\$600 a head pop-up in Tulum, the chefs learnt to make tortillas at Hernández's classes. The centuries-old flavours of Oaxaca, Mexico's mountainous central state, have proved so alluring that top chefs from New York and Copenhagen to Barcelona and Dubai are touting their own take on the area's mosaic of Indigenous and Spanish influences. If you've sampled a spicy-sweet mole sauce or sipped a smoky uber-trendy glass of mezcal then you've had a taste of Oaxaca. James Beard's award-winning chef Hugo Ortega calls the colourful colonial city "the belly of Mexico", while Alejandro Ruiz Olmeda, who helped revive his home city's dining scene, says it is "to chefs what Paris once was to painters". Here's how to make the most of Mexico's gastronomic heart.



Preparing quesadillas with squash blossoms at Itanoni Tortilleria y Antojeria (left and below); Criollo's courtyard has a relaxed and welcoming feel (bottom)



from overhead flutter down occasionally, while a hammock, cactus garden and free-roaming chickens lend a bucolic ambience to the high-brow minimalism of wooden décor and concrete awnings. The menu changes daily but a recent visit began with gorditas (masa pastry) filled with slow-roasted pork or huitlacoche and white oyster mushrooms. Every course showcases local produce – from corn-based tempuras to cactus salad, chilacayote squash and a rosemary cream and chicozapote sorbet "pre-dessert". Visit during the afternoon or brunch to fully appreciate the phenomenal space. Another drawcard is the accommodating kitchen, which caters to vegetarians, vegans and allergy sufferers.

MI TIERRA LINDA The best meal you'll ever cook yourself

This all-purpose space is where Juana Amaya Hernández lives, cooks, teaches and serves her restaurant guests (Calle Ignacio López Rayón 7, San Antonio, Zimatlán de Álvarez, Oaxaca; +52 1 951 129 6283). Though it's a 45-minute drive from Centro, in the village of Zimatlán, there's no better

way to get acquainted with Oaxacan cuisine than with the grande dame herself. Each class is adapted according to skill, time and interest (a multi-day curriculum for a professional chef is quite different from a half-day lesson for home cooks) and includes shopping for produce at the market, instruction and, of course, meals. In a typical class, Hernández teaches students how to roll, press and cook tortillas on a comal and to tackle a mole, the name given to the variety of complex, rich, spicy-sweet sauces that originate from Oaxaca. The sheer number of ingredients and processes involved in making one of the simpler moles will give you a new-found appreciation for the craft. Hernández is a generous host and teacher who seems delighted to share the recipes of her mother and grandmother with the world. Don't be surprised if her husband



makes a cameo with the mezcal bottle once the memelas (doughy breakfast tortillas smeared with lard and topped with bean paste, queso and salsa) have been digested. Hernández often travels so be sure to contact her ahead of time via phone or Facebook to book cooking classes and the restaurant.

ITANONI TORTILLERIA Y ANTOJERIA Lunch with a history lesson

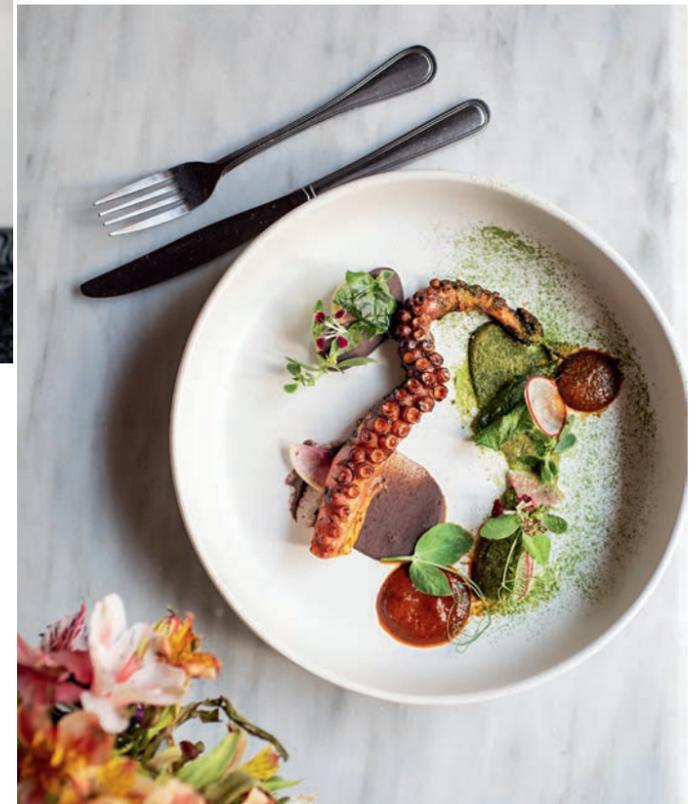
The colourful plastic chairs and picnic tables of this eatery (Av Belisario Domínguez 513, Reforma, Oaxaca; +52 951 205 2282) belie its lofty mission: to preserve the ancient native corn varieties of Oaxaca and neighbouring Chiapas. Husband and wife team Amado Ramirez Leyva and Gabriela Fernández Orantes are members of the global Slow Food movement and the four organically grown corn varieties they use are stone-ground and cooked onsite. Skip the tacos and opt for harder-to-find

tetelas de hongos, a chewy, crisp triangle-shaped tortilla oozing with mushroom, crema and queso. You'll find Itanoni in the quiet, leafy residential district of Reforma, nestled among pharmacies and piñata shops (yes, really).

ORIGEN Authentic flavours reimagined

"Everyone wants a Oaxacan restaurant," marvels chef Rodolfo Castellanos at his hometown's new-found trendiness. Raised not far from his multi-floor establishment (origenoaxaca.com), in the kitchen of his mother's eatery, Castellanos is well versed in the delicate

nature of Oaxacan cuisine. "It's like kryptonite: it can make you the most powerful person in the world or it can destroy you. It has to be in the right hands." Castellanos is more than capable, having later fine-tuned that early education at establishments as far-flung as Monaco and San Francisco. His Oaxacan heritage and French training both appear in a menu that reflects the full spectrum of his culinary influences. A light spaghetti squash salad with cherry tomato and goat's cheese or a dramatic grilled octopus in a crimson puddle of bean broth, chicharrón (fried pork skins) and pickled vegetables serve as welcome counterbalances to the region's often hearty



(From top left) Origen chef Rodolfo Castellanos, his restaurant and its grilled octopus with frijol purée and microgreens

(Clockwise from below)
 Casa Oaxaca El
 Restaurante's freshly
 made salsa with
 grasshoppers, the
 restaurant's entrance
 and squash flowers
 stuffed with king crab



traditional fare. The Top Chef Mexico winner opened Origen with his wife in 2010 and can sometimes be found mingling with his guests in the dining room. As for the extensive mezcal menu? Consume slowly, advises Castellanos – the first sip opens the palate, the second is “less aggressive” and the third “will be like music”.

LAS QUINCE LETRAS Traditional home-style mole a specialty

Favoured by locals and food pilgrims alike, Las Quince Letras (Calle de Mariano Abasolo 300, Centro, Oaxaca) is one of the best restaurants in town to experience mole. Helmed by chef Celia Florián for 25 years, this family-run eatery offers home-style cooking and the friendliest service you’re likely to encounter in a courtyard off Calle de Mariano Abasolo. The trilogy of moles (mole negro, mole almendrado and mole rojo), served with rice and chicken, is a perfect introduction to the regional specialty.

PITIONA Rustic elegance and innovative dishes

Founded by another prodigal son of Oaxaca, former El Bulli alumnus José Manuel Baños, Pitona (pitona.com) takes its name from the native purple flowering shrub. Traditional ingredients are reimagined in experimental ways – think tender pork chop abutted by a wreath of black mole-filled purslane (leafy vegetable) and served with a side of butter risotto. Or nopal cactus ceviche with iced tomato juice, grasshopper, poleo (pennyroyal) powder and baby chayote in avocado and lime vinaigrette. Though the restaurant’s sprawling venue makes it relatively easy to get a table, book ahead for the city’s most stunning vista



A traditional dancer performs in front of Santo Domingo church (above); Pitona restaurant (below)



– nothing beats seeing the green-tinged sandstone of Santo Domingo church from Pitona’s rooftop terrace.

MEZCALOTECA Mezcal for beginners and old hands

Mezcal, the small-batch, smoky agave spirit distilled in Oaxaca, has played a huge role in fuelling international interest in the region. As a result, it’s everywhere – from fine-diners to sketchy souvenir shops selling a suspect liquid that’s dubbed “crema de mezcal”. Mezcaloteca (mezcaloteca.com) is far from the only place to sample mezcal but for an educational experience, their 100-plus bottles and multilingual, spirit-obsessed staff are unbeatable. The bar has a speakeasy feel and tastings are by appointment only so phone ahead. La Mezcalerita (Calle Macedonio Alcalá, Centro, Oaxaca), five minutes down the road, also boasts a huge library of mezcals along with Mexican craft brews and pulque, a cloudy alcoholic drink made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant that has been produced in Oaxaca for millennia (it tastes a little like kombucha). Sample your mezcal with or without sal de gusano – a salt prepared with chilli pepper and dried agave worm. ●

Flight path

OAX

Qantas flies from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to Los Angeles, with connections to Oaxaca via a partner airline. qantas.com