

E
MY LAST MEAL/MEXICO CITY
Gabriela Cámara

The famed Mexican chef on her early culinary influences, rediscovering traditional Aztec ingredients and introducing seasonal produce and fresh seafood to Mexico City with her revolutionary restaurant Contramar.

By Mary Holland
Photography Ana Hop

“I’ve eaten really well all my life. I don’t know whether this is associated with the fact that my first word was ‘peach’ but I do remember eating peaches in Chihuahua, where I was born. I also remember eating flour tortillas, the thick ones they make in the north. We had a solar oven and I remember opening it and the smell – it might have been pork with rosemary. My mother is Italian and was born during the Second World War so we *never* wasted food in the house. I’m so neurotic about it.

At home my parents never made traditional Mexican food. It was always simple: pancakes or frittatas or Spanish tortillas. Always pasta. My father is Mexican but he has become the family pasta-maker; I used to hand-make it with him. When we moved to Mexico City and then to Tepoztlán [a town to the south of the capital], I really acknowledged the difference in food – traditional Mexican food with the influence of pre-Hispanic, pre-colonial cultures like the Aztecs and their obsession with corn. It was a culinary education. I was exposed to so many more traditional dishes, such as *moles* [Mexican sauces]; *mole* was never my favourite thing until I started to appreciate how it was sweet, salty and sometimes spicy. I didn’t realise at the time but we were living in a small town with an Aztec past. The corn was grown in the fields around the town and everyone made corn tortillas.

I learnt how to make food with my grandmother and aunts in Mexico City; they were all good cooks. I also learnt from my mother’s family in Italy. I had some of my most memorable meals at my aunt’s house in Florence, such as pumpkin gnocchi with pine nuts and butter. Italians love the sea. When I was growing up we always went fishing in Zihuatanejo [on Mexico’s Pacific Coast], which is what inspired my restaurant Contramar.

When I was 17 I went to [famed Berkeley restaurant] Chez Panisse with my parents. Now Alice [Waters, the

Profile:

Chef, restaurateur and cookbook author Gabriela Cámara is the talented soul behind Mexico City staple Contramar. Born in Chihuahua City, she moved to Tepoztlán as a child and opened the restaurant in Mexico City in 1998 during an exciting moment in Mexican art, cookery and culture. Her other venues include Cala in San Francisco, which opened in 2015, and the just-opened Itacate de Mar is at the hotel Círculo Mexicano in downtown Mexico City. Her cookbook *Mexico City Kitchen* is out now, published by Lorena Jones Books.

To eat:

Clam ceviche with lime, serrano chilli and coriander

Poblano chilli stuffed with shrimp, octopus and crab, topped with a walnut sauce and pomegranate

Fig and mascarpone tart

To drink:

Sparkling water and L’Ostal rosé

Venue:

Contramar in Mexico City’s Condesa neighbourhood can always be counted on to deliver. Cámara has orchestrated a seafood-focused menu that will forever be riffed on, including tuna tostadas with chipotle mayo and fried leeks, and huge planks of grilled fish, split down the middle and brushed with two sauces. Don’t miss the dessert tray, towering with delights from fig tartes to cheesecakes.
contramar.com.mx

owner and chef] and I have been friends since forever but then I had never been to California and I remember thinking, ‘This is a really smart restaurant.’ The food was delicious and simple; nothing fancy but really good. That was always in my mind.

I never considered studying to be a chef. I didn’t know what to specialise in and I always assumed that I would be an academic – I studied art history and wanted to do my master’s in London. I would cook a lot on the coast in Zihuatanejo and Troncones, and when people told me that I should study to be a chef I always said ‘no’ because I didn’t want to work at a five-star hotel or on a cruise ship. It was the 1990s and my idea of a chef was a French guy at a fancy restaurant; I wasn’t into that. Food was just the way one lives: you eat well – that’s it.

When we opened Contramar in 1998 there was nothing like it and it was super progressive to only use Mexican seafood. Food in Mexico was either formal or street food but Contramar was an easy hybrid, like a bistro. Within six months the restaurant was packed. We started making corn tortillas and I remember chef friends saying, ‘Why are you making those? Why don’t you just buy them?’ We are a generation that is in need of rescuing traditions: if we don’t, we’ll lose them.

The *chiles en nogada* [stuffed peppers in walnut cream] is a really special dish because it’s made from a poblano chilli, which is a speciality at this time of year. September is a patriotic month for Mexicans because we celebrate independence. The original version of this dish is with ground beef and was supposedly made for the first emperor after [the country gained] independence from Spain. It’s very elaborate and time-consuming as you have to peel the walnuts then grind them with some cream. If today’s was my ‘last meal’, I would have a *chiles en nogada* from Contramar.” — (M)



“I had some of my most memorable meals at my aunt’s house in Florence, such as pumpkin gnocchi with pine nuts and butter”