

COMMENTARY

Mole, "drowned sandwiches" and margaritas: Where a travel writer eats in Mexico

Travel writer Chaya Milchtein's food-based guide to Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta

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High Angle View Of Cathedral Against Blue Sky In Guadalajara, Mexico (Getty Images / Elijah Lovkoff / EyeEm)

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My wife, Morgan, and I [visited Mexico](#) for the first time in 2019, and ever since then, I've been dreaming of going back. Since we visited Mexico City last time, this time around we decided on flying into Puerto Vallarta and then driving to

Guadalajara, from where we would fly home. The two cities are located in the western Mexican state of Jalisco, but are quite different, allowing us to feel like we were taking completely different trips.

As expected, food was a magnificent part of our vacation. For those looking to make a similar trip, here are some of the best stops to make along the way.

Vallarta Food Tours

It's been about six months since I took my first food tour with [The Tour Guy](#), and it changed the way I travel. While tour-tours have always been an afterthought for me (and they still are), food tours are now a non-negotiable part of my itinerary. While many food tours limit you to a small walkable area, [Vallarta Food Tours](#) also offer a driven tour, taking you to many different areas in Puerto Vallarta.

The food was positively phenomenal! We tried many different dishes, including the *torta ahogada* — which translates literally to "drowned sandwich," and is traditional sandwich made by stuffing a crusty roll with pork carnitas and red onions and "drowning" it in a chile sauce — a tamal that was easily the best I've ever had, and a shrimp taco that convinced me that maybe I really do like [shrimp](#).

The guide also took us to a tortilla factory where we enjoyed a lesson about how they are made and tried the most flavorful tortillas, hot off the press.

Because it was a driving tour, the guide was able to tell us about the history of the city, pointing out various landmarks, and discuss in-depth information about the food as we drove. By the end of the tour, we were stuffed and vowed to go back to some of the restaurants for full meals during the rest of our stay.



Mole sampler (Jodyann Morgan)

Marival Armony

I'll admit something to you: I've always kind of looked down my nose at all-inclusive resorts. Why would you travel somewhere and stay in a resort instead of exploring the city?

Well, as it turns out, you can have the best of both worlds. The [Marival Armony resort](#) was simply magnificent. From the luxurious jacuzzi that stretched into the jungle to the massive balcony with views of the ocean that took my breath away, every part of the resort was thoughtfully considered.

But the dinner on the beach is really what sealed the deal.

It was easily the most romantic meal I've ever enjoyed. My wife and I were guided down to the beach and greeted by a candlelit pergola, set with a full tablescape. The meal was timed perfectly to the sunset, so we got to enjoy the views of the oceans, the twilight and, of course, each other. The food was worthy of the magnificent setup. Our meal celebrated seafood, with a massive main course of two lobster tails per person, served with the lobster head. But my favorite parts of the meal were the delicate small-form courses, including a tuna tartare and perfectly-cooked scallops.

Mary's

I wasn't about to spend my entire time at the Marivel, so we headed **on a private tour of San Pancho and Sayulita**. The half-day tour included a visit to the market, walking through the town and, of course, lunch at Mary's. As soon as you walk up to **Mary's** you just know that the food is going to be amazing.

The line stretched long as we squished beneath the canopy to escape the blazing sun, but we weren't going anywhere else. Our guide told us that this was the very best restaurant in the area and we were hungry.



It was worth every minute of the wait. While the chairs were really small —making it hard to get up at the end — the fajitas and mahi mahi empanada were everything we had hoped for. Simply great food, wonderful service and if that wasn't enough, there was live acrobatics and music outside on the street as we ate.

Daytrip

If I'm going to fly to another country, I want to make the most of my time there, which usually means I'm visiting at least two different cities. Mexico was no exception. After spending half of our trip in the Puerto Vallarta area, including Punta De Mita, we headed to Guadalajara.

It's only five hours away, so I wasn't going to fly. We settled on finding a driver, but after a bit more digging, I discovered [Daytrip](#), a company that helps people get from one city to the next, and allows you to make sightseeing stops along the way. This was right up our alley.

Our first stop: [El Cora Crocodile Sanctuary](#). This sanctuary rehabilitates wild animals that have been injured — or were captured to be domesticated — with the hopes of returning them to the wild when possible. For a small cost, you could be taken on a guided tour of the property. We even got to pet a tiny blind crocodile that they use for educational purposes, since it would die if released into the wild.



El Cora Crocodile Sanctuary (Jodyann Morgan)

We did stop for food, but it wasn't anything to write home about, so bring snacks!

Just before reaching Guadalajara, we drove through the beautiful city of Tequila, on a road flanked by agave plants as far as the eye can see. We wanted to tour a distillery, but unfortunately, there were no English tours for a few hours (if you make this trip, timing is important). But we did enjoy some specialty tequila and I got a **hibiscus margarita** which was easily in the top five drinks I've ever enjoyed.

Alcalde

I'm a pretty adventurous eater. I like food of all kinds, but there is something about tasting menus that make me really excited for the meal ahead. Especially tasting menus that are chef's choice, where you don't really know what's to come, and get to focus on the food in front of you, instead of what's next.

While not all tasting menus are winners, **Alcalde** serves one of my top-ten world wide. It's what I'd call a master class in all the ways you can serve seafood.

The chef, Francisco "Paco" Ruano, is a Guadalajara native who studied food across Europe, even cooking on a cruise ship for a while. His culinary adventures and training are very much at play in every bite of food that celebrates the best of Mexican ingredients. The 15-course tasting menu doesn't exactly have what one would consider a "main course," but the numerous bites leave you quite satisfied. My favorite bites were the octopus and chicken tacos, and the rabbit roulade on top of a magnificent mole. The meal ended with an ingenious use of bone marrow in dessert form, the perfect final hurrah for a memorable meal.

Bruna

Morgan and I were super excited to try **Bruna**, as we'd been recommended the restaurant many times during the days leading up to our meal. But the day of our reservation, our wallet went mysteriously missing while at a mall, leaving us with around 300 pesos (about \$15) and a massive headache.

It was a long, long day, and we almost canceled our reservation to order room service and get some sleep. However, as soon as we ordered our first cocktail — with its *outstanding* presentation — we knew we were in for a treat. Our dinner only got better from there.

We ordered a mole tasting since my wife was insistent that she didn't particularly enjoy mole, and I wanted to show her just how different moles could be depending on the region in Mexico it came from. And yes, she did find three different moles that she enjoyed, so the mission was a success. The rest of the meal was just as good, starring the signature baby pig with delicious crispy pork belly and a lovely piece of fish. We left in complete agreement that it was worth driving to Guadalajara just for the opportunity of dinner at Bruna.