



Camarones Embarazados, the Grilled Shrimp Recipe That Brings the Beach to You

With their cheeky name and rich adobo, these skewered “pregnant shrimp” rule the beaches of Puerto Vallarta and are perfect for grilling at home.



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PUERTO VALLARTA, Mexico — You’d have to try to miss the camarones embarazados on a walk along the beaches of Banderas Bay. Makeshift grills encased in bricks or rocks, exhaling the last puffs of smoke from early-morning cooking sessions, dot the shores. Soaked in a rich, burnished-red adobo sauce, head-on shrimp are threaded onto extra-long skewers, grilled until crisp and stuck in sand mounds, tempting passers-by.

Ask locals and they’ll tell you camarones embarazados have been part of the culture of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, “desde siempre” — since forever. Juan Manuel Gómez Encarnación, a renowned local historian, recalled kids selling them at the beach as early as the 1940s.

Camarones embarazados translates to pregnant shrimp in Spanish, but the crustaceans aren’t carrying any eggs. The name is a play on words: “En vara” means on a stick, and “asado” means roasted. When you put it all together, “en vara asado” sounds a lot like “embarazado.” The dish, with its memorable, funny name and its flavorful adobo, is making its way to indoor dining.

The popular snack, often trotted up and down the shoreline by vendors, has shaken off the sand and jumped from fast beach bite to must-order menu item at resorts and restaurants.

The fever for them has spread beyond the bay, which touches the states of Jalisco and Nayarit. Variations can be found along Mexico's Pacific coast and into the Yucatán Peninsula: You'll find some in their traditional head-on form and others that are headless and peeled. All are delicious, but versions with the head are an overall richer experience: The shell provides crunch and packs flavor as the adobo roasts around it.

There are as many takes on adobo as there are cooks, and we all hold our adobo recipes as close to our hearts as one does a good secret.

Most adobos are a concoction of several kinds of dried chiles and spices, along with a splash of vinegar. But it is the addition of Mexican chocolate that makes certain camarones embarazados vendors sell out time and again, said Oscar Rodriguez, a cook and waiter in Nuevo Vallarta, in a tone that felt almost like a whisper. Not only does it give the adobo a deeper caramel color and lip-smacking texture, but it balances the heat and tang of the sauce as well. Some cooks also use butter to help the shrimp caramelize as they cook — a newer but welcome modification. (It's hard to argue against cooking any kind of shrimp with butter.)

But the dish's essence remains unpretentious: messy, off-the-coals shrimp that are so good, you will want to eat the heads, shells, tails and everything in between.

Recipe: Camarones Embarazados (Adobo Grilled Shrimp)

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