

ENSALADA DE MARISCOS

ASSORTED SEAFOOD SALAD

One of the many joys afforded those of us who live in the northern reaches of the Yucatán peninsula is the ready availability of top quality fresh seafood. Restaurants large and small specializing in *mariscos* pepper some 1700 miles of coastline, from Campeche in the west to Tulum in the east. One such restaurant has made its mark: La Pigua. (FYI, a *pigua* is a variety of fresh water shrimp.) The first restaurant opened in Campeche in 1987, and soon soared to national prominence culminating in two additional branches, one in Mérida and another in Mexico City. All of their specialties are *sans pareil*, but the most joyous one to me sports the funny name “Sir Francis Drake”. An icon of Elizabethan power, Drake, you may remember, inspired the children’s rhyme “The Spanish Lake of Sir Francis Drake”, referring to the eventual English dominance of the Caribbean, formerly a Spanish holding. What you get when you order by that funny name at La Pigua is a pirate’s treasure of assorted seafood, so varied that at times it seems like there is one of everything. Our recipe for *Ensalada de Mariscos* is an homage to La Pigua’s invariably perfect masterpiece. And by the way, dining at La Pigua during your stay in Mérida is a must!

10 SERVINGS

✧ MAKE THE DRESSING ✧

- **1/4 cup (60ml) Worcestershire sauce**
- **1/2 cup (118ml) rice vinegar**
- **Juice of one large lime**
- **1/4 cup (60ml) olive oil**
- **1 tsp. (5ml) ground mustard**
- **1/4 tsp. (1.2ml) freshly ground black pepper**
- **1/4 tsp. (1.2ml) salt**
- **1 medium clove garlic, passed through a garlic press**

- **3/4 cup (175ml) fresh lime juice**
- **1/2 lb. (250g) conch, cut into 1-inch (2.5cm) cubes**
- **1/2 lb. (250g) firm fleshed white-fish such as grouper, cut into 1-inch (2.5cm) cubes**

- **1 small octopus (about 2 lbs/1k)**

- **1 lb. (500g) squid**

STEP 1 COMBINE INGREDIENTS AT LEFT in a small mixing bowl; whisk vigorously to incorporate. Refrigerate until ready to use. (This is best prepared several hours in advance, or the night before.)

✧ PREPARE THE SEAFOOD ✧

STEP 2 PLACE CONCH AND FISH in a large non-reactive bowl, and cover with the lime juice. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours, or overnight.

STEP 3 CLEAN THE OCTOPUS. If you buy your octopus at a fresh fish counter, chances are it will already be mostly cleaned, having had its stomach sac and entrails removed. If so, your only cleaning chore will be to remove the eyes, as well as the “beak” which is located in the middle of the area beneath the tentacles. (The squeamish can request that the fishmonger do all these chores.) Once cleaned, place the octopus between two pieces of waxed paper, and use a wooden mallet or rolling pin to pound vigorously to tenderize. Set aside.

STEP 4 CLEAN THE SQUID. With one hand, grab the head/tentacles of the squid; with the other, the body, then pull apart. Removal of the head also pulls out the entrails; discard the entrails. Just behind the eye, above the tentacles, use a knife to cut off the

ENSALADA DE MARISCOS (CONTINUED)

- **1 Tbs. (15ml) white vinegar**

- **1 lb. (500g) medium shrimp**

- **1/2 white onion**, cut in half again, then thinly sliced to form the media luna (half moon) shape

- **1 small cucumber**, peeled, cut in half, seeded, then thinly sliced*

- **2 small carrots**, peeled and waffle-cut*

- **1/2 cup cilantro**, cleaned and coarsely chopped

- **Bibb lettuce**, washed and drained and separated into leaves

(For both the cucumber and the carrot, you may also create a decorative cut by using a paring knife or fork to score lengthwise grooves on all sides, then thinly slice across the width)

head (avoid cutting into the eyes) and discard. Squeeze the tentacles at the base where the head used to be, and pop out the beak; remove it and discard. Set the tentacles aside until ready to use. Now grasp the body; insert your finger into the body to remove the translucent cartilage vertebra by pulling on the pointed tip, and discard. Holding the body under running water, use your index finger to go inside the body and clean out any remaining entrails, and discard them. Now remove the skin: hold the squid body under running water; using your fingernails or the tip of a knife, pry under a bit of the skin and peel it off. Rinse the squid inside and out, drain and set aside.

STEP 5 COOK THE OCTOPUS AND THE SQUID. Fill a medium stockpot with water; add the vinegar and bring to a boil. Add the octopus and squid; return to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Continue simmering for 45 minutes to 1 hour. Allow to cool slightly. Under running water, rub off the purplish skin that covers the tentacles and body of the octopus. Slice tentacles and body parts of both animals into bite-size pieces, and set aside.

STEP 6 CLEAN THE SHRIMP, removing the outer shell, veins and tail. Bring a saucepan of salted water to a boil. Add the shrimp, return to a boil and cook 1-2 minutes, or until they turn pink and are just cooked through. Do not overcook. Drain, rinse and allow to cool.

🌀 FINISH THE SALAD 🌀

STEP 7 THOROUGHLY DRAIN THE LIME JUICE from the conch and whitefish. Add octopus, squid, shrimp and all of the ingredients at left to the same bowl. Pour on the dressing and toss to incorporate. Check seasonings and serve immediately.

🌀 SERVE 🌀

STEP 8 TO SERVE, place one or two leaves of the lettuce on individual plates, and top with some of the salad. Alternatively, you may garnish a large serving platter with the lettuce and all of the salad in the center and allow guests to help themselves.

NOTE: At La Pigua, a standard accompaniment is warm, sliced French rolls, saltine crackers and butter. Of course you should have a selection of standard table salsas available, too, such as Chile Tamulado and X'nipek since we in Yucatán douse everything with them.