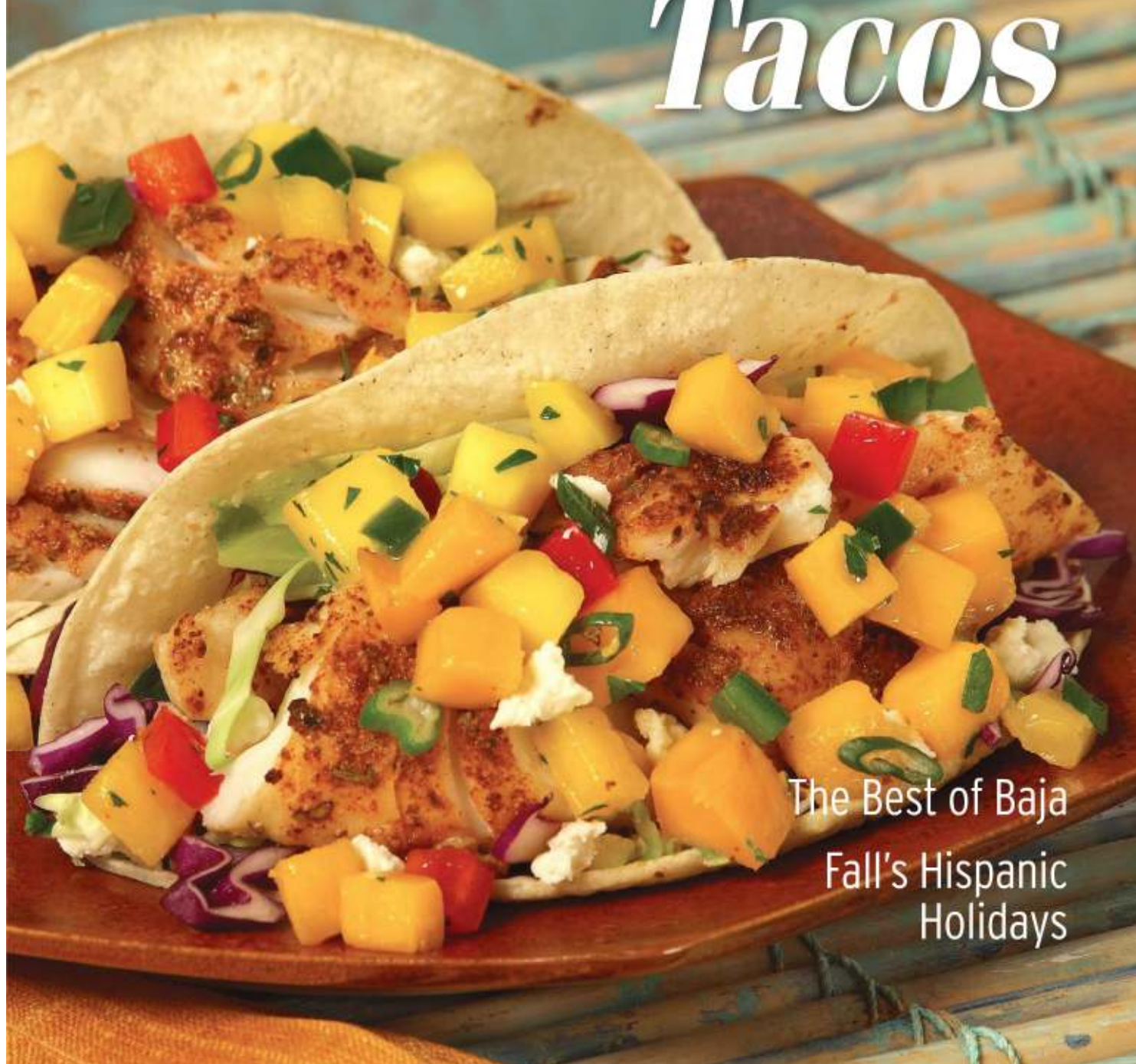


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A New Take On **Tacos**



The Best of Baja
Fall's Hispanic
Holidays



THE BEST OF BAJA

A culinary journey through Baja Norte | BY CHEF TED STONER AND ROSELYNE HALLDORSON |

Editor's Note: Over the past several years, the foods of Baja have become increasingly familiar to followers of Mexican cuisine in what is often referred to as the "Baja-Med movement." Recipes from places like Tijuana, Rosarito and Ensenada have been heating up the U.S. restaurant scene, especially in the San Diego area, where Javier Placincia (recognized as one of Baja's top chefs) has introduced diners to Baja cuisine with his Romesco Baja-Med Bistro in Bonita, Calif. (www.romescomexmed.com).

When I learned that Chef Ted Stoner, founder of Boulder, Co.-based Ted Stoner Restaurant Consulting, former culinary director at Qdoba Mexican Grill, and long-time friend of el Restaurante, was traveling through Baja on an exploration of the region's cuisine, I asked if he would be willing share insights from his travels. He enthusiastically obliged, and shares a culinary travelogue, written by his assistant Roselyne Halldorson. —**Kathleen Furore**

BAJA NORTE IS A LAND OF EXQUISITE VISTAS AND DELECTABLE CUISINE; a place where the adventurous traveler can luxuriate in bites of salty, fresh-from-the-sea fish, sips of fine, earthy wines and nibbles of creamy, farm fresh cheeses and fruity olive oils. Chefs can attain true inspiration from the artistic and imaginative preparations of farm fresh produce and locally caught seafood. While the restaurateurs of Tijuana have revolutionized the city, making it

a fine dining destination in its own right, culinary treasures also await in Rosarito, Puerto Nuevo, Ensenada, and Valle de Guadalupe.

Tijuana's easy-to-navigate market, Mercado Miguel Hidalgo, has many fruit, candy and chile stalls, with some of the best cheeses in Mexico at La Cava del Queso. Fabulous food carts also surround the market, especially the El Conchal seafood cart, which offers unbelievably fresh ceviche cocktails and plump, briny oysters. Caesars on Revolución



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Avenue is home to the original Caesar salad and has been a mainstay in Tijuana since 1927. Among the must-try dishes are the perfectly balanced Caesar salad, prepared tableside, and the tuétano de res rostizado (roasted beef marrow), a creamy and rich indulgence. The upscale Misión 19 features a menu of tender grilled octopus, roasted suckling pig, and perfectly seared, fresh caught

local tuna, while Tacos Salceados serves some of the best tacos in town (the marlin quesatacos, fresh marlin encased in crispy pan-fried cheese, is pure mouth-watering satisfaction). The immense salsa selection at Tacos Salceados ranges from smoky chipotle to fiery mango habanero, with every level of spice and heat in between.

A quick 30 minute drive south from Tijuana finds the

quiet beach town of Rosarito, where many quality restaurants line the main street. The best steak tacos are found at Tacos El Yaqui, with its outdoor grill and tacos prepared with flour tortillas, cheese and beans, and wood-grilled carne asada, then topped with fire roasted jalapeño.

While the region's grilled meats are delicious, lobster is a real treat. Twenty minutes down the coast from Rosarito is Puerto Nuevo, a town with the reputation for serving lobster so incredibly delicious that people come from near and far to enjoy it. The Ortega family owns many restaurants in the village; Villa Ortega's has splendid views overlooking the ocean, especially at sundown. Puerto Nuevo-style lobster is simply sweet Carib-

A photo montage of Chef Ted Stoner's Baja Norte adventure

(Across top of spread, left to right) Clams at El Conchal and oysters at Mercado Miguel Hidalgo in Tijuana; Puerto Nuevo-style Lobster at Villa Ortega in Puerto Nuevo.

(Bottom left) Cheese at La Escuelita in Valle de Guadalupe



Culinary inspiration for experienced chefs and novice cooks alike clearly abounds in Baja Norte—where the land meets the sea in the most delectable union.

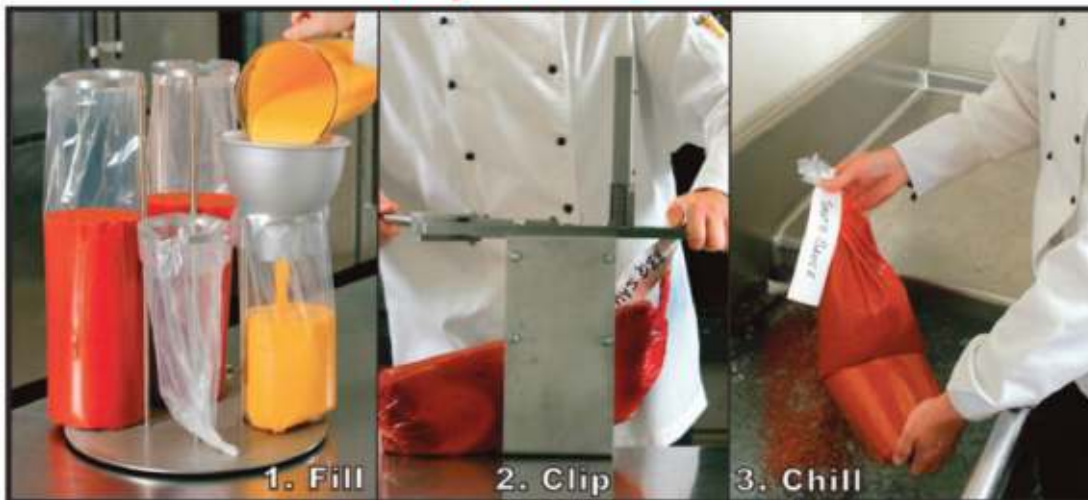


Steak tacos at Tacos El Yaqui in Rosarito

bean lobster cut in half and deep-fried in Manteca. The resulting meat is tender, chewy and ever so lightly oiled. The lobster is served steaming, with flour tortillas and a large bowl of creamy pinto beans (and, upon request, with a side of chopped chipotle for extra heat).

A breathtaking 45-minute coast line drive south from Puerto Nuevo sits the bustling village of Ensenada—home to the freshest and most reasonably priced seafood in Baja. For the finest, most af-

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fordable seafood visit the La Gurrerense seafood cart on the corner of 1st Street and Alvarado, where the owner, Sabina, prepares a wonderful variety of delicacies. A favorite with her loyal patrons is the salty, rich sea urchin tostada that imparts a faint taste of the ocean.

When nightlife calls, Cantina Hussong's is a popular stop. Established in 1892, this cantina remains the destination for a cold beer, a shot of tequila, polite conversation and live music—and don't be surprised when a band of mariachis plays a surreal rendition of Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall*.

The town of Ensenada can get crowded when the cruise ships arrive, and an excellent escape is La Bufadora, a marine geyser that blows

every few minutes. There is a long row of vendor stalls approaching the blowhole, where visitors can grab a tall can of frosty Tecate (crafted in the nearby town of Tecate). At the last food stall nearest the geyser, giant chocolate clams stuffed with chewy, creamy cheese and diced tomatoes sizzle atop an open grill. Relishing the plump clam meat, the savory cheese, the smokiness of the grill and the salty sea liquor is pure delight while gazing down from the cliffside to the crystal blue waters below.

Inland from and north of Ensenada lays the Valle de Guadalupe, a tranquil land of fruit orchards, vineyards and olive groves. There are many wine tasting rooms along the Ruta del Vino that offer fresh-baked breads and artisanal

cheeses. Most of the wines are big, red, fruity varietals like Cabernet, Tempranillo, and Malbec. A favorite stop is La Escuelita, a compound of buildings constructed from up-cycled materials, where students learn how to press olive oil and craft wine. Diners can sit at the bar and enjoy tasty antojitos, oils and wines, or visit the gift shop for jars of pickled chiles. For a truly exceptional dining experience, Corazón de Tierra is the embodiment of what makes Baja Norte extraordi-

nary. Farm-to-table produce, meats, cheeses and locally caught seafood pair with the region's complex wines in a glass-encased environment overlooking the beautifully tranquil land of the food's origin.

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To keep up with Chef Ted Stoner, visit www.facebook.com/tedstoner.stonerfoodsllc.

Rosarito's Tacos El Yaqui grills meat and chiles streetside



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