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KITCHEN GOD MEETS MEXICAN MUSE

COOKING AWAY WHOEVER FIRST SAID TRAVEL IS BROADENING MUST HAVE HAD MENU INSPIRATION IN MIND. CONFIRMING THIS, COOKBOOK AUTHOR GAIL MONAGHAN FLIES TO THE YUCATÁN, CURRENT PERCH OF PERIPATETIC RESTAURANT LEGEND JEREMIAH TOWER, TO ENGAGE IN ONE OF HIS LATEST BOUTS OF REGIONALLY PROVISIONED CULINARY IMPROVISATION.

Jeremiah Tower, a close friend, is and has always been a huge poetic talent with a larger than life personal presence. In 2001 *Wine Spectator*, describing Jeremiah's stint as co-owner and first chef of the nascent **Chez Panisse**, called him "the father of California cuisine," in that he was largely responsible for the restaurant's early rise to fame, for its celebrated menu nights, and for initiating the practice of replacing fancy culinary and menu nomenclature with plain English. When he outgrew Berkeley (which he always referred to as "the Birkenstock Republic") and moved to San Francisco, Jeremiah appeared in one of the first Dewar's ads, opened the legendary *Star's* in 1984 and then its satellites, started the *Peak Café* in Hong Kong, won a James Beard

Award for his 1986 cookbook, *New American Classics*, and then in 1996 another James Beard Award for Farberware Millenium Outstanding Chef of the Year. He then took *Star's* to Manila before moving to New York City to write *California Dish*—his page-turner of a memoir—and other books and PBS projects. Over the years, Jeremiah has often been featured in *Food Arts* and in 1994 was the winner of a SILVER SPOON award. In 2006 when David Kamp came out with *United States of Arugula*, the *Chez Panisse* chapter was almost entirely devoted to Jeremiah, and it was then excerpted in *Vanity Fair* with a photo spread of Jeremiah sitting by his pool in Mérida, the capital of the Yucatán.

I was surprised when soon after 9/11 and without much warning, Jeremiah upped and moved from New York City to the Yucatán, wanting to rest up a bit from his amazing lives (like a cat, at least nine) and to explore his passion for architecture (he has both undergraduate and architecture degrees from Harvard) while buying, renovating, and then selling beautiful old courtyard-style Mérida houses. The idyllic Mexican setting and lifestyle affords him the time he's always craved (but never had) to cook and experiment with local ingredients—the Mexican ones are many, varied, and



Now and then: Jeremiah Tower relaxing in Mexico; at the highly charged *Star's*. Stars photo by John Harding.

fabulous—without the pressures of a restaurant existence.

Here in New York, I miss him tremendously, but (silver lining) his relocation has provided me with numerous opportunities for Mexican eating adventures. The most recent occurred last September when after a night at his house in Mérida, we flew to Oaxaca to explore—sightsee, check out restaurants, and visit the city's several markets—and specifically to gather ingredients to play with on our return to Mérida.

That first night I arrived at Jeremiah's after dark. This was not the original plan, but my short connecting flight from Cancún to Mérida had been canceled and there were no flights until the next day. Not wanting to miss the dinner Jeremiah had promised to cook for me, I dredged up a local with a van who was willing to drive me to Mérida. After a four hour trip through the intensely uninteresting and relentless Yucatecan jungle, I was very hot and very tired when, finally around 9 p.m., I pulled the blue string that served as my host's doorbell. Entering his dimly lit, beautifully atmospheric old house, I was immediately handed an ice cold Margarita and sent to cool off in the swimming pool. Within seconds, heat and aggravation dissipated. While I relaxed there, in heaven because



In the kitchen with Jeremiah: Tower's chile ice cream with hibiscus syrup, fresh mangos, pomegranate seeds, and rose petal chiffonade propelled cookbook author Gail Monaghan (right) into some freewheeling days of cooking Mexican with the chef who never met a larder he couldn't charm. Photos by Alexandra Grablewski.

I was no longer sweltering, Jeremiah finished up the “small light supper” he had concocted for my arrival. The meal was very *bim*, a series of small plates with a perfectly balanced and carefully orchestrated combination of flavors, textures, and colors.

I sat at a little table by the pool, the air laden with perfumes of the tropical night. Flickering candles cast moving shadows—in abstracted plant formations—on the garden walls. Soon, however, the pungent smell of roasted garlic overwhelmed the soft scents of jasmine and mimosa, and the somewhat surreal moment passed. A plate of *angulas* (elvers, or baby eels) was placed before me, sautéed with sliced potatoes and whole garlic in arbol chile-infused olive oil. Almost a variation on the little elvers theme—baby eels once described as “short spaghetti with eyes”—the next dish was real spaghetti subtly bathed in tomatoes and cream. Jeremiah said the enigmatic complexity of the sauce derived from the inclusion of a handful of chopped epazote. Salad followed—a refreshingly welcome mix of watercress, orange and *limón agria* sections, avocado slices, and pecans, enhanced by a citrus/cumin vinaigrette incorporating both avocado and pecan oils.

By this time I was sleepy from travel and no longer particularly hungry, but dessert was spectacular and woke me up—a real show-stopper, both delicious and gorgeous—and I ate every bite! Jeremiah had stirred purees of both dried morita and dried Oaxacan chiles (three times as much Oaxacan as morita, and both soaked in warm water until very soft—at least three hours—before pureeing and sieving) into a light vanilla bean ice cream base before freezing. Brilliant magenta hibiscus syrup (made by dissolving one cup of sugar in boiling water and then stirring in two cups of dried

hibiscus flowers and steeping for four hours before reducing) was poured over each portion of dusty pink ice cream and topped with fresh mango slices. Finished with a sprinkling of pomegranate seeds and a chiffonade of organic rose petals, the result was fit for the Mayan gods.

The next day we set off for Oaxaca. When we returned several days later—overflowing with both ideas and culinary market finds—we were ready to hit the stove.

Jeremiah's sunny kitchen opens directly onto a mimosa-studded courtyard replete with bougainvillea, banana trees, jasmine, birds of paradise, and orchids. This plethora of tropical vegetation surrounded the swimming pool, a mandatory feature as the thermometer peaked somewhere between 103 and 106 degrees every day I was there. Amazingly, the heavy stucco walls, cool tile floors, and huge ceiling fans kept the heat at bay—especially as we lived in bathing suits, perpetually wet due to frequent trips from kitchen to swimming pool and back. An added treat and energy booster was the occasional pinch of a Oaxacan discovery—small grasshoppers sautéed with *chile molido* (red chile powder), salt, and lime. At twilight we realized this mix was also divine dropped into “frozen” vodka. Jeremiah says he's now addicted.

The ingredients laid on the table before us included freshly roasted cacao nibs; dried morito, arbol, and pasilla naranja Oaxaqueno chiles; Jeremiah's special *chile molido* mix (30 percent hot smoky Mérida *chile molido*, 50 percent mild lighter red *chile molido* from Oaxaca, and 20 percent ground cumin seeds), saffron, cumin, Yucatecan roasted arbol black chile paste, peanuts, pecans, pine nuts, *naranja agria* (sour oranges, ancestor of the Spanish bitter



The markets of Oaxaca are filled with an endless variety of chilis. Photo by Michael Freeman.

orange), *limón agria* (a cross between a lemon and a lime but sweeter than either), and Yucatecan honey.

What to make? After battling the options back and forth, we decided on cacao- and chile-marinated pork short ribs, a seafood and garlic soup, and meatballs served up in Jeremiah's version of the famous Yucatecan black sauce. One last quick trip to the market to buy fish, meat, and vegetables, and we were set.

First on the list was to make the mole marinade for the meat. Jeremiah says this mix is also great for pork shoulder, beef spare ribs, lamb, goose, chicken, turkey, and entrecôte. He suggests roasting, braising, or a smoke oven, as he feels that direct heat (broiling or an open grill) causes the meat to overchar and dry out. In the food processor, we pureed the roasted cacao nibs with a little vegetable oil until smooth and silky. (You can also process whole toasted cacao beans, but that mixture needs sieving). We then mixed the puree with saffron flavored chicken broth, extra-virgin olive oil, lots of chopped garlic, fresh *naranja* juice, ground allspice, a little bit of chopped fresh rosemary, a few chopped leaves from the lime tree in the courtyard (kaffir lime leaves can be substituted), sieved purees of Mexican and Oaxacan chiles, and a little bit (Jeremiah's complaint about most chocolate moles is that they are too sweet) of Oaxacan honey, and finely grated zest of a regular orange.

After marinating the ribs (several hours or overnight), we roasted them at 425°F for an hour and then at 325°F until done, covered loosely with foil for the last hour. The meat was succulent and flavorful and particularly delicious when topped with a crisp chopped salad—raw radishes, cilantro, and mint tossed with a cooled sauté of thinly sliced white onion and garlic and a vinaigrette made from sesame oil, citrus juices, salt, pepper, and a little of the pork pan juices—served with lime wedges on the side.

In winter, the salad becomes more substantial with the addition of extra pan juices plus a little chile water or chicken broth. Mango, tomato, and avocado are good additions no matter what the season.

Sometimes Jeremiah turns the marinade into a mole sauce by

cooking the same ingredients briefly in a saucepan, then adding more citrus juices at the end. He also suggests poaching salmon, bluefish, or mackerel in cacao paste thinned with chile water. He tops this dish with the same chopped salad dressed as above but replacing the pork pan juices with fish poaching liquid, reduced or not.

The seafood and garlic soup—somewhat of a cross between soup and warm salad—is highly flavored but light, ideal if heavy food is to follow. To begin, Jeremiah poached several cloves of garlic in strong fish or seafood stock until soft. He then pureed the garlic and used it—along with purees of both *chiles Mexicanas* and *chiles Oaxacanas*—to flavor and thicken. For serving, he covered the bottoms of the soup plates with a mixture of finely shredded napa cabbage, mâche, and roughly chopped cilantro and basil. He heated the soup to a simmer, then turned it off and added thinly sliced shrimp, scallops, calamari rings, and fish fillets (Jeremiah suggested a variation with langoustines only) to steep until done before ladling over the greens and garnishing with chopped cilantro, juices of Mexican limes and oranges, and a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil.

As a variation, Jeremiah serves the soup chilled in summer in the manner of a Russian *chłodnik*. Sometimes he replaces the greens with cooked pasta or rice, adds a garnish of crispy fried tortilla strips or garlic toasts at the last minute, or dresses lump crabmeat with olive oil and citrus and places a large spoonful of this crab salad in the center of each bowl atop the soup, which is then sprinkled with basil or cilantro.

Only one recipe to go—a good thing as we were getting hungry—meatballs in black mole, Jeremiah's answer to *pavo en relleño negro*. For this traditional and very complicated Yucatecan dish, a whole turkey stuffed with *chimole* flavored ground pork is bathed in *recado negro* or *chimole*, the primordial precursor to all moles—a thick black sauce made from burned (practically incinerated) arbol chiles. Burning of chiles for *recado negro* produces a smoke so acrid—causing coughing, sneezing, and watery eyes—that the process is now banned within Mérida city limits. Jeremiah says these chiles are often burned in big paella pans in the remote jungle! He buys the black paste from a stand in the local market, and it's also available commercially both in Mexican grocery stores and in the ethnic foods sections of many supermarkets under brand names such as El Yucateco and Marin.

Our meatballs (60 percent finely ground fatty pork, 30 percent ground veal, and 10 percent fresh chorizo) were cooked in a sauce made by simmering Yucatecan black chile paste together with saffron infused chicken stock, then served in shallow soup plates along with a coarsely chopped salad—little white onions caramelized with their greens, parsley, cilantro leaves, orange zest, a pinch of Jeremiah's *molido* mix, juice of ripe *naranja agria*, sesame oil, salt, and pepper. I had tasted *pavo en relleño negro* once many years ago, and it was exquisite. But for me, Jeremiah's unique meatballs in their inky black sauce, haunting and mysterious, were at least as good and infinitely easier to make.

Gail Monaghan is a New York City-based cookbook author and teacher.

Jeremiah Tower expounds on his six favorite chiles

Warning: No matter what I call these chiles, there are legions of you out there who know them by other names. Where you are and where you are from determine the nomenclature.

FRESH

POBLANO

- A triangular and tapered body up to six inches long, dark hunter green, and very shiny.
- Mild chile familiar in *chiles rellenos* with a rich, nutty flavor that can become a habit.
- Deeply satisfying when cooked with cream and corn, or when tossed with lime juice and mint to top sliced tomatoes. Also very fine combined with sour cream, cilantro, orange zest, and chipotle for fish, crab, and shrimp.

DRIED

ANCHO AND MULATO

- Slightly round, four inches long, usually very wrinkled, maroon to dark red brown, with a sweet, rich smell. The mulato is darker, fruitier, and more full-bodied and earthier than the ancho, and is as mild or a bit hotter.



Poblano



Ancho



Mulato



Guajillo



Chipotle

- Both have earthy, brilliant flavors mixed with hints of dried fruit such as raisin. There's a reason these are on my list, whether powder or paste or whole: they're the most versatile, especially because they reveal all their haunting flavors with just the right amount of heat.
- Puree with garlic, lime juice, and onion to magically transform mayonnaise, sour cream, or butter-thickened stock-based sauces for grilled fish, eggs, or chicken salads.

MORITA

- Two to three inches long, half wrinkled, and garnet colored. Dried jalapeño, so medium heat to quite hot. Use with guajillo, which is a dried mirasol.
- Smells and tastes like an ancho or mulato but with a little bit of smoke and more sweetness.
- Brings heat and fruity sweetness to purees of ancho and mulato. Add to any type of mole—or ground dried chile paste—that's used for stews and soups. Amazing with avocado, and powdered and sprinkled on sliced oranges, mandarins, or raw carrots with fresh lime juice. Or stir into fresh lemonade.

FAMILY OF PASILLA DE OAXACA: CHIHUACLE NEGRO/OAXACAN/MEXICANA

- Six to nine inches long, maroon, mostly smooth, very fruity, and smoky aromatic chiles from Oaxaca that range from mild to very hot. Some use the word "tobacco" to describe their aroma, but you'd have to be puffing on a luxurious Russian *Sobranie*. The Oaxacan and the Mexicana are the mildest.
- This family of pasillas and chihuacles are the key to the whole family of mole dishes and sauces. Traditionally mixed with chocolate or cacao but amazingly complex by themselves.
- Quite wonderful when added to pork leg braises with sour orange; degrease the stock and thicken with a paste of the pasilla de Oaxaca, garlic, cilantro, and corn oil. Cut into slivers and heat in olive oil with chunks of garlic for shrimp, baby eels, or scrambled eggs. Chop with a vanilla pod and serve over fresh pineapple. Pair ice cream flavored with these chiles with tropical fruits such as mangoes.

DE ÁRBOL (OR GUAJILLO AND PULLA)

- Four to six inches long with a slender shape and pointed body. Retains its Chinese-brick red color when dried. Medium heat to very hot, with an almost citrus edge.
- Toast to black in a pan over a fire (traditionally done in the jungle, as the acrid smoke produced is toxic), and then soak and

make into the coal-black paste *chilmole*, used in the outstanding Yucatecan dish *relleno negro* (black stuffing, usually served with turkey)—truly one of the great ethnic dishes of the world.

- Use the *chilmole* to make broth-based and butter- (or olive oil-) thickened sauces for poached red snapper and grouper, or ladle underneath a scooped out and sliced avocado covered with a julienne of fresh hibiscus flowers.

CHIPOTLE

- A dark chocolate brown and usually very wrinkled smoked/dried jalapeño that's very hot. It's the only chile I know that is acceptable from a can.
- The combination of its smoky, sweet-sour chocolate flavor and heat is irresistible. In small quantities it lends a very mysterious background and base flavor, on top of which citrus and fresh herb flavors sing.
- Puree and sieve: add to sour cream with mandarin orange zest and cilantro for grilled fish; add a pinch to a French lobster sauce for scallops; or mix with fresh Key lime juice for poultry broths.

—JEREMIAH TOWER