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THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

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perspectives

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+ CRUISE INTO THE NEW YEAR



An aerial photograph of a restaurant interior. The walls are covered in a dense, multi-layered living wall of various green plants, including mosses and ferns. Several wooden tables and chairs are arranged throughout the space, with several people seated at them, eating and talking. The lighting is bright and even, highlighting the textures of the plants and the activity of the dining area.

eat to the beat

The best way to tap into the fast-paced rhythms of modern-day Mexico City? Immerse yourself in the wild flavors of its world-class restaurant scene. Gary Shteyngart gathers some friends and heads out on an epic grub crawl

Photographs by Maya Visnyei

Clockwise from top left:
A residential block in the Roma Norte neighborhood; Jesus, a waiter at Contramar, serves the famous tuna tostada; a living wall at Downtown Mexico hotel; the opulent Palace of Fine Arts, home to murals by Rivera and Siqueiros; escamoles (ant roe) and mole coloradito at El Cardenal.



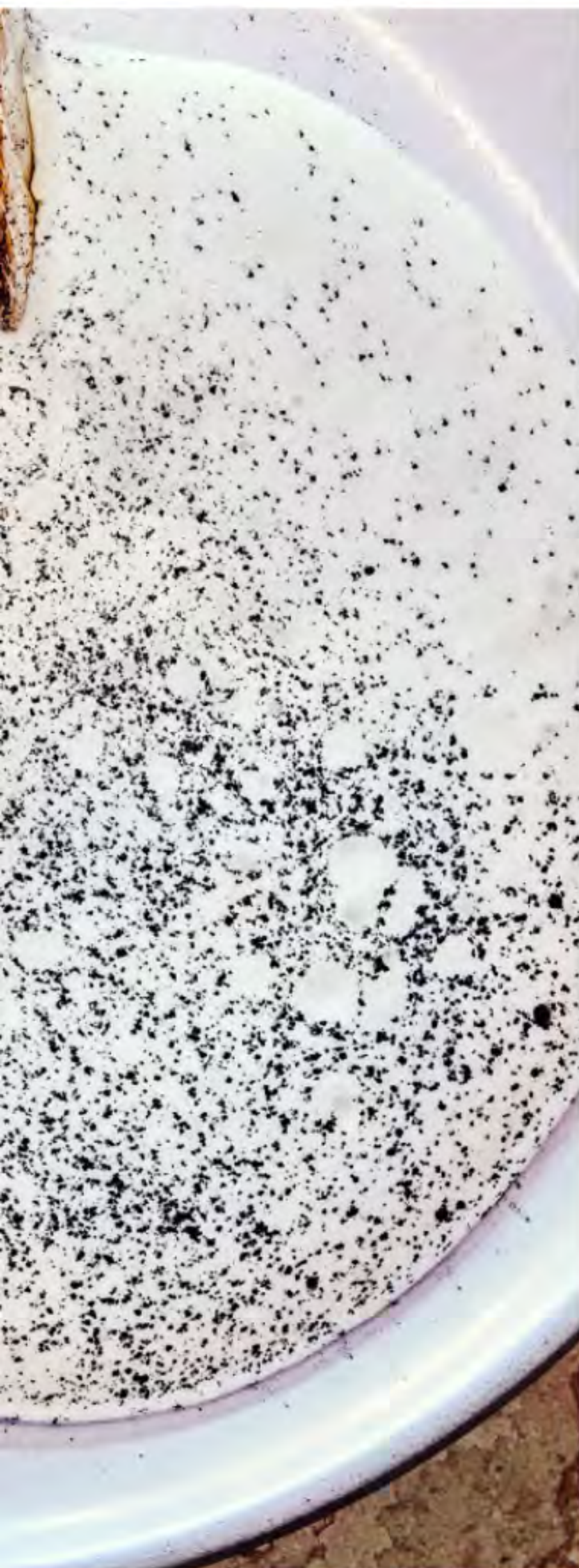
Clockwise from left: Shops line the leafy streets of Roma Norte; the double-decker carousel in Chapultepec Park, the oldest and largest urban park in Latin America; the view from Samos, the restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton, Mexico City; classic cantina Tío Pepe, in the city's Chinatown; Japanese-inflected seasonal dishes are chef Lucho Martínez's calling card at EM

“Mexico City is upsettingly good,”

Natalie Kitroeff tells me. Natalie, a *New York Times* reporter, is one of the many young transplants to CDMX, as Ciudad de México is colloquially known. She's referring to the fact that CDMX's many pleasures—sensual, social, spiritual, and, God help me, gustatory—have brought a multinational, multilingual gaggle to its coolest colonias, threatening to turn the place into a Disneyland of Moleskine-scribbling café denizens. Don't speak Spanish? *¡No hay problema!* The servers, bartenders, and pooch walkers of the trendiest quarters will accommodate you—even as young chilangos grouse about rising rents and declining authenticity these interlopers have wrought.

Mexico City's global reputation has been on an upswing for some time, but the absence of the kinds of pandemic restrictions found elsewhere in the world drew in a whole crop of laissez-faire youth looking for the urban experience par excellence. None of this would be possible, however, or indeed bearable without some of the finest restaurants on Earth, a collection of grub, both Mexican and Mexican-adjacent, that has made CDMX a city on culinary par with Bangkok and Mumbai, Paris and Rome—one of the two or three quintessential North American food scenes. Of course, authentic Mexican cuisine has long brought visiting gourmands to





tears, but increasingly, local chefs like Enrique Olvera, whose Pujol has been a fixture on the World's Best Restaurants list for nearly a decade, have become recognized on the world stage.

I'm here for only five days, so I've got to make every meal count. I check into the year-old Ritz-Carlton, huddled in a cluster of space-age skyscrapers on the central Paseo de la Reforma. My glassed-in balcony on the 45th floor hovers above the green expanse of Chapultepec Park ("twice as big as Central Park!" everyone proudly tells me), with its bonkers 18th-century castle and exceptional National Museum of Anthropology. On one side of the park, I spy the upscale Polanco neighborhood, and on the other side the jet-setting Condesa and Roma Norte.

The closest major restaurant to my balcony is Contramar, near Condesa, which in bringing fresh seafood to the meat-loving masses sparked Mexico City's culinary explosion a little over 20 years ago. Today it is packed for the extended Mexican "lunch hour," which somehow lasts from 12:00 to 6:00. At 3 p.m., the maître d' tells me it will be a one-hour wait, but I pout with such ferocity he lets me in. The crowd looks like it was directed by a minor Almodóvar—women in flowing sundresses; older men in crisp shirts open one button too many; the blue-and-white interior evoking the faraway coasts. Contramar's bona fides are real: The chef, Gabriela Cámara, is a culinary adviser to the Mexican president.

When I joke on Instagram about coming to the most obvious restaurant in Mexico City, calling

myself "Señor Basic" (*caballero básico*, someone corrects me), it seems like half my followers have been to Contramar and swear by it. The reason? The tuna tostadas. The combination of chipotle and avocado may be familiar, but placing the raw fish in your mouth is akin to tasting silk. I follow up with an afternoon mezcal and a ceviche of red clams and cherry tomatoes, but nothing can quite match the genius of the appetizer, except maybe the soothing fresh fig tart at the end of the meal.

I take an important nap, then meet my friend David Lida, author of *First Stop in the New World*, widely considered the definitive guide to Mexico City. David has spent the better part of his adult life in CDMX. He has loved and lost here, been battered and captivated, but most of all he has drunk and eaten well. As we walk and kibitz around Roma Norte, he points out the palimpsest of old and new places that have grafted themselves upon the 19th-century French-inspired architecture, the glassy façades advertising Hawaiian poke and sushi bowls. After discussing the merits of a dozen restaurants, we continue my seafood theme at La Docena, an import from Guadalajara. Now 10 years old, La Docena was an important addition to Roma



Norte, distinguished by chef Tomás Bermúdez's emphasis on fish freshly caught from the Pacific; cured and grilled meats; and underappreciated Mexican wine. As the sun sets and the humidity falls, we feast on Pacific oysters paired with the unexpectedly impressive house rosé. In between redistributing his pesos to children selling schlock on the busy street out front, David introduces me to chilpachole. The Docena version mingles chunks of crab and pink wedges of radish with a thin peppery broth poured tableside. It's appropriately spicy, bringing tears to my eyes.

After dinner, we visit the apartment of our mutual friend Diego Salazar, a reporter I first met in Madrid. The last I saw him in Europe we barely made it home, but we are both older and married now, and instead of being devotees of long, boozy nights we are proper burghers who dream of square footage. If you come to Mexico City for the food, you may find yourself staying for the apartments, which have ceilings and views that non-billionaire residents of coastal American cities can only dream of. There are parquet hallways here that can house an entire Upper West Side family. Visiting David Lida's apartment a few days later, I espied a refrigerator that seemed to be dedicated to chilling martini glasses. I could go on.

While quaffing some fine chilled Siete Leguas tequila at his pad, Diego and I make plans to have breakfast the next day. We choose Nicos, a beloved restaurant run by mother-and-son chefs far north of the Condesa–Roma Norte axis. We start with succulent chicken enchiladas de mole, with a green salsa that, as Diego says, "just pops." Then there's chilaquiles parranderos, with a tender layer of cream and a burst of chorizo. Even a simple guava empanada dazzles with the freshness of its fruit and proves a good foil for a cup of thick hot chocolate.

Let me be clear: Mexico City is the breakfast capital of the world. No one else invests more in a proper first meal. In the coming days I will indulge at the famous Fonda Margarita, a family-friendly dive beneath a corrugated roof in a quiet southern neighborhood. (Late risers, take heed! The restaurant stops serving at noon, or whenever the food runs out.) The chicharrón en salsa verde is as soft as a newborn's ear. A tubular serving of black beans is the ultimate lard-delivery vehicle. The traditional café de olla may be too sweet for some tastes, but it is as



From left: Though casual in feel, Meroma, in Roma Norte, has serious culinary chops; inside Tío Pepe

Opposite page: Small seafood plates and mezcal cocktails at see-and-be-seen Contramar, where four-hour lunches are the norm





authentic as it comes. (Trotskyites will be happy to know their hero's last domicile is a pleasant walk away.) Lastly, at the Zócalo-adjacent fixture El Cardenal, housed in an old Parisian-style mansion, I have my first crunchy dish of escamoles, fried ant larvae that here are mixed omelet-style with crunchy cactus leaves—it looks and tastes far better than it sounds, even to an entomophobe like me—and a ritually poured cup of hot chocolate along with pastries and natas, the clotted-cream-like butterfat that may be the ultimate child's breakfast. I'm fascinated by the El Cardenal crowd, which includes both visitors fresh from tour buses and ancient locals reading newspapers, wishing they could spark up a cigar. The restaurant was groundbreaking in its day (it opened in 1969), a worthy antecedent to Pujol, lavishing care on traditional recipes.

The next day I bum around CDMX with David Lida. We start near the Mercado de San Juan, where controversial delicacies such as tiger and armadillo meat can sometimes be found. Some old ladies on a street corner are making quesadillas out of corn fungus, which imparts a creaminess that calls to mind blue cheese and musk. Across the street, Rico Tacos offers its delicious namesake from Toluca, a city in the State of Mexico known for its sausages; the chorizo verde is bright with cilantro. We chase it with a cortado from Café Villarías, a coffeehouse founded by refugees from the Spanish Civil War.

Now it's time for a cantina crawl. Both David and the novelist Francisco Goldman, another dear friend and longtime Mexico City resident, have waxed poetic over the Mexican cantina—part bar, sometime diner, and always a place to trumpet your joys and submerge your sorrows with the best of friends. The contemporary cantina is more democratic than ever (especially as prices escalate at local bars and restaurants), although as recently as 30 years ago women could still be denied entrance. Cantina Tío Pepe, in the Chinatown neighborhood of Centro, is one of the oldest in Mexico City. David is clearly in love with it. "Look at the molding on the ceilings," he rhapsodizes. "Most cantinas were remodeled in the '90s and ought to look like airport bars." Tío Pepe, by contrast, looks like a place where William Burroughs, one of its many famous patrons, might still be loitering at a back table, testing some dubious fungi. As we swill Mezcal Unión Joven, a woman dressed like a nurse comes to take our blood pressure.

"People in cantinas always seem to be having a good time," David observes after we relocate to one

of his all-time favorites, El Paraíso, in the Santa María la Ribera neighborhood. The middle-aged couple next to us is in the midst of a three-hour-long make-out session. El Paraíso is one of the local temples to all-day boozing that feed you along the way: Caldo de camarón, a spicy shrimp broth; ceviche; even, of all things, a paella are yours for the taking as you bop along to ranchera music on the stereo. We finish off the night at Cantina Covadonga back in Roma Norte. This is an old-school Spanish place beloved by journalists and now rediscovered by a new set of hipsters, some from Brooklyn, some only Brooklyn-inspired. Rubin, the waiters' captain, rushes over to David and announces he wants to make us a steak tartare tableside. "If others make it, it's not as good," David says. We sip a fine Rioja as Rubin squeezes in the lime and mixes in the olive oil and Worcestershire sauce, his gaze serene but his brow furrowed in concentration. The vast room, which looks like a giant Spanish rec center, is as loud as a Real Madrid game. As we pass midnight, our mouths stuffed with raw beef, a young woman wanders in wearing pajamas, yawning pleasantly on the arm of her beau.

For lunch the next day I meet Francisco Goldman and his sweet young family for chilaquiles. Chilaquiles are a matter of much debate among the gastronomic set, with some wanting their tortillas crisp and others more pliable. Francisco and I belong firmly to the former camp, so he takes me to Comal Oculto, a tiny new place already known for its chilaquiles' deep crunch, in his leafy, not-yet-gringofied neighborhood of San Miguel, right by Chapultepec Park. We crackle through a plate's worth of shredded chicken atop quartered tortillas soaking beneath a combination of salsa verde ("succulent," Francisco says) and salsa roja ("smoky," I say). To the delight of Francisco's little girls, the place serves, apropos of nothing, a truly over-the-top chocolate chip cookie. After this strenuous lunch, I retire to the St. Regis hotel, where I have moved after my tenure at the Ritz, to soak away some of the fat in the 15th-floor pool overlooking the famed golden Angel of Independence statue.

"This is a *Mexican* restaurant," says Ana Paula Tovar, a well-respected local food blogger, journalist, and podcaster. The restaurant in question is the five-year-old Meroma, an airy, mirrored, and terraced Roma Norte joint that, at first glance, does not seem especially Mexican—its most well-known dish is an orecchiette with lamb merguez. What Ana means is that the preparation, the style, the—if you'll permit me to say it, *heart*—of the place is infused with the



tradition and playful experimentation that have made Mexican cuisine so indispensable. Meroma is perhaps the best personification of what Mexico City can deliver right now. Mercedes Bernal, who, along with her husband, Rodney Cusic, is the chef and owner of Meroma, greets us with a potent taste test of Oaxacan mezcals. Then the dishes start coming. Meroma is a true market-driven powerhouse. The restaurant buys the full animals, including dairy cows. The merguez in that celebrated orecchiette bursts with Mexican spices. The bluefin tuna from Ensanada is garnished with wood ear mushrooms, cilantro, and citrus kosho. I'll never say no to a butter-roasted chicken, but it's the spicy herbs from Tepetzotlán that make its jus gras sing. Yes, this is a *Mexican* restaurant.

The next day I decide to level up on the gorging and

Above: A variety of edible insects on display for purchase at Mercado de San Juan in the city's historic center

Opposite page, from top left: A mural at La Ciudadela, a market that specializes in traditional crafts; Tacos El Güero; serving a margarita on Meroma's outdoor patio

Where to Stay

With grand boulevards and plentiful parks and plazas, Mexico City is great for walking, and all of these hotels are excellent home bases from which to explore. The new **Ritz-Carlton, Mexico City** (from \$700; ritzcarlton.com) has spacious rooms with balconies that overlook the museum-dotted Chapultepec Park, while **The St. Regis Mexico City** (from \$880; marriott.com), an iconic high-rise hotel on the jacaranda-lined Paseo de la Reforma, is close to Condesa's buzzy bars and restaurants. For a more boutique experience, try newcomer **Casa Polanco** (from \$395; casapolanco.com), in a restored 1940s mansion nestled among the designer shops and pretty residential streets of the elegant Polanco neighborhood.



meet Diego at Em, a Roma Norte farm-to-table where we are ushered upstairs to a small air-conditioned bar. The electricity has failed (which happens often, even in the best neighborhoods), and the main dining room is out of service. Eating a \$120 tasting menu in a small upstairs bar is also very Mexico City. The food—Mexican, non-Mexican, Mexican-inspired—is revelatory. First comes a Japanese broth to relax the stomach, then a cavalcade of chilled corn tofu (heavenly), butter-soaked oysters, baby corn with yuzu, ant larvae in cilantro oil (it melts on the tongue), and an aged duck breast with smoked bone dashi. Nine other dishes arrive, many celebrating the Mexican staple of corn, making creative use of butter, and displaying a variety of Japanese influences. “Mexico City is living through its golden age,” Diego says over the roasted mamey tart covered with pine nuts and pixtle (the seed of the mamey fruit) ice cream. Who needs a dining room?

On one of my last nights in town, Francisco takes me and David Lida to his favorite old cantina, El Centenario in Condesa, which Ana Paula calls *la tina*, or “the bathtub,” because of its many ceramic tiles. This is true literary territory. “The Keith Richards of Mexican literature used to drink here,” Francisco says over mezcals and beer chasers. “And the Bret Easton Ellis too.”

“I remember you when you were a young man,” one of the waiters tells Francisco with a sigh.

As often happens in a cantina, hunger strikes, so we head to the San Rafael neighborhood because Francisco’s friend, a local prosecutor who is “muy barrio” and hence knows the best food in town, recommends a brightly lit hole-in-the-wall called Tacos El Güero. The specialty is one of my favorite types of taco—the slow-cooked beef brisket known as *tacos de suadero*. Half the neighborhood seems to be in line for one of these juicy beasts—perhaps the best taco I’ve ever eaten—cut over a large wooden sundial and garnished with salsa a sign warns is *muy picosa*. “Bad suadero is greasy,” Francisco says. “But this...”

We decide to take the moveable feast back to the bathtub to catch a boxing match between a Mexican and a Russian. We cram into a cab and are soon weaving our way through the overpasses and past the Reforma skyline on the way to more drinks. “It’s 30 years later, and I feel like I picked the right place,” David says, watching his city pass before us as it falls softly into night. As the other passengers murmur in assent, I rub my stomach contentedly, ready for whatever comes next. ●