

The sun-drenched-yet-mild climate and envy-inducing multiterrain geography of these regions means chefs on both sides of the border have unfettered access to the best fresh-catch seafood and farm-fresh produce.

Combine that proximity to the sea and abundance from the verdant soil with the more recent migrations of people from around the world, including the Caribbean, Middle East, South America, and other parts of the United States and Mexico - and there's a good chance your next fish taco has taken on a whole new life with those foreign influences.

The greater San Diego and Tijuana / Baja California areas have made an art of exploiting the regional riches to create an entirely new age of cuisine that's infused with bolder global flavors - Cali-Baja.

The Cali-Baja corridor is kind of crushing it when it comes to cuisine crossovers.

# Join us as we shine a light on the classic and new cross-border flavor fusions defining Cali-Baja cuisine these days.





NAME: **Claudia Sandoval** THAT HANDLE:

@chefclaudiasandoval

KNOWN FOR: Being a judge on the last three seasons of MasterChef Latino, host of Taste of the Border on Discovery+, and

expert or judge on half a dozen FoodNetwork shows.

# Claudia Sandoval

A San Diego native with Sinaloan roots and current Tijuana resident, Chef Claudia lives, breathes, imbibes, and eats all that is this regional Cali-Baja culinary scene.

You might recognize her as the winner of MasterChef Season 6, and ever since she's been growing her culinary empire with a best-selling cookbook, more shows, more events, but it remains all about the food.

She's also a best-selling cookbook author and equal parts gifted pastry and executive chef. **AWARDS:** 

MasterChef Season 6 Winner



No one likes the word fusion, but that's what Cali-Baja cuisine is - it's usion of all the flavors that have found their way to the region.

- Chef Claudia Sandoval



One Bite, Five (Not So Basic) Tastes

Like you need another reason to love tacos...

ANATOMY OF A TACO: We're breaking down how

The respect for ingredients is a big aspect of Cali-Baja

this hand-held hero is quite possibly one of the best and most-balanced bites.

And while we know tacos can come in an infinite variety and combos, we're talking about a typical street-style taco vou'd find in Tiiuana or San Diego nowadays.

cuisine. It's almost a simplified version of cooking. You're honoring the ingredients and not transforming them, but letting them shine. Seasonings enhance the flavor rather than completely transforming it. That minimal intervention and respect for the entire ingredient - we use everything stem to leaf, head to tail - we're wasting nothing and bringing so much flavor to the table."

- Chef Claudia Sandoval

Sour

onions,

cilantro, and lime wedge.

You're getting lots of tangy and vinegary bursts from salsa, pickled



#### Salty

Whether it's that amazing melty queso Oaxaca or crumbly cotija, cheeses used in Cali-Baja tacos provide a salty flavor. Depending on how the meat is marinated, you can also get a subtle saltiness from the seasoning.

#### Sweet

White onions are more mild and sweet, and while flour tortillas are more traditional in Northern Mexico, both corn and flour are prevalent in Cali-Baja cuisine. Cool guacamole or avocado can also add a mild sweetness.

### **Bitter**

You get some amazing char flavors from the tortilla, meat or any blistered chiles or peppers.

#### Umami

Marinated meat is an umami flavor bomb, including carne asada, machaca, carnitas, al pastor, shrimp, etc.



there's some serious science going on to create those amazing flavors of ceviche and aguachile, signature dishes of Cali-Baja cuisine.

**Denature:** de·na·ture / dē'nāCHer/ verb

Denature refers to the physical changes that take place in a protein exposed to abnormal conditions in the environment. Heat, acid, high salt concentrations, alcohol, and mechanical agitation can cause proteins to denature.



I'm known for my pomegranate aguachile with ginger, cucumber, fresh edible flowers, and local scallops - it creates this amazing vibrant color, I guess I have a thing for red.

- Chef Claudia Sandoval

Now let's break down what it means when fresh fish or shellfish goes through the denaturing process:



Thin pieces or small chunks of super fresh fish marinate in a herbs, and whatever seasoning you



mix of citrus juice, chiles, salt, want to add to layer the flavor.

As the fish marinates, citric acid from the juice slowly causes the proteins to denature, creating an opaque appearance and firm texture

of "cooked" fish, but more tender. This form of chemical cooking relies on high salt concentrations or extreme pH conditions (like from citric acid) to

denature those proteins.



The marinating can last for a few minutes up to a few hours, but the more you let the fish marinate, the more "cooked" it will appear.

"Denatured protein networks also affect the optical properties of protein-rich foods. Because a cooked protein network scatters light more effectively than a suspension of uncooked proteins, eggs and fish become more opaque as they are cooked."

- Scienceandfood.org

How Soy Sauce Became a **Cali-Baja Pantry Staple** 

The short answer: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

The longer answer: The Chinese Exclusion Act banned the immigration of male Chinese workers into the United States. More Asian and specifically Chinese migrants moved to and settled within the Baja region for work - and when they did they brought their culinary traditions and ingredients with them - and fusion dishes emerged.

Also, soy sauce, rice wine vinegar, mirin - all these staple Asian sauces just-so-happen to go amazing with fresh seafood.

Zona Blanca we do an oyster shooter that's inspired by that Chinese population in Baja. So many people found asylum there after the Chinese **Exclusion Act and started** working at local farms. They changed the flavors of Cali-Baja cuisine and made them even more bold by using soy sauce, fish sauce and

> ginger." - Chef Chad White

Experiment with Flavor

We asked our Spiceologists for their takes on classic Cali-Baja-inspired dishes.

## P

**Breakfast** Smoky Honey Habanero Carnitas Chilaquiles

Dinner Chile Margarita Shrimp Tostada

Lunch Achiote Fish Sandwich with Smoked Garlic Jalapeno Sauce



Dessert Mango Tango **Paletas** 



**Guac & Roll Fresh** Guacamole

Cocktail Tequila Soleil with Lime Salt Rim

# Cali-Baja-Inspired Ingredients & Blends

Layer in some serious depth of Cali-Baja flavors into your dishes.



AC

**Ancho Chile** 





Achiote



ICEOLOGY Chile con Limon

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JS

ALAPEÑO SALT

Jalapeno Infused Salt



Mexican Oregano



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Mango Tango



ALAPEÑ

Jalapeno Lime Pilsner

**Cumin Ground** 

## **Chef Claudia Sandoval** Quickie Q&A

What do you see as the future of Cali-Baja cuisine?

We'll start to see more incorporation of new migrants we have people from Syria, Haiti, Palestine... and we're already starting to see infusions. I'm seeing food stands pop up in Tijuana that are doing a Haitian-Tijuana mariscos-style seafood. They're bringing in new spices and new techniques and the locals are embracing these new flavors.

My friend from Jordan was teaching me about Middle Eastern desserts, and we just started riffing on fusion ideas. Like 'oh, this could have horchata in it...' This is how fusion happens - a dish will remind me of another dish or flavor, and then I start seeing what I can create with the ingredients I know. This is the definition of migrant magic - and as a

community we're embracing it."

Periodically Inspired interview at Chefs.Spiceology.com/blog

Read the entire



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