



# As It's Meant To Be

Chef talks tantalizingly about his authentic Mexican dishes

By Duffy Kelly

**T**he first word that comes to mind when you meet Arturo Vargas is juicy.

This Mexican-American East Sacramento resident is not only a chef, but a caterer and teacher of cooking classes in which he celebrates the making of his gourmet signature Mexican food—selections as uniquely tasty as they are juicy. In fact, he talks about the “juice” in a way that makes mouths water.

If you're not careful, you might even start drooling when he passionately describes the way citrus and savory dance around mahi-mahi or how poblano peppers punch up a succulent tomato when heated just right. In his charming accent and appropriately picturesque white chef attire complete with puffy hat, Vargas purses his lips, kisses his fingers, flips the frying pan and melts your mouth all at once while singing out a mini-dissertation about his personal creations.

But wait. Not only can this man cook food, he also makes his own “water”!

“This water has 20 different types of fruit chopped very small with nuts, water, sugar, cinnamon,” he says. “Let it ferment for a couple of days. While you serve this water, it's beautiful, the taste is so concentrated with all the fruits and agua. Mmmmm. Drinking it is gorgeous!



Chef Arturo Vargas puts the finishing touch on his ceviche

You get little pieces of fruit and walnuts at the bottom of the glass.”

When Vargas, owner of Taste For The Senses, is not catering a wedding or private dinner party, he is teaching cooking classes in San Francisco and Sacramento to private

parties and groups. Call them cooking fiestas, where guests arrive and help make the dishes they will enjoy that evening.

Vargas is also featured on cooking segments on Telemundo, and he stars in television commercials for

Mexican food products. When that work is done, he's behind the frying pan, offering group cooking classes through the Learning Exchange in which his students attend hands-on demonstrations at various locales, including Whole Foods Market.

“What we are going to do tonight,” he said during a recent demonstration, “is I am going to sauté a little bit of vegetables—zucchini, Mexican bell pepper, onions, garlic. We sauté on a hot skillet with olive oil. And this tomato, I feel so much for this tomato, I don't want to get rid of it. But just a little tomato and it will make this dish very juicy, very watery. And then, a little pinch of salt, not too much,” he said while cooking and coaxing flavors from their skins as though he himself were swimming in the skillet.

“My classes are very simple,” Vargas says. “We make sopas, tomases, dishes that are very ethnic and we make them from scratch. It's fun, I love the hands-on. I want people to get their hands on the food, to feel it and smell it and touch it. To really know the food.”

But you had better be quick with your potholder when you're standing near him as he's teaching the tortilla lesson, because he's liable to throw a ball of dough your way. Yes, indeed, you will make your very own tortilla just the way his grandparents did. “Kids love this the most,” he says.

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Vargas brings to the table a host of deep secrets from his childhood, when he grew up cooking with everything but a conventional stovetop. Born in Acapulco, Mexico, Vargas began cooking at the age of 5 alongside his grandmother. "We lived in a little village and they had their own way of primitive cooking, so I learned how to cook in a different pots and with different types of flames not just a stove," he says.

From fire pits on the beach to brick ovens to open flames in the country, Vargas has cooked just about everywhere with whatever fire may blaze. And along the way a sense of flavor and a passion for good food became inculcated into his very DNA. Call it the perfect storm for a chef.

"I have a very good appetite and I have a very good sense of smell," he says. "I know when it's good."

Vargas' authentic ethnic dishes put Americanized Mexican dishes such as the burrito to shame. "When I got here people talked about a burrito. What is a burrito? We do not eat burritos in Mexico," he says. "And menudo? It's a pity that people might think it's Mexican food.

Needless to say, "rice and beans" are a far cry from what this lobster-prawns-fresh-veggie-pick-a-pepper chef has in store for the discerning palette. For chili rellenos, for example, "we fill it with scallops and prawns and lobster and lots of garlic and cheeses," Vargas says. "Put it in the oven until it's sizzling, then serve it on a bed of guacamole. Here they put cheese and eggs and that's it. I don't know why."

With his wife, Martha Geraty, and two children, Cassandra, 12, and Christopher, 8, Vargas brings his love of gourmet cooking to his community. He can be seen rolling his Bar-B-Q into his East Sacramento street where he fashions tacos for neighborhood street parties. You might catch him at summer concerts at Pops in the

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Park serving up his signature ceviche complete with tiger prawns and a deliciously memorable citrus "juice." Or University of California, Davis Medical Center patients might find him teaching healthful cooking classes as part of his Latino ambassadorship for the American Heart Association. And someday, when his two children are a little older, you might find him at his own restaurant.

"I like to be home with my children now while they are young," he says. "But someday soon, I would like my own restaurant."

In the meantime, he'll be tossing those dough balls to his kids from his own kitchen.

*For more information about Arturo Vargas, call 420-8994.*

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