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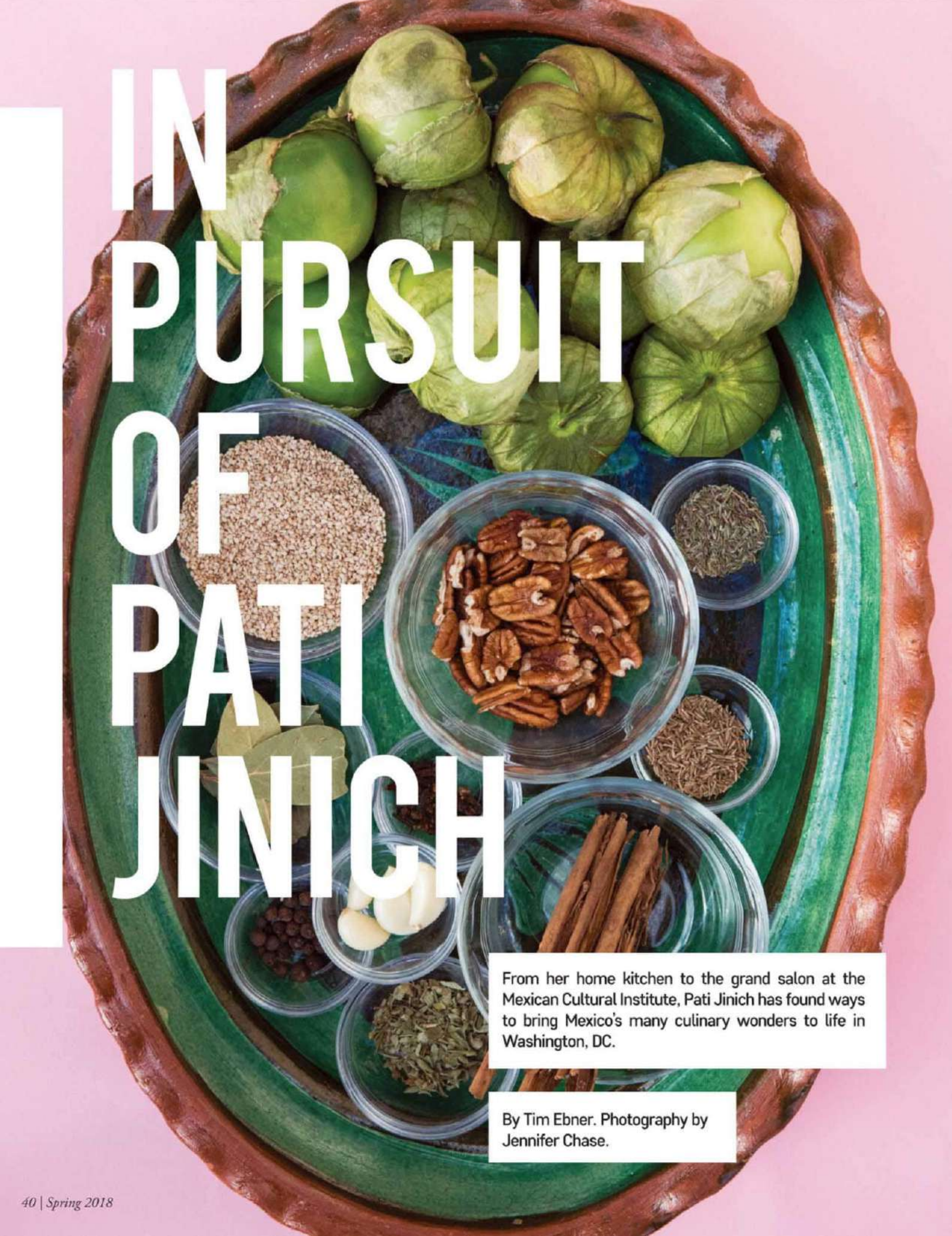
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THE WORLD OF PATI JINICH

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IN PURSUIT OF PATI JINICH

From her home kitchen to the grand salon at the Mexican Cultural Institute, Pati Jinich has found ways to bring Mexico's many culinary wonders to life in Washington, DC.

By Tim Ebner. Photography by
Jennifer Chase.



IN PATI JINICH'S KITCHEN— WHEREVER THAT MAY BE— THERE'S ALWAYS ROOM FOR HER FANS.

With just an hour to go before a seven-course, dinner for more than 100 guests, she's not focused on her passion fruit ceviche—"I'll plate that next," she promises—instead she's in the kitchen recording a quick video with her fans.

Between her frantic traveling and cooking schedule, she often pauses for moments at a time to speak directly to her tens-of-thousands of social media followers.

"¡Hola, amigos!" she proclaims with a beaming smile. "¿Ya están listos?" Moments later she translates: "Hello, friends! Are you ready?"

Take a look into the life of Pati Jinich and you're bound to learn about her primary passion: food. Whether that's at her home kitchen in Chevy Chase, MD, on a whirlwind shopping trip at one of her favorite Mexican markets, or on a behind-the-scenes tour of the Mexican Cultural Institute, where she hosts recurring dinners and classes as the resident chef.

Tonight, she's cooking alongside her friend Alex Ruiz, the head chef of Casa Oaxaca in Oaxaca City, Mexico, and a noted culinary ambassador of Mexico.

This is only the second time that Chef Alex has cooked in DC, and it's because of Jinich that he's here making one of his restaurant's signature dishes, tuna buñuelo with chichatanas, a seared tuna coated in one of Oaxaca's most covered culinary ingredients: flying ants.

As the story goes, every year in April and May, flying ants (chichatanas) are abundant and fall from the sky in Oaxaca. Children collect them and hand over the insects to their mothers, who wash them and grill them on a comal—a flat metal or clay pan.

Once cleaned, the ants are pulverized using a molcajete—the same stone mortar used to make guacamole. Then, Ruiz adds a bit of allspice, garlic, avocado leaves and three types of chili before coating his tuna with the blackened paste. It leaves this fatty and fresh filet of fish with an explosion of earthy and spicy flavors that's distinctly Oaxacan.

"Yum! This is simply ridiculous," Jinich exclaims. "You won't get this anywhere!" You certainly won't. And you also won't get Jinich anywhere else either.

She's a chef and rising culinary star devoted to a bicultural life between the United States and her native Mexico. And she calls herself a bridge to greater understanding on either side of the border.

Lucky for us, she's also a Washingtonian, and while she travels monthly, and sometimes weekly, between the two countries, it's here where her culinary journey began and continues to thrive on a rapid ascent.

You might know Jinich as the host of an Emmy and James Beard Award-nominated PBS television series, *Pati's Mexican Table*, about to enter its seventh season. Or you might know her as a successful author of two cookbooks: *Pati's Mexican Table* and *Mexican Today*.



Chef Alex Ruiz of Casa Oaxca visits DC for the second time to make a signature regional dish.



An Oaxcan specialty is served. Seared tuna coated in crushed chicatanas, or flying ants.

However, what you probably don't know is that Jinich wasn't always on a straight path to food fame. Her success as a television chef came from a career pivot made later in life.

When she moved to the United States from Mexico City more than two decades ago, she went from working as a political analyst at an international think tank to a culinary student at L'Academie de Cuisine. After culinary school, she returned home to cook and write for a recipe-driven blog, which started her down her path as a personality-driven chef.

Before long, she found a connection to Washington's Mexican Cultural Institute and said yes to the "once in a lifetime opportunity" to develop a cooking school curriculum around Mexico.

"I was very enthusiastic, and word-of-mouth really helped to spread and share the love for my classes," she says. "But I tell this to everyone who's ever been enthusiastic about something: 'Don't get distracted by the noise. What's defined my career is that I never took the fast road, and I have to feel really comfortable and proud of everything I do.'"

That focus paid off for her in 2010 with a television pilot, but even then it took some time for Jinich to feel comfortable in her own skin.

"Starting with season three, we took off the makeup and got rid of the script and went to a travelogue-style cooking show," she says. "It felt wonderful because I could finally be myself. Now, we go out and spend time doing more listening, until I find what excites people about food. That takes a lot of patience to do."

Jinich is also extremely patient when it comes to finding the ripest mango at her favorite Mexican market in Columbia Heights, Panam International. "You have to really get in there and feel it," she says. "Each one is different. I'm looking for the ripest one because it's my son's favorite snack."

She's on a first-name basis with the market's manager, and today she's shopping for ingredients that will be used for recipe testing in her third cookbook, including dishes she's never cooked before, like northern-style quesadillas from Mexico's Pacific Coast regions.

As she moves up and down each narrow aisle, her mind is carefully at work. Chayotes, green bumpy gourds, are 89 cents a pound. In an instant, she picks up three for a fresh salad she's going to make tonight—it's an impulse buy, and she'll need fresh jicama and avocado to complete the salad (full recipe follows).

As she passes each ingredient, there's a new story to tell. Green leafy epazote is an herb you'll find up and down the Baja California peninsula at tianguis (open-air markets). That's also the next stop on her culinary adventure. Her show will head to the westernmost territory of Mexico, a region Jinich says is brimming with possibilities.

"By going there, I will have a new tool kit of ingredients—like the fresh herbs, seafood, wines and olive oils. It's like you're in the Mediterranean," she says. "To me, this is new territory or frontier. It's going to be a chance to continue mixing cultures between the U.S. and Mexico—I can't wait for this new adventure."

It may have taken a while for Jinich to get here, but it seems that her life is also on the verge of something big—an adventure that she'll no doubt lead with many more fans to come.

PATI'S SHOPPING TIPS

We went along with Pati for a shopping trip to her favorite Mexican market, Panam International on 14th Street NW. Her advice: "Don't be overwhelmed by the narrow aisles or endless amounts of produce."

Here are her three shopping strategies:

MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE MANAGER.

Those who sell should know everything, including the food purveyors, delivery schedules and seasonal ingredients. The manager may also carry hard-to-find ingredients at certain times of the year. Always be sure to ask what's new and fresh.

BE FEARLESS AND CURIOUS. AND DON'T

be afraid to ask. People who work in a good grocery store should also know how to use and prepare the foods they sell. If you're unfamiliar with an ingredient or packaging item, speak up.

PICK THROUGH THE PRODUCE.

You want to pick the ripest fruit. In the same pile of limes, there will be some that are juicy, ripe and soft and others that are hard and juiceless. You can tell by giving a gentle squeeze—the same goes for avocados. When it comes to tomatillos, just like corn, peek through the husk. If the fruit is yellow, it's over-ripe.



Photo by Tim Ebner

CHAYOTE, APPLE AND JÍCAMA SALAD WITH AVOCADO AND PEPITA DRESSING

SERVES 4

- ¼ cup pepitas or raw and hulled pumpkin seeds
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 7 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- ¼ cup (packed) coarsely chopped cilantro leaves and upper stems, plus more for garnish
- 2 tablespoons (packed) coarsely chopped fresh dill, plus more for garnish
- 1 ripe avocado, halved, pitted and meat scooped out
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 ¼ teaspoon kosher or coarse sea salt
- 1 teaspoon whole-grain mustard
- 1 pound (about 2) chayote squash, peeled and julienned
- 1 pound (about 2) tart green apples, peeled and julienned
- 1 jicama, peeled and julienned

In a small pan over low-medium heat, toast the pepitas, stirring occasionally, until they start to make popping sounds and are very lightly browned, about 3 to 4 minutes. Remove from heat.

For the avocado dressing, in the jar of a blender, add ½ cup water and the oil, lime juice, garlic, cilantro, dill, avocado, pepper, salt, mustard and the toasted pepitas, and purée until completely smooth.

In a bowl, toss the julienned chayote squash, apple and jicama with the avocado dressing. Garnish with some cilantro and dill and serve.

OAXACA-STYLE MUSHROOM AND CHEESE QUESADILLAS

MAKES 12 QUESADILLAS

- 1 tablespoon sunflower or corn oil
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- ½ cup chopped white onion
- 1 serrano or jalapeño chile, finely chopped (seeding optional)
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 pound fresh mushrooms, white or baby bello or any that you prefer, cleaned and thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons fresh epazote leaves, chopped (optional)
- 2 tablespoons kosher or sea salt, or to taste
- 1 cup Oaxaca cheese, shredded (also good with mozzarella, muenster or monterey jack)
- Corn tortillas, store bought or homemade
- Salsa of your choice

Heat the oil and butter in a large sauté pan over medium-high heat. When butter starts to sizzle, add white onion and cook until soft and translucent, about 3 to 4 minutes. Add the serrano chile and chopped garlic and cook until fragrant, for about a minute.

Incorporate the thinly sliced mushrooms and cook them for about 5 minutes, stirring often. Their juices will begin to come out and after a couple minutes they will begin to dry out. When they do, mix in the epazote leaves if using, and salt; stir and cook for another minute. The mushroom mix should be moist, not wet or too dry, which will be perfect for filling the quesadillas.

Heat the tortillas on a hot comal or dry skillet over medium heat for about 20 seconds. Place a tablespoon or 2 of the mushroom mix and a tablespoon or 2 of the shredded cheese (depending on how chubby you want them!) on the center of each tortilla. Fold it as if it were a turnover and press down. Cook for about 2 minutes per side, until cheese is completely melted and tortillas have begun to crisp a bit on the outside.

Serve with a side of a salsa of your choice.

