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COOKBOOK

## MEXICAN FOOD'S TREASURE TROVE



Photos by Angle Mosler

Pati Jinch's latest offering highlights cuisines from lesser-known regions of the country

**By Greg Morago**  
STAFF WRITER

**B**efore she became a household name associated with Mexican cuisine, Pati Jinch was a kitchen novice who couldn't get a good meal on the table.

The Mexican food ambassador recalls the time when she was a young bride having moved in 1997 from her home in Mexico City to Dallas, where her new husband had work.

"I was a terrible cook when I moved to Texas. My English was terrible. I remember going to the Mexican stores to shop and being in awe of seeing Mexicans from all over," she said, recalling her Texas indoctrination to the American Mexican larder. Shopping for chiles and other essential foodstuffs, she began informal conversations with



**Award-winning chef and television host Pati Jinch's latest cookbook is "Treasures of the Mexican Table."**

other shoppers. "We started sharing recipes and they'd invite me into their homes."

Jinch was quick to make friends. Her English got better. So did her cooking – by necessity. Hungry for the foods from home, Jinch was intent on mastering the art of Mexican cooking.

Today she is a James Beard Award-winning chef, cookbook author and host of the long-running PBS series "Pati's Mexican Table." Considered an authority on Mexican food and culture, Jinch's culinary journey had strong roots in Mexico but blossomed in Texas, thanks to those recipe-sharing home cooks she met in Dallas.

She calls recipes treasures, and now she's sharing her trove in a new cookbook, "Treasures of the Mexican Table: Classic Recipes, Local Secrets." Her most ambitious cook-

*Treasures continues on D2*

Above: Zucchini and Corn in Poblano Sauce from "Treasures of the Mexican Table" by Pati Jinch

BEST DISHES

## Finding comfort in the middle of a cold snap

**By Alison Cook**  
STAFF WRITER

Cold, colder, coldest: This was the week when I wanted my meals to warm me up. The quest took me to a futuristic Chinese takeout joint, a brilliant new modern Mexican restaurant and a clubby New American spot where the vinyl is cool and the crowd is, too.

**Mapo tofu and Garlic 4 Season green beans from The Rice Box**

The warming mala tingle of Sichuan peppercorns meeting dried red chiles was just what I



Alison Cook / Staff

**The Rice Box in River Oaks offered generous portions of both the mapo tofu and Garlic 4 Season green beans.**

required as the mercury plunged.

And thanks to the heroic portions from The Rice Box, the three-unit takeout enterprise that began life as a food truck, I procured enough mapo tofu and green beans to eat for days without venturing into the cold again. Twenty-five bucks bought me enough food for a family of three, to my surprise, with rice and a couple of egg rolls in the bargain.

Both dishes were lively enough that I didn't tire of them, either. The tofu cubes were as silky as could be. The mala

*Disbes continues on D7*

## HOUSTON HARVEST

# Coconut and herb biscuits are a savory delight

One of my favorite breakfast indulgences is a cup of steaming chai with a warm, savory, flaky biscuit fresh out of the oven. The biscuit can



ANITA JAISINGHANI

be dipped in ghee or smeared with jam or butter.

The best part about making biscuits is that the dough can be made in minutes, shaped, cut and frozen until ready to bake.

What makes this coconut biscuit exciting is that the recipe is entirely plant based, using coconut oil in place of butter. The sweetness of the coconut complements the savory herbs and spicy serrano pepper. When picking herbs, anything goes – so feel free to use what you have.

Anita Jaisinghani is the chef-owner of Pondicheri restaurant in Houston. Her website is [india948.com](http://india948.com). Her first cookbook, "Masala" (Ten Speed Press), publishes in August. Email: [anita@pondicheri.com](mailto:anita@pondicheri.com).



Ajna Jai / Contributor

## Coconut Biscuits

2 scant cups (226 grams) all-purpose flour  
1 tablespoon baking powder  
½ teaspoon baking soda  
1 tablespoon cane sugar  
½ teaspoon salt  
1 cup (100 grams) fresh or frozen coconut  
4 ounces coconut oil  
¾ cup (158 grams) coconut milk  
1 cup loose herbs (such as basil, parsley, or rosemary), finely minced  
1 small serrano pepper, minced

**Instructions:** Combine the flour with baking powder, baking soda, sugar and salt. Add the fresh coconut and coconut oil and mix it in with your fingers until crumbly. Do not overmix.

Add the coconut milk, herbs and serrano, and combine the mixture just until evenly mixed. Turn the dough into a thick log – it will be roughly 3 inches in diameter and 8 to 10 inches in length. Wrap it in plastic or kitchen paper and refrigerate for a few hours.

Divide the log into 8 equal portions by cutting into thick discs. At this point, the biscuits can be frozen until ready to bake.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Spread the biscuit dough 3 to 4 inches apart on a parchment-paper-lined baking pan and place in the oven. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes until golden and cooked through. Let cool for 15 to 20 minutes before serving.

**Makes 8 biscuits**

From chef Anita Jaisinghani

## TREASURES

From page D1

book – it took her four years to research and write – “Treasures” canvasses the breadth of Mexico with recipes from throughout the country, many drawn from little-known regions, subregions and even microregions. There are recipes from unsung home cooks, from villages and single-family homesteads. It was her goal, she said, to show that Mexican food isn’t one thing but an extraordinarily varied expanse of ingredients, flavors, cultures and techniques.

Jinich’s third cookbook arrives at a time when interest in Mexican cuisine is at a high. Americans have grown from familiar taco night rituals to embracing a more varied and sophisticated appreciation for regional Mexican cuisines and Mexican-inspired fusion fare.

While “Pati’s Mexican Table” does much to explore cooking traditions throughout Mexico, Jinich’s research for the new cookbook unearthed a new appreciation for Mexican foods, even for an expert.

“I used to think of flour tortillas as something very American. And then you go to Sinaloa or Sonora, and their flour tortillas will give a corn tortilla a run for their money,” she said, describing regional flour tortillas that can be as big as a hubcap or prepared with tiny shreds of cracklings in the dough.

The book was an education for Jinich. “After so many years, instead of thinking I’m mastering more, I realize there’s still so much I don’t know, and it makes me hungry to learn more.”

Much of that “more” is defined in the book by foods that are eaten in homes, not in restaurants, she said. And even within Mexico, the nation’s food is evolving as people become more familiar with the rich diversity of their own country. “It’s mind-boggling how much Mexicans don’t know about our own cuisine because it’s so diverse from one region to another,” she said.

In addition to working on the new cookbook, Jinich produced a new PBS show, “La Frontera,” a two-part special that explores the U.S.-Mexico border region through stories of artists, musicians, athletes, chefs and local celebrities who reflect the blend-

ed life of the border. Jinich, a Maryland resident, has long been fascinated by border life, which lately has been shaped against a background of volatile politics and pandemic issues.

“Having spent so many years going back and forth, I’m trying to break down myths about Mexicans and Mexico,” she said. “I kept feeling pulled to the border and themes of the border.”

With her easy smile, joyous demeanor and natural curiosity, Jinich is a perfect presenter of the border stories in “La Frontera,” whose residents, she said, are continuously navigating evolving cultures and politics from both sides.

Of course, diplomacy is often much easier when there’s food involved. “No matter what side you’re on, you have a bowl of food in front of you and it’s something nurturing,” she said. “The walls come down. Food opens the door – just like art, music, or poetry.”

Jinich’s own art takes a delicious step with her new cookbook.

“My hope is these treasures will become treasures in your home. That they’ll become staples and you’ll pass them down and feel free to adapt as your own,” she said. “That’s the beauty of recipes.”

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Vuelve a la Vida “Come Back to Life” Seafood Cocktail from “Treasures of the Mexican Table”

## Mixed Nut Salsa Macha

1 cup olive oil  
½ cup vegetable oil  
5 dried ancho chiles, stemmed, seeded and cut with scissors into small pieces  
3 to 5 dried chiles do arbol, stems removed (keep seeds), cut into small pieces  
6 garlic cloves, sliced  
½ cup raw unsalted walnuts  
½ cup raw unsalted pistachios  
½ cup raw unsalted pine nuts  
¼ cup cider vinegar  
1 tablespoon dark brown sugar or grated piloncillo, or to taste  
2 teaspoons kosher salt, or to taste  
½ cup raw pumpkin seeds  
½ cup amaranth seeds

**Instructions:** Heat both oils in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add the chiles, garlic and all the nuts and cook, stirring, until lightly toasted and fragrant, 2 to 3 minutes. Turn off the heat, add the vinegar, brown sugar and salt, and mix. Stir in the pumpkin and amaranth seeds. Let the mixture sit for 10 to 15 minutes. Scrape into the bowl of a food processor and pulse a few times until coarsely ground.

The salsa will keep, tightly covered, for at least a month in the refrigerator.

**Makes about 3 cups**

From “Treasures of the Mexican Table” by Pati Jinich

## Vuelve a la Vida “Come Back to Life” Seafood Cocktail

1 pound firm, mild white fish fillets, such as flounder, snapper, or sea bass, cut into ½-inch dice  
2 cups freshly squeezed lime juice (from 12 to 14 limes)  
6 tablespoons olive oil  
2 garlic cloves, peeled  
2 dried chiles de arbol  
Kosher salt  
1 pound large shrimp, peeled and deveined  
2 tomatoes, finely chopped  
1 to 2 fresh jalapeños, finely chopped  
2 pickled jalapeños, finely chopped, or to taste  
⅔ cup finely chopped white onion  
½ cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves and upper stems  
⅓ cup pimiento-stuffed green olives  
¼ cup chopped drained capers  
1½ cups ketchup  
1½ teaspoons dried oregano  
1 pound jumbo lump

crabmeat, picked over for shells and cartilage  
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste  
1 to 2 ripe avocados, halved, pitted and sliced or diced  
Corn tostadas, tortilla chips, or saltine crackers for serving

**Instructions:** Place the diced fish in a bowl, add the lime juice, and gently mix. Cover with plastic wrap and marinate for at least an hour or up to 12 hours in the refrigerator. Heat the olive oil in a small skillet over medium-low heat. Add the garlic cloves and chile de arbol and cook until the garlic is golden, 10 to 15 minutes, stirring occasionally; take care not to burn the garlic and chiles. Turn off the heat and allow the oil to cool, then remove and discard the garlic and chiles.

Bring a medium saucepan of water to a boil, salt gener-

ously, and add the shrimp. Cook for 1 minute or until just pink. Immediately drain shrimp and transfer to a bowl; let cool.

In a large bowl, combine the tomatoes, fresh and pickled jalapeños, onion, cilantro, olives, capers, ketchup and oregano, and mix well. Stir in the seasoned olive oil.

Drain the fish, reserving the marinade, and add the fish, shrimp and crabmeat to the bowl, along with ½ cups of the marinade from the fish. Gently mix together, then season with 2 teaspoons salt and black pepper. Taste and adjust the salt and pepper.

Serve in small bowls or martini or other stemmed glasses, topped with the avocado and with tostadas, chips, or crackers on the side.

**Makes 6-8 generous appetizer servings**

From “Treasures of the Mexican Table” by Pati Jinich



## ‘Treasures of the Mexican Table’

‘Classic Recipes, Local Secrets’

By Pati Jinich

Harvest

416 pages, \$28

## Zucchini and Corn in Poblano Sauce

4 fresh poblano chiles, roasted, sweated, peeled and coarsely chopped  
½ cup chopped white onion  
1 garlic clove, peeled  
½ cup vegetable or chicken broth or water  
2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
½ pound ripe tomatoes, finely chopped, or half a 15-ounce can crushed tomatoes  
1 cup corn kernels (from 1 large ear)  
1½ pounds zucchini (about 3 medium), trimmed and diced  
1¼ teaspoons kosher salt  
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
1 cup diced panela cheese

**Instructions:** Combine the poblanos, onion, garlic and broth or water in a blender or food processor and puree until smooth. Set aside.

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the tomatoes and cook until they soften, about 3 minutes. Clear a space in the middle of the pan and add the corn. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes, until it begins to color. Add the zucchini, season with the salt and pepper, stir, and cook for 2 to 3 minutes, until the zucchini begins to soften.

Stir in the poblano puree, bring to a medium simmer, and cook 8 to 10 minutes, until the poblano sauce has reduced and thickened and the zucchini is tender but not mushy. Scrape onto a platter, top with the cheese and serve.

Note: If you can’t find panela cheese, you can substitute queso fresco, for a more crumbly option, or Oaxaca for a mild, melty option.

**Makes 6 servings**

From “Treasures of the Mexican Table” by Pati Jinich