

# *Mexican Fiesta Planner*



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Throw a festive party with food that's as colorful as the décor, along with an assortment of margaritas.

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MENU  
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*Saucy Black Beans*

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*Green Rice*

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*Grilled Mahimahi*

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*Beer-Battered Cod*

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*Pineapple Salsa*

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*Pico de Gallo*

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*Cucumber Relish*

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*Almond Flan*

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*Coconut Margaritas*

•

*Pink Margaritas*

•

*Margaritas for a Crowd*

## RECIPES

### SEVICHE VERDE

SERVES 12 AS AN APPETIZER

2 pounds firm white fish fillets, skin and bones removed

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1 cup freshly squeezed lime juice (about 10 limes)

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2 1/2 teaspoons coarse salt

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Pinch of dried oregano, preferably Mexican

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1 1/2 cups lightly packed fresh basil leaves

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1 1/2 cups lightly packed fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves

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1/4 cup lightly packed fresh mint leaves

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1 small garlic clove

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1 serrano chile, cut into pieces

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1/4 cup water

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1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

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1/4 cup chopped green olives

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1/2 cup finely diced white onion

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1. Cut fish into 1/2-inch dice, and place in a nonreactive container. Pour lime juice over fish, and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon salt and oregano; toss to combine. Refrigerate, covered, 6 to 8 hours.

2. Purée basil, parsley, mint, garlic, serrano, and the water in a blender until smooth but quite thick. With the motor running, add oil in a steady stream. Season with remaining 1 1/2 teaspoons salt.

3. Drain marinade from fish. Pour herb sauce over fish; toss to combine. Garnish with olives and onion, and serve.



### JICAMA SALAD

SERVES 12

3 jicama (about 2 pounds), peeled

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3 beets, trimmed and peeled

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3 large carrots, cut into 3-inch lengths

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5 navel oranges

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1/3 cup freshly squeezed lime juice (4 limes)

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5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

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1/2 cup unsalted peanuts, toasted and coarsely chopped

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Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

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1. Using a mandoline or very sharp knife, julienne jicama, beets, and carrots. Toss in a large bowl.

2. Cut ends off oranges; using a paring knife, remove peel, pith, and outer membranes, following the curve of the fruit. Remove whole sections; add to bowl with vegetables. Squeeze juice from membranes into a bowl; reserve 1/2 cup.

3. In a small bowl, whisk together reserved orange juice, lime juice, and oil. Pour over vegetable mixture; toss to coat. Sprinkle with peanuts; season with salt and pepper. Serve immediately.



## SAUCY BLACK BEANS

SERVES 6 TO 8

- 1 twelve-ounce package dried black beans, picked over
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 large white onion, diced
- 8 cups cold water
- Peel of 1 orange, pith removed (optional)
- 1 jalapeño pepper, sliced in half lengthwise and seeded (optional)
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Hot-pepper sauce, such as Tabasco (optional)

FOLD

1. Place beans in a large bowl or stockpot; cover with cold water by 2 inches. Let stand at room temperature 4 hours or overnight. Drain, and rinse beans with cold water; set aside.
2. Heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion, and cook until it is soft and translucent but not browned, about 8 minutes. Add the beans and the cold water, along with the orange peel and jalapeño, if desired. Bring to a boil, and reduce heat to a gentle simmer; cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the beans are tender and most of the liquid has evaporated, creating a saucelike consistency, about 2 hours. Most of the liquid should have evaporated.
3. Remove from heat; remove orange peel and jalapeño, if using. Season with salt, black pepper, and hot-pepper sauce, if desired. Serve hot or at room temperature.

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## RECIPES

### GREEN RICE

SERVES 6 TO 8

2 tablespoons vegetable or olive oil  
 1 white onion, cut into 1/4-inch dice  
 2 garlic cloves, minced  
 1 1/2 cups long-grain rice  
 2 1/2 cups homemade or low-sodium canned chicken or vegetable stock, or water  
 1/2 cup finely chopped fresh cilantro  
 1 poblano chile, seeded and finely chopped  
 Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Heat oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion; cook until it is soft and translucent, about 8 minutes. Add garlic; cook 2 minutes. Add rice, and stir to coat. Add stock, and bring to a boil; reduce heat to a simmer. Cover, and cook until rice is tender, about 15 minutes.
2. Turn off heat; let stand, covered, until liquid is absorbed, 5 to 10 minutes. Fluff with a fork; stir in cilantro and poblano. Season with salt and pepper. Serve hot.

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### GRILLED MAHIMAH

SERVES 6 TO 8

*You can use other types of firm, white-fleshed fish, or even shrimp or chicken.*

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice  
 3 garlic cloves, smashed  
 1/2 teaspoon cumin seeds  
 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper  
 2 to 3 sprigs thyme, oregano, or other herbs  
 1 1/2 pounds mahimahi fillets

1. Make marinade: Combine olive oil, lime juice, garlic, cumin seeds, pepper, and herbs in a large resealable plastic bag or airtight plastic container. Shake well to combine.
2. Add fish, and shake gently to coat well with the marinade. Refrigerate at least 1 hour and up to 4 hours.
3. Heat grill or grill pan. Remove fish from marinade, letting excess drip off; grill until it is browned on the outside and cooked through, about 4 minutes per side. Serve hot or at room temperature.

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## BEER-BATTERED COD

SERVES 6 TO 8

*Fried fish is the traditional filling of Baja tacos. They are simply garnished with shredded cabbage, pico de gallo, and sour cream.*

Vegetable oil, for frying

2 large eggs

1 cup beer

1 1/2 teaspoons coarse salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 cup all-purpose flour

Pinch of cayenne pepper

1 1/2 pounds cod fillets, cut crosswise into 1/2-inch-thick strips

FOLD

1. Heat oil in a large cast-iron or heavy skillet until a deep-fry thermometer registers 375°. Meanwhile, whisk together eggs, beer, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon black pepper in a medium bowl; set aside.
2. In a separate medium bowl, whisk together flour, remaining teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon black pepper, and cayenne; add to egg mixture. Whisk until batter is well combined; let rest 15 minutes.
3. Dip fish strips one at a time into batter, letting excess drip off. Working in batches, drop carefully into hot oil; fry until fish is golden and crisp and cooked through, about 4 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon; drain on paper towels. Serve immediately.

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RECIPES

## PINEAPPLE SALSA

MAKES ABOUT 1 QUART

*This sweet-and-tart salsa is a great accompaniment to grilled fish or chicken.*

1/2 large (or 1 small) pineapple, peeled, cored,  
and diced (about 3 cups)

1 small red onion, diced

1 small yellow or orange bell pepper, seeds and  
ribs removed, diced

1/2 cup finely chopped fresh cilantro

2 tablespoons finely chopped mint

Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

Combine all ingredients in a large bowl, and  
let stand at least 30 minutes to let flavors  
develop. Serve; or store, covered in plastic  
wrap, in the refrigerator up to 1 day.

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## PICO DE GALLO

MAKES ABOUT 1 QUART

1 medium white onion, diced

4 large tomatoes, seeded and diced

1 large jalapeño pepper, seeded and minced

1/4 cup freshly squeezed lime juice

1/2 cup finely chopped fresh cilantro

Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper

Combine all ingredients in a large bowl;  
let stand at least 30 minutes at room  
temperature to let flavors develop. Serve;  
or store, covered in plastic wrap, in the  
refrigerator up to 3 days.

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## CUCUMBER RELISH

MAKES ABOUT 1 QUART

*Relish can be made up to one day ahead and stored in refrigerator; add the salt just before serving.*

- 1 1/2 teaspoons cumin seeds
- 2 cucumbers
- 2 celery stalks, finely chopped
- 1 bunch scallions, white and light-green parts, thinly sliced
- 2 poblano chiles or green bell peppers, seeds and ribs removed, finely chopped
- 1/4 cup finely chopped fresh cilantro
- 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- Coarse salt

FOLD

1. Heat a small skillet over medium heat. Add cumin seeds; toast, stirring, until they are lightly browned. Transfer to a small bowl; let cool.
2. Peel and seed the cucumbers, and cut into 1/4-inch dice. Place in a large bowl, and add celery, scallions, poblano chiles, cilantro, lemon juice, and toasted cumin seeds. Season with salt, and serve immediately.



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## ALMOND FLAN

SERVES 12

1/2 cup plus 2/3 cup sugar
2 tablespoons water
4 cups half-and-half
6 ounces blanched whole almonds (about 3/4 cup), toasted and finely ground
Pinch of salt
3 large whole eggs
6 large egg yolks
3 tablespoons amaretto

FOLD

1. Preheat oven to 325°. In a small saucepan, bring 1/2 cup sugar and the water to a boil over medium-high heat. Without stirring, cook until syrup is a rich amber color, about 8 minutes; brush down sides of pan with a wet pastry brush to prevent crystals from forming. Pour into an 8-by-2-inch round tart pan, swirling to coat bottom evenly. Set aside.
2. In a medium saucepan over medium-high heat, bring half-and-half and ground almonds just to a boil; remove from heat. Let steep, covered, 20 minutes. Strain through a fine sieve into a clean saucepan, pressing with a rubber spatula to extract liquid; discard solids.
3. Whisk remaining 2/3 cup sugar and salt into mixture in saucepan; bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Whisk together eggs and yolks in a medium bowl. Whisking constantly, gradually add half-and-half mixture. Stir in the amaretto. Pour through a fine sieve into prepared pan; place in a roasting pan.
4. Cover the flan with foil; poke several holes in foil. Place pan in oven; fill it with boiling water to reach halfway up sides of flan. Bake until just set, 50 to 55 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool completely. Cover with plastic wrap; chill overnight. Run a thin knife around edge of flan; invert onto a serving plate.



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RECIPES

## COCONUT MARGARITAS

SERVES 2

1 cup sweetened shredded coconut

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup freshly squeezed lime juice, plus 2 table-  
spoons for glasses (about 5 limes)

3/4 cup Coco Lopez or cream of coconut

1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons tequila

1/4 cup Cointreau or other orange liqueur

1. Preheat oven to 350°. On a rimmed baking sheet, toss coconut with the salt. Spread on sheet; toast in oven, stirring frequently, until golden brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Let cool, then crush with your hands until crumbly.

2. Pour 2 tablespoons lime juice into a shallow dish. Place coconut mixture in another dish. Dip rims of two cocktail glasses in lime juice, then in coconut mixture, coating well.

3. Combine remaining ingredients with 1 cup ice in a blender; purée until smooth. Divide evenly between prepared glasses, and serve immediately.

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## PINK MARGARITAS

SERVES 4

*Grenadine, a nonalcoholic syrup made from pomegranates, gives the margarita its color.*

1/3 cup fresh lime juice

1/3 cup fresh lemon juice

1/2 cup tequila

2 tablespoons Grand Marnier

3 tablespoons grenadine

2 tablespoons superfine sugar

2 cups crushed ice

Combine all ingredients in a blender, and mix until smooth. Serve immediately in oversize dessert goblets.

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## MARGARITAS FOR A CROWD

SERVES 6 TO 8

2 cups sugar

2 cups water

Lime wedges

Coarse salt or sea salt

2 cups freshly squeezed lime juice

2 cups tequila

1 cup triple sec or Grand Marnier

Cracked ice cubes

1. Make simple syrup: Bring sugar and water to a boil in a small saucepan. Simmer, stirring, until sugar has dissolved. Remove from heat; let cool. Refrigerate until ready to use.
2. Rub rims of glasses with a lime wedge; dip rims in a dish of salt.
3. In a large pitcher, combine lime juice, tequila, and triple sec or Grand Marnier. Add chilled sugar syrup, and stir to combine. Add ice cubes, and serve in prepared glasses.

FOLD

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## MEXICAN SPICE GLOSSARY

A wide array of fresh and dried herbs, chiles, seeds, and spices makes for a complex cuisine.



- |                                                              |                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 1. ACHIOTE PASTE (ALSO CALLED ANNATTO)                       | 11. DRIED EPAZOTE                                   |
| 2. PEPITAS (HULLED PUMPKIN SEEDS)                            | 12. JALAPENO PEPPER                                 |
| 3. SESAME SEEDS                                              | 13. SERRANO CHILE                                   |
| 4. PILONCILLO (UNREFINED CANE SUGAR;<br>ALSO SOLD AS PANELA) | 14. TOMATILLOS                                      |
| 5. PASILLA CHILE                                             | 15. CHIPOTLE PEPPER PUREE                           |
| 6. CHILES DE ARBOL                                           | 16. MEXICAN CINNAMON STICKS<br>(ALSO CALLED CANELE) |
| 7. DRIED CHILE SEEDS                                         | 17. CUMIN SEEDS                                     |
| 8. ANCHO CHILE (DRIED POBLANO CHILE)                         | 18. ALLSPICE BERRIES                                |
| 9. DRIED MEXICAN OREGANO                                     | 19. CORIANDER SEEDS                                 |
| 10. POBLANO CHILE                                            |                                                     |



A piñata has much more personality than your average party decoration. The mere presence of one of these fantastical figures makes a gathering feel festive long before guests break it open and plunge into its showers of candy and confetti. Before they became symbols of Mexico, piñatas had made their way around the world. Centuries ago, revelers in Italy and Spain split apart clay vessels filled with favors. (Some credit Italian explorer Marco Polo with introducing the custom after his travels to China.) The story goes that the Spanish took piñatas to Mexico in the 1500s, though the Aztecs may have already had versions of their own. Piñatas were once used in religious rituals, but today's creations—animals, stars, flowers, and fruit wrapped in ruffles of colored paper—are employed purely for fun. Breaking the piñata remains the highlight of many a Mexican fiesta, in particular Las Posadas, the nine-day celebration leading up to Christmas. Children form a circle and sing traditional songs as they take turns being blindfolded and swinging a stick at the piñata, every time hoping to land the decisive whack that finally releases its treasures.

Creating a piñata can be as entertaining as breaking one open. Though each piñata here looks very different, most were accomplished with two simple techniques: smoothing pasty newspaper over blown-up balloons, and overlapping crepe-paper cutouts to give the fish their scales, the flowers their petals, and the bee its fuzzy stripes. (The strawberry, you will see, is even easier to make.) The basic method is eminently adaptable—the bee's fringe, for example, could easily be used for a furry creature. So use your imagination. It's not difficult to make a piñata so charming you'll almost wish you didn't have to break it open. Almost.



## PINATA BASICS

Blow up a balloon for the “body” of the piñata; a balloon at least 12 inches long or wide makes the best target. Round or oval shapes are particularly versatile for decoration, but other shapes may inspire you. For the papier-mâché mixture, combine roughly equal parts flour and water; add more or less of either ingredient if you like to work with a thicker or thinner paste—this is not an exact science. Cut newspaper strips about 1 1/2 inches wide. Dip a strip into the paste, using your fingers to remove the excess. Smooth the strip onto the balloon. Cover the entire balloon, except the knot, one strip at a time, in a single layer. Add a hanger for the piñata: Wrap and tie a length of string around the wet balloon, leaving long loose ends to hang the balloon. Add a second layer of papier-mâché strips over the balloon. Balance the balloon on a glass, and let dry overnight or longer if needed, rotating it once or twice so all areas dry completely. Pop the balloon with a pin, then carefully pull it out by the knot. Don't worry if it breaks apart and some pieces stick inside. With a marker, divide piñata into four equal sections to orient you when decorating. Cut a “trap door” with a utility knife; add candy, confetti, and other treats, such as small toys, then tape the door shut with masking tape.



### FLOWER PINATA

Cover the papier-mâché form with strips of crepe paper: Brush on craft glue, then smooth strips in place. For a rose, cut lots of petals in graduated sizes; our smallest ones are 5 inches long by 6 inches wide; the largest are 10 by 10. For the flower's center, loosely roll a length of 5-inch-wide crepe paper, and glue it to the top of the balloon. Then add a row of small petals around it, gluing them at their bases after taking a small tuck or two in the bottom of each for more flare. As you make each row, overlap petals by about a third. Make the next row about 1/2 inch below the first. Continue, using larger petals as you work your way down. Stop about two-thirds of the way. Cover the piñata's base with green crepe paper; add leaves if you wish. For a carnation, cut a spiky edge on long strips of paper instead of using individual petals, and gather bases of the strips tightly as you glue. Play with crepe-paper color by dipping it into a bowl of water with food coloring; dry before using.

### STRAWBERRY PINATA

To make a blossom, wrap a length of wire in a thin strip of crepe paper, gluing at ends if necessary. Use floral tape to join a small roll of yellow paper to one end of the wire for the flower center, then add white petals and a leaf down the stem; hide floral tape with more crepe paper. Wrap and glue a double layer of red crepe paper around the piñata. Use a needle and thread to make a running stitch around the paper's bottom edge; pull the thread to cinch. Gather excess paper at top. Cut out leaf shapes, and add them one at a time to the gathered paper at top, wrapping with floral tape as you go and taping in the stem of the flower, too. Hide the tape by wrapping a strip of crepe paper around the top. Cut out almond shapes in a different red for seeds, and glue-stick them onto the strawberry.



### FISH PINATA

Make a cardboard template for scales; ours has 2-inch-wide scallops. Cut out long strips of scales by leaving the crepe paper folded. Cut out fins (tail, dorsal, pectoral), and glue in place. Then cover the body with overlapping scales. Use a small squirt bottle of glue as you go. When you approach the face, decide where you want the mouth to be, and cut an opening with a utility knife. When all scales are applied, glue on paper dots for eyes.

### BUMBLEBEE PINATA

Use a "bowling pin" balloon for this piñata. Glue a circle of black crepe paper onto each end. Cut sections of yellow and black folded crepe paper (ours are 2 inches tall), then make deep cuts for fringe. Starting at the tail end, glue on layers of fringe, overlapping to leave about 1/8 inch showing; make alternate sections of black and yellow. Before adding the last two sections, add wings made of glassine or waxed paper, then keep adding fringe, and continue over the head with black fringe. Make holes with an awl for pipe-cleaner antennae; dab them with glue before poking them in.



## GOOD THINGS



### FIESTA INVITATIONS

Glue crepe-paper fringe to blank note cards for invitations; use rubber stamps to state the occasion.

### PARTY PLACE MATS

Decorate the table at your next fiesta with *papel picado*—paper flags unfurled on holidays like Cinco de Mayo. Find them (sold in rows attached to string for hanging) at crafts stores. Snip them off their string for place mats, or cut them into strips for napkin wraps. Colored flags can bleed when wet, so arrange them over a paper tablecloth to avoid stains.



### SILK-FLOWER PARTY LIGHTS

These flowers look like the prettiest climbing vines. But they're not just sweet by day—they're radiant by night. Despite their enchanted appearance, they are simply holiday lights covered with faux flowers (we chose flame-hued silk poppies). Making this decoration doesn't require stitching, tape, or glue; all you need are silk flowers and a string of lights.

**HOW-TO:** You'll need miniature holiday string lights for outdoor use, as well as silk poppies or other flowers (one for each bulb) with removable plastic stems and centers, available at crafts stores. Pull the heads off the stems, then use scissors to enlarge the hole to about 1/4 inch to fit over the base of each light. If your flowers have layers of petals—as with a gardenia—stack them onto the base from largest to smallest. Push the petals back, away from the bulb, so they don't touch it and overheat (for safety, be sure that each bulb is firmly connected to its base). Then hang the string of blooms just as you would any other decorative garland.



### LANTERN VASE

Make a vase to match your flowers with a Chinese paper lantern and a small drinking glass. You'll find the accordion-style lanterns in many colors at party-supply stores. Trace the top of the glass onto the top of the lantern. Cut out that circle using scissors. Then slide in the glass, allowing the top of the lantern to catch on the lip of the glass, keeping the lantern "open." Pour water into the glass, then add a handful of flowers, such as these zinnias, with their stems cut short so the blooms cluster at the top of the lantern.