



Trujillo-Paumier

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The Party's on the Plate

Think Cancún is just about frozen margaritas and resort buffets? Think again. Raphael Kadushin finds that the city is trading its spring-break image for serious culinary bona fides.

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Bladimir García, head chef at Ramona restaurant, is a true mole master. His spicy *mole del centro*, commonly found in Mexico City, blends peanuts, pistachios, almonds, and ancho chile. He douses his short-rib stew with *mole del olla*, a vegetable-heavy version from central Mexico. And the smoky *mole de Oaxaca* on his turkey breast contains chilhuacle chile, native to the southern part of the country. What's most surprising about all these artful moles is where García is serving them: Ramona is located in Nizuc Resort & Spa, on the edge of Cancún, a city more commonly associated with mudslide-like moles, limp tacos, and endless tequila shots than with thoughtfully sourced, ambitiously prepared cuisine.

How did a culinary scene blossom in this former gastronomic wasteland? Simple: now that Mexican chefs are turning into global stars, like Enrique Olvera (Mexico City's Pujol), Alejandro Ruiz (Casa Oaxaca), and Daniel Ovadía (Mexico City's Paxia restaurants), many ambitious cooks who had left for European kitchens are returning or choosing not to leave in the first place. And Cancún, flush with resort cash and dense with uninspired hotel restaurants, is an obvious destination for them—especially since the city's increasingly food-savvy visitors are no longer willing to settle for soupy guacamole and assembly-line enchiladas. The result is a flurry of great new restaurants on and off the resort strip.

La Joya

At this restaurant in the Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach Resort, chef Francisco Flores Obieta draws on earlier stints cooking in France and at Pujol. His grouper fillet marinated in annatto and a cactus-leaf salad tossed with roasted Oaxacan grasshoppers are characteristic of his menu's indigenous bent. *Entrées \$15–\$23.*