

**FLAVORS OF MEXICO 2018:
Report of Antoinette Benjamin, LDEAA President**

**Thirty seven Dames representing 16 LDEI chapters assembled in Merida Mexico
to begin a 4 day cultural and educational adventure lead by the hospitable Mexican
Chapter**

Our adventure began with a ceremonial blessing performed by a Mayan Shaman, Mayan traditional dancing, and a group promenade (complete with police escort) to the restaurant La Tradicion where Chaya Margaritas were served to kick off the festivities. We quickly learned that Chaya is the Mayan super green and it appeared in many dishes throughout our stay from acqua frescas to numerous preparations using fresh masa. The legendary chef Jeremiah Tower who now lives in Merida joined the Dames to share his observations about life in the Yucatan and the food treasures found here. Those treasures were well reflected in our dinner that evening.

The following day we traveled about an hour and a half outside of Merida to Hacienda Sotuta de Peon. Here for several centuries the use of another variety of agaves called henequen was demonstrated. The raw fibers are shredded, pulled, wound together made into rope that varies in size for making hammocks, twine, to rope that tie ocean freighter to docks around the world. It was considered “green gold” in its heyday. We all enjoyed a festive lunch on the beautiful terrace of the hacienda. Back to Merida we refreshed and then headed off to the Pueblo Pibil. Here we were greeted with Habanera Margaritas and viewed the cooking in progress in the pits behind the garden. Much of the food from this area is cooked under ground mostly due to the hot climate found here. The Mayan diet is based on three main components; corn, beans and squash. Our creative dinner used the corn to make ice cream, empanadas filled with beans served with tequila flambé shrimp, squash, stuffed and filled with ground venison wrapped in banana leaves then cooked underground.

On day two we headed to the colorful hectic regional market. Here we were divided into teams and each team was given 200 pesos to “bargain” with the local sellers to purchase items needed for our meals at Hacienda Ochil. Breakfast was a fresh masa tortilla placed on a wood-burning grill until it puffed open and then a raw egg was placed inside and slipped black on the grill for a minute or two. Was so delicious! We next got to work alongside of the Mayan woman as we prepared lunch dishes. We were introduced to the sour orange that is used extensively in their cuisine most famously to season the pork which was then cooked in banana leaves underground. We enjoyed the fruits of our labor along with shots of tequila. That evening refreshed from naps on the return bus ride we gathered in the city center. Here front row seats were reserved for us to experience the video-graphing on the façade of the cathedral which told the story of the conquest of Merida. A short walk later to the Terrace of Olympia lead to a dinner hosted by the Mayor of Merida, the first woman to govern the city in 400 years. She greeted each of us warmly and related that she attended college for one year in Michigan! She gave each of us a Yucatan cookbook.

Chichen Itza was reserved for our final day. Complete with some informed guides we toured the site in spite of the 102 degree temperatures. As a surprise for each of us the Mexico Dames commissioned beautifully embroidered Huipil dresses for the Dames and Guayabera shirts made for the Dudes. The Mexican Dames demonstrated their mastery of details with the LDEI logo embroidered on the cuff of each shirt! Horse drawn carriages transported us down the beautiful Calle Montejo to view the colonial French influence at its finest. Of course a group photo is always an important souvenir and this one was taken at the Monument of the People, the Mexican “Champs Elysees” by a drone. We walked across the street to a restored colonial home converted to a restaurant for a seated 8 course tasting menu featuring updated presentations of Yucatan specialties. The rabbit in a plum pipian sauce and the brisket with the most interesting and creative riff on a tamale were standouts. Of course no meal would be complete on this journey without tequila and we thank our sponsor Jose Cuervo for keeping us all well-hydrated

Next March the Mexico Dames will welcome us once again to explore another region of their interesting country. One of the many enriching aspects of being a Dame d’Escoffier is the international outreach provided by our international chapters. We owe these Dames a big thank you for all of the hard work they do to provide us with gastronomical delights, cultural exchange, and networking.