

Veracruz-style fish complex in its regional varieties

By Edmund Tijerina
etijerina@express-news.net

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When it comes to the classic Veracruz-style fish, there is no one single, correct way to prepare the dish.

After all, there are differences even within the Mexican state of Veracruz.

“If you're close to the coast, it doesn't have raisins, generally. If you go to the mountains, you will find it often has raisins,” said [Iliana de la Vega](#), chef-instructor at [the Culinary Institute of America](#) campus here and chef/owner of [El Naranjo Mobile](#) in Austin.

Or, she notes, home cooks along the coast often prepare the dish on top of a stove, while home cooks in the mountains of the state are more likely to cook it in an oven. The reason for that difference is simple: Homes along the beach often don't have ovens, and homes in the mountains are more likely to only have ovens.

“Everybody has their own recipe, whether it's the north or the center or the south,” said [Nelly Mendoza Olsen](#), general manager at Paloma Blanca restaurant and a native of Santiago Tuxtla, a small city in the state of Veracruz.

Having said that, there is no single, correct method. There are some essential ingredients that a true Veracruz-style sauce should contain: tomatoes, onion, garlic, capers and green olives.

What about chiles? Some versions don't use pickled chiles, while other versions use pickled jalapeños or serranos. Perhaps a bit more traditional than those chiles is the native chile güero or the chile largo. No matter the chile, it's not a spicy dish. Like the best of Mexican regional cooking, Veracruz-style fish is a dish of many different flavor notes with tremendous depth.

For Mendoza Olsen's family, it's important to use pickling juice from the jalapeños and the olives and some bay leaves.

Other versions use potatoes, peeled and cooked separately and then added to the dish.

Most likely, de la Vega said, that came from a similar dish, pescado a la vizcaina, a Spanish dish from the Basque region. The version using salt cod, or bacalao, is a Christmas tradition.

Like many Latin American dishes, the veracruzana sauce is a mix of Old World and New World ingredients, combining the olives and capers with tomatoes and chiles.

The cuisine of Veracruz, the site at which [Hernán Cortés](#) first landed, often combines elements from different cultures. For example, a different Veracruz regional dish features chicken in a peanut sauce, using the legumes that came from Africa.

Even though the classic name is huachinango a la veracruzana, the people of Veracruz will use any number of fish and other types of seafood, not just red snapper. It's especially good with shrimp, Mendoza Olsen said.

Then again, in Mexico City, some places serve lengua a la veracruzana, or cow's tongue cooked in the famous sauce, de la Vega said.

In that home state, the pescado a la veracruzana is the common party and celebration dish, much like mole poblano is in Puebla and Central Mexico.

“It's a traditional dish for the whole state,” [Mendoza Olson](#) said. “Every time you have an activity, whenever families get together, it's the dish that you have.”

One big difference between serving the dish in this country and its homeland is that in Mexico it's often made with the whole fish, but here it's usually a fillet, especially in a restaurant. The most traditional way of cooking it is simmering in the sauce, but many restaurants will cook the fish separately and then add the sauce on top.

Another restaurant method, de la Vega said, is to start the fish on top of the stove, cover it with sauce and finish it in the oven.

In other words, there are plenty of ways to make it well.

“When I eat pescado a la veracruzana, it makes me feel like I'm home,” Mendoza Olsen said. “I'm so far away, but with the food, I can feel closer, and I'm excited that I can share it.”