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# ROBERTO GARCIA: FEEDING THE HEART

BY KIRA RYDER



Roberto Garcia has soft easy dark chocolate eyes. They twinkle brightly when he speaks of cooking, particularly his mother's, and dance joyfully when he shares his gratitude of finally doing what he loves.

"Maybe the secret to doing things well is liking what you are doing," he muses as he expertly removes the skins from the avocados.

Recently welcomed into the kitchen of The Farmer and the Cook, Roberto is the organic vegetarian restaurant's latest secret. But it is not just his teddy bear nature and passion for delicious food that has us all falling in love. Roberto's story of gaining the courage to follow his heart is a familiar one in Ojai and is re-inspiring an entire community to remember to do the same.

## Pre-Columbian Mexican Food

By the end of last summer, the overwhelming success of The Farmer and the Cook's weekend Pizza Café with live music was taking its toll on Olivia Chase—"The Cook" and co-owner—and her kitchen staff. She kept hearing about a regular customer named Roberto who was interested in cooking with her, but because she was hearing about him from the beautiful blond twins Nicole and Lauren LaForge, she just assumed that "he wanted to date Nicole and Lauren."

One evening after serving over 100 people, her newest cook quit. But, as is typical fashion at The Farmer and the Cook, he had already replaced himself. Olivia's annoyance at the hire that happened without her involvement melted as soon as she met the replacement, Roberto. Her heart lifted

and the deal was sealed when he expressed desire to prepare "Pre-Columbian Mexican food, dishes like Chiles Enogada."

*Pre-Columbian Mexican food* refers to the cooking in Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish in the 15th and 16th centuries. Traditional Aztec, Mayan, Zapotec, Mahuatl and other native dishes that incorporate corn, potatoes, beans, squash, tomatoes, tomatillos, chocolate, vanilla, chiles, avocado, chayotes, papayas, prickly pear cactus and peanuts.

Usually vegetarian, the flavors are a natural for The Farmer and the Cook and have inspired

wonderfully flavorful dishes such as pumpkin ravioli with tomatillo Jalapeño sauce; Pasilla chiles stuffed with zucchini and tomato served in a feta cheese cream sauce with walnuts and pomegranates; and "stuffed tomato filled with nopales, baby tomatillos and mole sauce, served with Pasilla chile, zucchini, corn and cream sauce.

"It's the same variety of ingredients, that is why I feel so comfortable with everything that is around me," explains Roberto, who is of Zapotec decent on his mother's side. Scooping out a plump ripe tomato grown by Steve Sprinkle—"The Farmer" and co-owner with wife Olivia—Roberto brightens as he reveals, "but there is still room for experimentation and play."

But creativity takes practice. On a recent Tuesday night, I found Roberto in the kitchen by himself carefully layering roasted Kabocha squash, goat cheese and polenta. "I'm experimenting to see what flavors come through," he mused. He cut the stacks into perfect half moon shapes, arranged them on a plate with a complementary combination of chard, apples and turnips and artistically poured the reduced wine sauce around the plate, playing the dish's flavors all the way to the final presentation. When you are following your heart, you are compelled to show up and participate, and what could be understood as work becomes play.

## Coming to America

Roberto first came to Oxnard in 1985 from Lake Chapala in Jalisco, Mexico, with his parents and two sisters when he was

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10 years old. He became a permanent resident at the age of 14. Infused with a traditional understanding of a Mexican male's responsibility as "the provider" and the desire to make his parents proud, before he was even through college, Roberto had identified a trade that seemed profitable and stable.

Raised to understand that "whatever you do, do it well," Roberto met that criterion by committing to a job he could do easily. For the last 13 years, he has been working in the production of pre-construction drawings, specializing in electrical systems. "It's my job to find a solution before it becomes a problem ... making sure all the systems coordinate effectively."

But at the age of 28, Roberto realized that his own internal systems were not in coordination. His head and heart had disconnected, and his health had begun to suffer. But the sudden awareness that he had lost the ability to feel spurred him to "look around at his environment" and question his situation.

### Arriving in Ojai

Three years later, in May 2007, he moved to Ojai from Oxnard because he was looking "for somewhere that felt more like home." But it took a friend inquiring about what he really wanted to do for Roberto to gain the confidence to start looking for a kitchen.

Chopping the late heirloom tomatoes for his delicious cucumber, roasted Poblano and avocado salsa, he described the new feelings of happiness as "Light. There is no burden. You have clarity in all you look at. Life seems simple, even if it is a challenge. Big problems seem smaller."

One of the problems Roberto has found himself trying to solve is no longer having his family nearby. About 5 years ago, they returned to Guadalajara, Jalisco, in the central region of Mexico and following his mother's heart, opened up a family restaurant, La Cocinita, meaning "The Little Kitchen."

Roberto grew up cooking with his family, and desires to be with them and be a part of the venture, but a combination of economics and dharma (a Buddhist term meaning living in harmony with one's self and the universe) keep him here. He thoughtfully tries to explain.

"Going to Mexico would be limiting. I love Mexico as a great place to visit .... I enjoy the beat the life has ... but there is not much room financially.... I am freer here. I like it here. This is my home."

His yearning to be closer to family and around lovingly prepared food drew him to The Farmer and the Cook first as a customer. "It's a nice feeling here. I could come for dinner and was greeted with beautiful smiles from everyone. I had not felt that at many other places."

### Home Cooking at The Farmer and the Cook

"The best food is cooked at home," smiles Roberto. "The love is there. The family is there. The relationships are there."

So it was natural that Roberto chose to reconnect with his cooking at The Farmer and the Cook. Olivia's kitchen is like a family kitchen. When you enter on a weekend night, everyone greets you with hugs and kisses and food to taste. And with Steve as the gregarious and entertaining host of the café, you might even get poured a glass of Casa Barranca wine or sangria while you converse.

On a recent Friday evening, as Roberto was prepping for that night and the rest of the weekend, Nicollete was baking up a storm, Erika was prepping the pizza dough, Gaby and her mom Rosa were starting to tackle the dishes and Olivia was in the usual owner-operator position, stretched between pots on the stove and her office.

Nicole, Katy and Kaley gathered around Roberto to learn about the evening's offerings. "His enthusiasm inspires us," glowed Katy. "His attitude is incredible," gushed Nicole. "He is always smiling and full of energy and wants to connect with you." The servers are able to easily pass on his enthusiasm to the customers who have been thrilled about the new flavors coming out of the "pizza café."

But no one is more delighted than Olivia. In awe, I watch her, the head of kitchen, listening and learning from Roberto with no judgment and no superiority. She allows him to enter the kitchen and be himself. And she allows his enthusiasm and passion to re-inspire her. "It's so much fun to have a partner in the kitchen," she beams. The spirit of playfulness in cooking has reentered and you feel and taste it.

"We have been afraid to make food too spicy," shrugs Olivia. "Roberto has helped give me the confidence to cook how I want to." And Roberto knows spicy. He chuckles as he dices the Jalapeño without removing the seeds, "I have such a high tolerance for spicy food. What I consider mild might just be insane." Nicole, Katy and Grace know this well as sometimes dishes get sent back to be tamed.

### Serving Love

The openness and loving embrace of the community of Ojai were the medicine Roberto's heart needed, and they feed his courage daily. Cooking at The Farmer and the Cook is a way to stay connected with his parents' restaurant, mother's recipes and a familiar way of life, while simultaneously nourishing the discovery and blossoming of his own expressions.

The kitchen is where we gather and share our stories. The tales that get traded while preparing meals get passed on through the food. When Roberto cooks, his sweet tender love story of following his heart comes through in each tasty spicy bite.

*Kira Ryder is grateful and honored to live in the beautiful Ojai Valley. Her yoga studio, Lulu Bandha's, home of "Stiff White Guy Yoga," is conveniently located in the heart of town right next to the Sunday farmers' market. Compelled to share everything, her writings about yoga and cooking appear on [lulubandhas.com](http://lulubandhas.com) and [channelchow.blogspot.com](http://channelchow.blogspot.com) respectively.*

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# Roberto's Recipes:

## TOMATOES STUFFED WITH NOPALITOS AND TOMATILLOS IN MOLE ROJO WITH CREAM OF CHAYOTES AND POBLANO RAJAS

8 large heirloom tomatoes

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Slice the stem side and core each tomato to form a bowl; save cores for mole rojo sauce (see below). Lather the inside walls of the bowl with olive oil. Place in a baking dish, set this aside until the filling is ready. Keep the tomato lids separately for further preparation.

### Nopalitos and Tomatillo Filling

2 tsp. olive oil  
1 pound nopales (3–4 cactus leaves, whole leaves are required for roasting)  
1 cup baby tomatillos  
½ cup epazote leaves, chopped fine  
1 onion, roughly chopped and sautéed (from Mole Rojo preparation below)  
1 cup queso fresco, crumbled, or fresh feta cheese  
½ cup bread crumbs or crushed croutons

Remove the spines and coarse part of the stem from the nopal leaves. Heat a heavy skillet and coat lightly with sea salt, place the leaves to cover the bottom of the pan then roast over high heat on the same side until the color begins to pale on the top. Turn the leaves over and roast until browned on both sides. Remove from heat and slice into ¼-inch by 1-inch lengths.

Place the tomato bowls in the oven and keep there until the filling is completed (8–10 minutes max). After removing the tomatoes, reduce the temperature of the oven to 180 degrees.

Reserve the excess salt from the skillet, if any, then coat skillet with oil. When the oil is hot, sauté the tomatillos until blistering appears. Add the crystallized onions, roasted nopales and mole rojo. Bring the sauce to a boil, add the epazote leaves, reduce the heat to a simmer for a couple minutes until you are ready to fill the tomatoes, at which point the sauce is removed from the heat and the cheese is folded into the filling.

Remove the tomatoes from the oven, fill generously with the sauce and top with breadcrumbs. Set back in the oven to keep warm.

Glaze the bottom of the tomato lids with olive oil and grill in a small skillet until lightly browned.

### Mole Rojo

1 cup canola oil (approximately)  
1 California dried pepper  
1 Ancho dried pepper  
2 Japanese dried peppers  
3 Roma tomatoes or use heirloom tomato cores  
1 garlic clove, whole  
1 bay leaf  
1 cinnamon stick (see note below)  
1–2 fresh oregano stalks (equivalent to ½ teaspoon dried leaves)  
3- to 4-ounce chocolate bar, Green & Black's Maya Gold or Sweetened Dark Chocolate, shaved  
1 vegetable broth bouillon cube  
2 Tbsp. each peanuts, almonds, pumpkin seeds and white sesame seeds; flax seeds can be used additionally or to substitute any one of the other seeds if preferred. (Roast each type of seed separately in a cast iron skillet until browned and set aside.)  
1 small onion, sliced into ¼-inch-thick rings then chopped coarsely

In a deep skillet heat ½ inch of oil over moderately high heat until it is hot but not smoking. In it cook the onions. Heat until tender, then remove from oil and set aside to drain. Use above in Nopalitos filling. Reserve the remaining oil for later.

De-seed the California and Ancho chilies before cooking. Place all the chiles, tomatoes, garlic, cinnamon, bay leaf and oregano in a saucepan. Remove leaves from oregano stalks before heating but keep the bare stalks in the saucepan. Add water to cover the ingredients. Bring water to a boil, add the bouillon cube, then simmer over medium heat for about 10 minutes. Remove saucepan from heat, remove the oregano stalks and cinnamon stick (see note below) then stir in the chocolate shavings and let stand to cool. Add all items to a blender including roasted seeds and purée until smooth.

Pour the mixture into the same skillet used to fry the onions, using the remaining oil; bring to a boil, lower heat and cook for about 15 minutes. This process will incorporate the flavors, preserve the sauce for up to a week and thicken it. Add salt to taste.

*Note: Roberto recommends using Cassia cinnamon, also known as Chinese cinnamon, which has a rougher bark texture and is more pungent than Ceylon cinnamon or common cinnamon. Cassia cinnamon gives a more traditional taste to the meal, if available. Break off an inch of the softened bark after it has simmered in the saucepan to remain in the sauce.*



### Cream of chayotes and Poblano Rajas

- 8 Poblano peppers (roasted, peeled, seeded and cut into strips, called *rajas*)
- 2 chayotes, quartered lengthwise, then sliced across at 1/8 to 1/4 inch
- 1 tsp. olive oil
- 2 Tbsp. butter, softened
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 1/2 cup white wine or pulque (a fermentation of blue agave or maguey)
- 1/2 pound Mexican cream or sour cream thinned using whipping cream
- 1/2 cup Chiguagua cheese (Oaxaca or Mozzarella may be substituted), shredded
- 1 ear of tender white corn, shucked
- 1/2 tsp. powdered cardamom
- 1/2 tsp. powdered cumin

Sauté onions and peppers in a pan coated lightly with olive oil until onions soften and brown.

In a saucepan, melt and clear the butter, then add the wine. Reduce until 3/4 remains. Pour the Mexican cream slowly while stirring; keep stirring frequently.

Add the chayotes and corn to the onion and rajas mixture; continue to sauté until tender, approximately 8 minutes. Add cardamom, cumin, salt and fresh-ground pepper to taste. Fold in cream reduction and shredded cheese. Bring all to a simmer, then remove from heat.

### Garnishes and Presentation

- 8 basil sprigs

Remove the stuffed tomatoes from the oven, set aside and let cool. In a deep bowl, form a bed with the chayote and rajas cream. Place the stuffed tomato in the center of the bed and decorate with the grilled tomato lid offset to the side of the tomato. Insert the basil sprig into the stuffed tomato and serve.



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## CHILES ENOGADA

### Walnut Cream Sauce

- 1 cup cream
- ½ cup queso fresco or mild feta cheese
- 1 to 5 Tbsp. sugar
- ⅓ cup chopped walnuts
- Seeds of 1 small pomegranate (about ½ cup, more if you wish, for garnish)
- Sprigs of cilantro (for garnish)

Note: The sauce is traditionally sweet, but may be too sweet for American tastes. We suggest you add only 1 tablespoon of sugar at first, taste, and then add more if you wish. This sauce is served at room temperature or lightly chilled. Don't try to heat it. In a blender combine first four ingredients until smooth.

### Calabazitas Filling

- ½ small onion, finely chopped
- Cooking oil (enough to coat bottom of pan)
- 1–3 Jalapeño peppers (minced or keep whole with stem-on)
- 1 pound Mexican squash (calabazitas) or zucchini
- ½ cup corn kernels
- 1 tsp. cumin
- Salt and fresh-ground pepper to taste

In a large sauté pan, fry the whole Jalapeño peppers to flavor the oil, should you desire to keep the flavor but not the heat. Add the onion and garlic to the pan and sauté over medium heat until golden brown. Add minced Jalapeño now if spicy filling is desired. Add remaining ingredients and cook until calabazitas are tender or cooked as desired. Stuff chiles with calabazitas mixture.

*(Note: You can use toothpicks to keep the chiles closed after they have been stuffed, should the walls have thinned during the roasting process. Otherwise just handle them very carefully, cupping them in your hands while slipping them into the oil to fry, in the next step.)*

### Chiles

- 8 Poblano chiles

To prepare the chiles, roast them directly over a gas flame (preferably and watchfully) or on a comal or a cast-iron skillet, turning frequently, until they blister and turn brown on all sides. Place them in a closed paper bag or, if you must use a plastic bag, first wrap the chiles in a cloth or paper towel to prevent melting the bag; in either case allow them to “sweat” for 20 minutes. Peel off the browned skin. Then make a slit in the side of each chile and remove the seeds and veins, being careful not to remove the core, or top part, and the stem. Rinse and pat dry.

### Batter

- 10 eggs, separated
- ½ cup flour
- Vegetable oil for frying

Beat egg whites until stiff peaks form. In a separate bowl, beat yolks well. Fold yolks into beaten whites. Sprinkle about 2½ tablespoons of the flour on top and fold it into the egg mixture.

Sprinkle a plate with a layer of flour and lay each stuffed chile in it. Sprinkle more flour on top of the chiles so that they are thoroughly coated; this helps the batter adhere. In a large sauté pan, heat about ¼ inch oil over medium-high heat. When oil is hot, pick up each floured chile by the stem and dip it the batter. Then gently lay it in the oil.

As the chiles fry, lift the pan by the handle and tilt it back and forth so that the edges of the battered chiles are cooked (this makes them easier to turn too). When the first side is golden brown, turn and cook the other side. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on several layers of paper towels. Keep warm in a low oven (about 150 or 200 degrees) until all are done.

Note: The chiles may be prepared in advance and reheated on a nonstick baking sheet for about 8 minutes at 450 degrees. Or they may be served at room temperature.

To serve, place a stuffed chile on each plate and cover with walnut cream sauce. Sprinkle with pomegranate seeds and garnish plate with cilantro. Serves 8.

## CHILAQUILES

- 1 dozen corn tortillas
- 1 cup canola oil (approximately)
- 1 California dried pepper
- 1 Ancho dried pepper
- 2 Japanese dried peppers
- 3 Roma tomatoes
- 1 garlic clove
- 1 cinnamon stick (see note)
- 1-2 fresh oregano stalks (equivalent to ½ teaspoon dried leaves)
- 1 vegetable bouillon cube
- 1 small onion sliced into ¼-inch-thick rings

### Optional Garnishes:

- Chopped onion
- Chopped lettuce
- Sautéed onion rings
- Mexican cheese
- Sour cream

Cut the tortillas into strips or wedges.

In a deep skillet, heat ½ inch of oil over moderately high heat until it is hot but not smoking. In it cook the onion slices and break into individual onion rings. Heat until tender, then remove from oil and set aside to drain. Using the remaining oil, fry the tortillas in batches for 10 to 20 seconds, or until they are pale golden and almost crisp, then transfer them with a slotted spatula to paper towels to drain and add salt to taste.

De-seed the California and Ancho chiles before cooking. Place all the chiles, tomatoes, garlic, cinnamon and oregano in a saucepan. Remove leaves from oregano stalks before heating but keep the bare stalks in the saucepan. Add water to cover the ingredients. Bring water to a boil, add the bouillon cube, then simmer over medium heat for about 10 minutes. Remove saucepan from heat and let stand to cool. Remove the oregano stalks and cinnamon stick. Add all items to a blender and purée until smooth.

Pour the mixture into the same skillet used to fry the tortillas using the remaining oil; bring to a boil, lower heat and cook for about 15 minutes. Add salt to taste. Place the tortilla strips in the hot sauce and cook until most of the sauce has been absorbed (1-2 minutes). Serve immediately and garnish with any or all of the suggested choices over the chilaquiles.

*Note: Roberto recommends using Cassia cinnamon, also known as Chinese cinnamon, which has a rougher bark texture and is more pungent than Ceylon cinnamon or common cinnamon. Cassia cinnamon gives a more traditional taste to the meal. Break off an inch of the softened bark after it has simmered in the saucepan to remain in the sauce.*



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