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Salad Sensations

Beers from South of the Border

Cuban Cuisine Makes a Comeback

CRAB, MANGO AND AVOCADO SALAD

JUAN CARLOS ORTEGA

Ortega's—A Mexican Bistro

San Diego, CA www.Ortegas.com



LOCATED IN SAN DIEGO'S TRENDY HILLCREST NEIGHBORHOOD, ORTEGA'S, A Mexican Bistro brings an authentic Puerto Nuevo dining experience to the heart of this southern California city.

The recipes co-owner Juan Carlos Ortega serves date back 60 years to Puerto Nuevo, a tiny fishing village between Tijuana and Ensenada on the Carretera Libre, or Free Road, in Baja California, Mexico. There, the Ortega family fed the locals with hearty servings of the local staples: rice, beans, tortillas and steamed lobster. Over time, Puerto Nuevo became a popular fishing destination for Americans, who quickly embraced the regional cuisine.

"The cuisine is really all about the lobster—everything else in Puerto Nuevo comes from other parts of Mexico," Ortega says, describing both the food of his homeland and what his restaurant's customers enjoy. "The dishes are similar to [those found in] beach communities in Mexico—fresh seafood dishes such as fish and shrimp ceviche or the fresh banana crusted snapper. The rice is similar to other Mexican restaurants, but the refried beans have a looser consistency than other Mexican restau-

rants. They are slightly spicy and extremely flavorful."

The youngest of his family's 11 children, Ortega opened the San Diego restaurant nine years ago. "I moved to San Diego 13 years ago and after living here for a few years, I decided to open a restaurant with the co-owner, John Haugland," Ortega recalls.

A few items on Ortega's San Diego menu are similar, but slightly modified versions of those served at restaurants the family still owns in Puerto Nuevo: Ortega's The Original, Villa Ortega's, Hacienda Ortega's and Ortega's Buffet. Most, however, were created in San Diego.

"The lobster with homemade flour tortillas, refried beans and rice is the signature dish in Baja and in San Diego," Ortega says. "But our dishes [in San Diego] are a bit more extensive. The dishes in Puerto Nuevo are more basic."

The Banana Crusted Huachinango, which Ortega's created in San Diego, is served with a roasted tomato arbol sauce and vegetables, rice, refried beans and a homemade flour tortilla. He shares the

recipe for what has become one of the restaurant's best-selling entrees below.

THE RECIPE: Banana Crusted Huachinango

(Also known as Plantain Crusted Seared Pacific Snapper)

Makes 4 servings

The Plantain/Banana Crust

Makes 1/2 quart

- 1 lb. butter
- 1 red bell pepper, minced
- 2 plantains, ripe and minced
- 1 shallot, minced
- ½ lemon, squeezed
- 2 qts. corn chips
- ½ cob of corn, minced

Blend all ingredients in food processor until mixture is smooth.

The Huachinango/Red Snapper

- 4 six-ounce fresh snapper filets
- Fried plantain chips

Lightly grease a large griddle or flat top and set to medium heat. Place four snapper filets on top. Evenly spread approximately 4 ounces of the plantain crust on top of each filet. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes, then turn the filets over, cooking the crust side down for another 3 to 4 minutes. Remove from griddle and garnish with fried plantain chips.