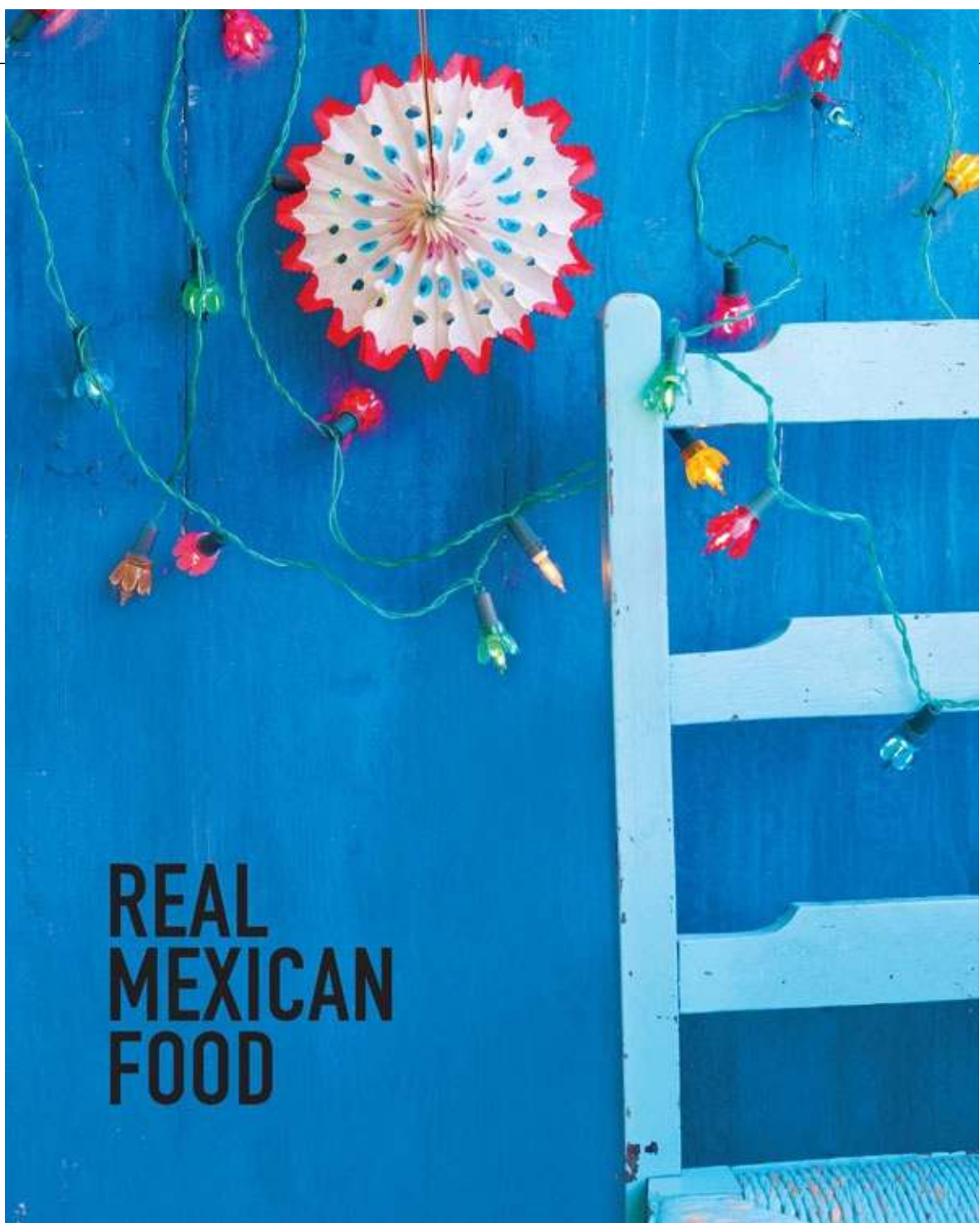




REAL MEXICAN FOOD

Authentic recipes for burritos,
tacos, salsas and more

Felipe Fuentes Cruz & Ben Fordham
of **BENITO'S HAT MEXICAN KITCHEN**



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FOOD**

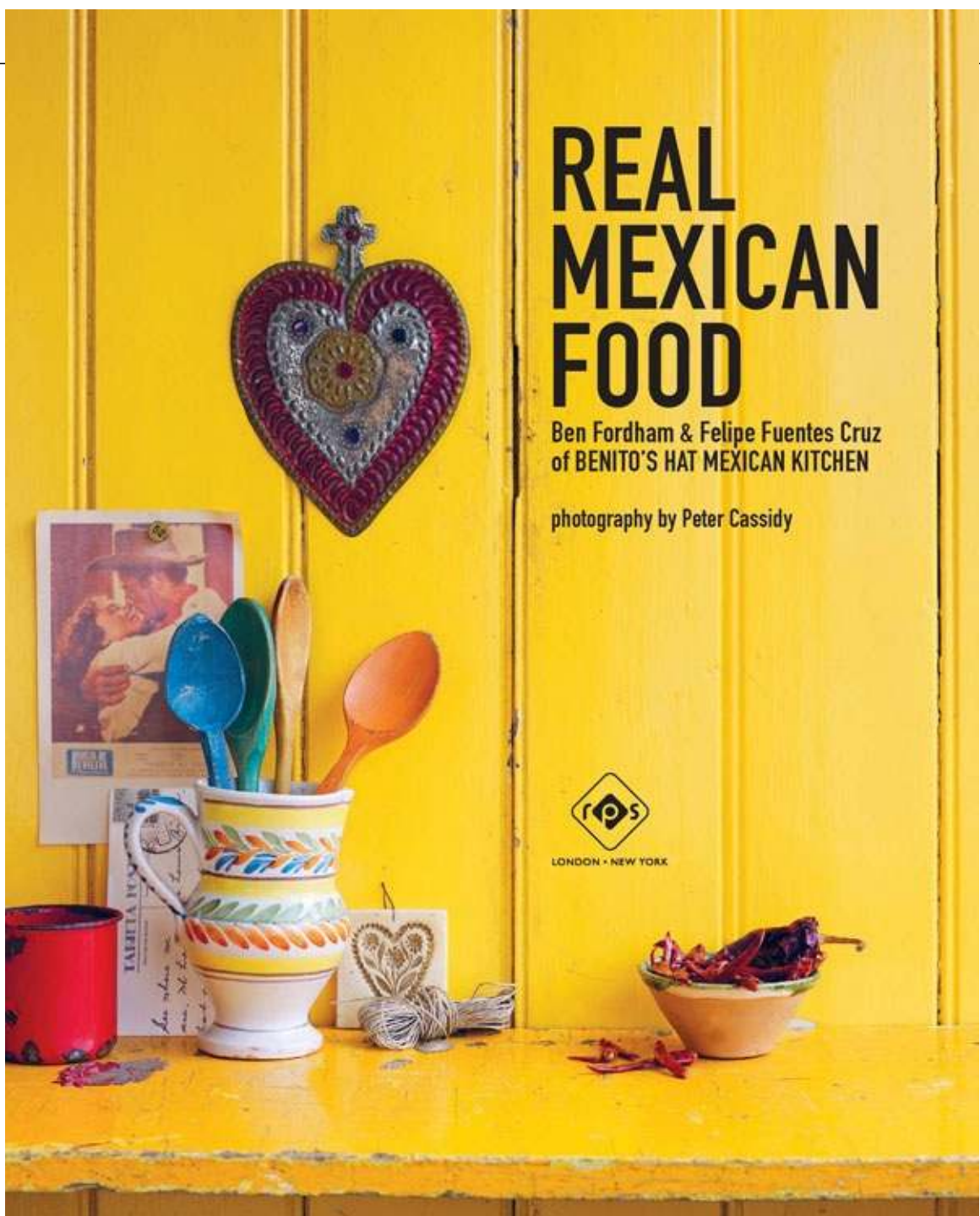
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Ben Fordham & Felipe Fuentes Cruz
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photography by Peter Cassidy



LONDON • NEW YORK



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

BEN FORDHAM opened Benito's Hat, a Mexican bar and kitchen, on Goodge Street in 2008; now there are four branches in London. His dream to open a Mexican restaurant began when he lived in Texas and he discovered real Mexican food. From hole-in-the-wall canteens with plastic chairs to fine-dining restaurants, it was all a far cry from what was then being served in London as Mexican food, but it was particularly the simple, fresh burrito and taco bars that Ben thought London was crying out for. From that point on he began the plan to bring authentic, good-quality, fresh food to his home town at a reasonable price. Ben started moonlighting at a Mexican restaurant while continuing his legal career and shortly afterwards he met Felipe, who had the same dream of bringing great Mexican food to London.

FELIPE FUENTES CRUZ was born in Puebla, Mexico. He and his eight brothers and sisters often had to lend his mother and grandmother a hand when it came to putting food on the table. At 19, he emigrated to the USA where he began his restaurant life. In 2006, he came to London, via a stint in Barcelona, and a year later, Felipe was working in a Mexican restaurant when Ben walked in. They instantly found common ground in their passion for Mexican food. Felipe has been a business partner and head chef of Benito's Hat since it began in 2008.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

PETER CASSIDY is one of Europe's most talented photographers. He specializes in food and travel and his work frequently appears in magazines. For Ryland Peters & Small, he has photographed *The Red Hot Chilli Cookbook*, *Nordic Bakery Cookbook*, *Popina Book of Baking* and the number one bestselling *The Hummingbird Bakery Cookbook*.



DEDICATION

We would like to dedicate this book to our families: Siobhan, Ferran and Yasmin, and Kay Lee, Penelope and Beatrice.

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NOTES

- All spoon measurements are level, unless otherwise specified.
- Recipes containing raw or partially cooked egg, or raw fish or shellfish, should not be served to the very young, very old, anyone with a compromised immune system or pregnant women.

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Introduction

This book and the Benito's Hat restaurants are born out of mine and Felipe's passion to bring fantastic, simple Mexican food to the British people. From the day we opened our first Hat in July 2008, we have stayed true to our belief in the importance of quality ingredients and cooking everything fresh every day. A visit to Benito's Hat takes your taste buds on a journey from the palm-fringed beaches and turquoise waves of Puerto Vallarta to the bustling heart of Mexico City for a fast, fresh and affordable feast like no other. This book will allow you to make that journey the comfort of your own home, with a deliberately wide variety of recipes. Some recipes, like the Elote Asado ([page 23](#)), are a lesson in simplicity, while others, like the Chiles en Nogada ([page 74](#)) require patience and precision, so hopefully you will find something to suit every occasion.

Felipe's education in Mexican food began in his grandmother's kitchen. Since then he has worked in restaurant kitchens in California, Barcelona and now London. He has gained in experience and technique every step of the way and has developed his own style of unique cooking that is a true melting pot of all the influences that he has come across on his wonderful culinary journey.

While my love of cooking and food also began at home, I came to appreciate Mexican food relatively late on. A year spent studying in Austin, Texas showed me the huge gulf between what was available there and what passed for Mexican food in the UK. That year I fell in love with the lady who is now my wife and also with the vibrant, fresh flavours that are at the heart of Mexican cooking.

Benito's Hat sets itself apart from the other Latin American restaurants in the UK with our Puebla-born chef, Felipe, at the helm of the kitchen. Inspired by his native country's famous street food, zingy flavours and rich culinary culture, Felipe has created a menu featuring freshly made burritos, tacos, soups and salads. Authentic recipes for marinades, salsas and beans are given a modern and unique twist by Felipe. On the following pages, Felipe and I give away some of the secrets of the restaurant as well many more recipes that Felipe has developed over 30 years spent in Mexican kitchens.

Tequilas containing barely 50% agave and pre-made lime-juice mixes do not a good margarita make! Here we encourage you to use Tequila made with 100% blue agave and freshly squeezed lime juice as a classic margarita base from which you can create many different delicious cocktails exactly to your taste.

Those of you who already love Mexican food will find new and exciting recipes in the pages of the book. Mexico's food varies from region to region and, as we have already said, Felipe's cooking has taken on influences from many places, so we are sure that even those of you who are very familiar with its cuisine will find things here to surprise and delight you. Those of you who are new to cooking it, please put aside any preconceptions you might have and embrace the beautiful flavours and combinations that this wonderful country and its cuisine have to offer.

Ben Fordha

The Mexican pantry

AVOCADO (SEE ALSO [PAGE 103](#))

Where to start with the wonderful avocado? It contains nearly 20 vitamins and nutrients such as potassium, which helps to relieve high blood pressure. It is also super rich in monounsaturated fats (the good ones).

CORIANDER/CILANTRO (SEE ALSO [PAGE 107](#))

This plant is grown throughout the world and is used both as a herb, through the fresh leaves, and as a spice, by its seeds. The leaves impart a wonderful citrus and even minty flavour to dishes but, beware, it is a herb that divides opinion.

LIMES

The balance of citrus and spice is at the heart of Mexican cooking. Fresh lime juice can be used equally to cut the sweetness in desserts or bring out the individual flavours in a spicy salsa.

TOMATOES

Walk into any vegetable market in Mexico and you will see more varieties of tomato than you can count. Whether you are going for the standard plum or the rippled kidney tomato, give it a good smell before buying and you will know instantly if you are getting something flavourful and fresh.

QUESO FRESCO

This creamy, soft cheese originated in Spain and travelled to Mexico with the earlier settlers. We have used feta as an alternative in several recipes here but if you prefer something milder then Indian paneer is a good bet.

CHILLIES (SEE ALSO [PAGE 36](#))

These are the stars of Mexican cuisine and an essential part of the Mexican diet. The level of heat depends on the concentration of a substance called capsaicin. The most developed species in Mexico is *Capsicum Annum*, which includes many varieties ranging in colour, shape, flavour and heat.

JALAPEÑOS (SEE ALSO [PAGE 92](#))

Originally from the Mexican city of Xalapa, Jalapeños can reach up to 7 cm/2³/₄ inches long and 3 cm/1¹/₄ inches wide at the base. It is a hot chilli but the intensity of the heat can vary widely depending on the terrain and variety of seed.

CHIPOTLE CHILLIES

These are dried, smoked Jalapeños. The name comes from the Nahuatl word “chilpochtli” which means “smoked chilli”. They are often found preserved in a sweet adobo sauce or in a paste.

HABANERO CHILLIES

These are serious chillies that really pack a punch. Scotch Bonnets are a different variety of the same

species, so they work very well as a substitute.

GUAJILLO CHILLIES

These are not hot but have a delicate fruity flavour. They are dried and made from Mirasol chillies.

TOMATILLOS (SEE ALSO [PAGE 104](#))

Similar to a tomato with a unique tart flavour that is a wonderful addition to many salsas, the fruit is green or purple and surrounded by a papery skin.

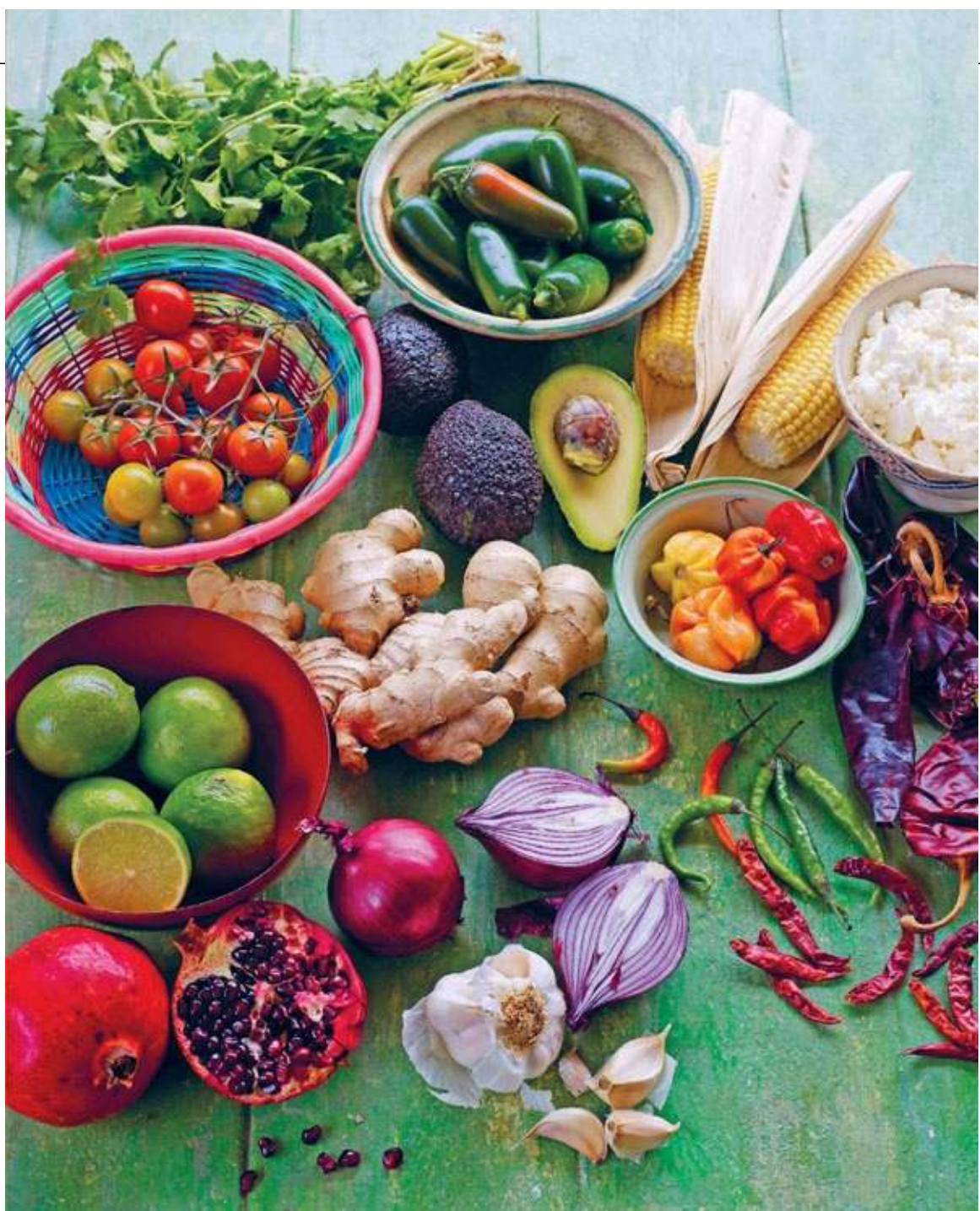
CORN

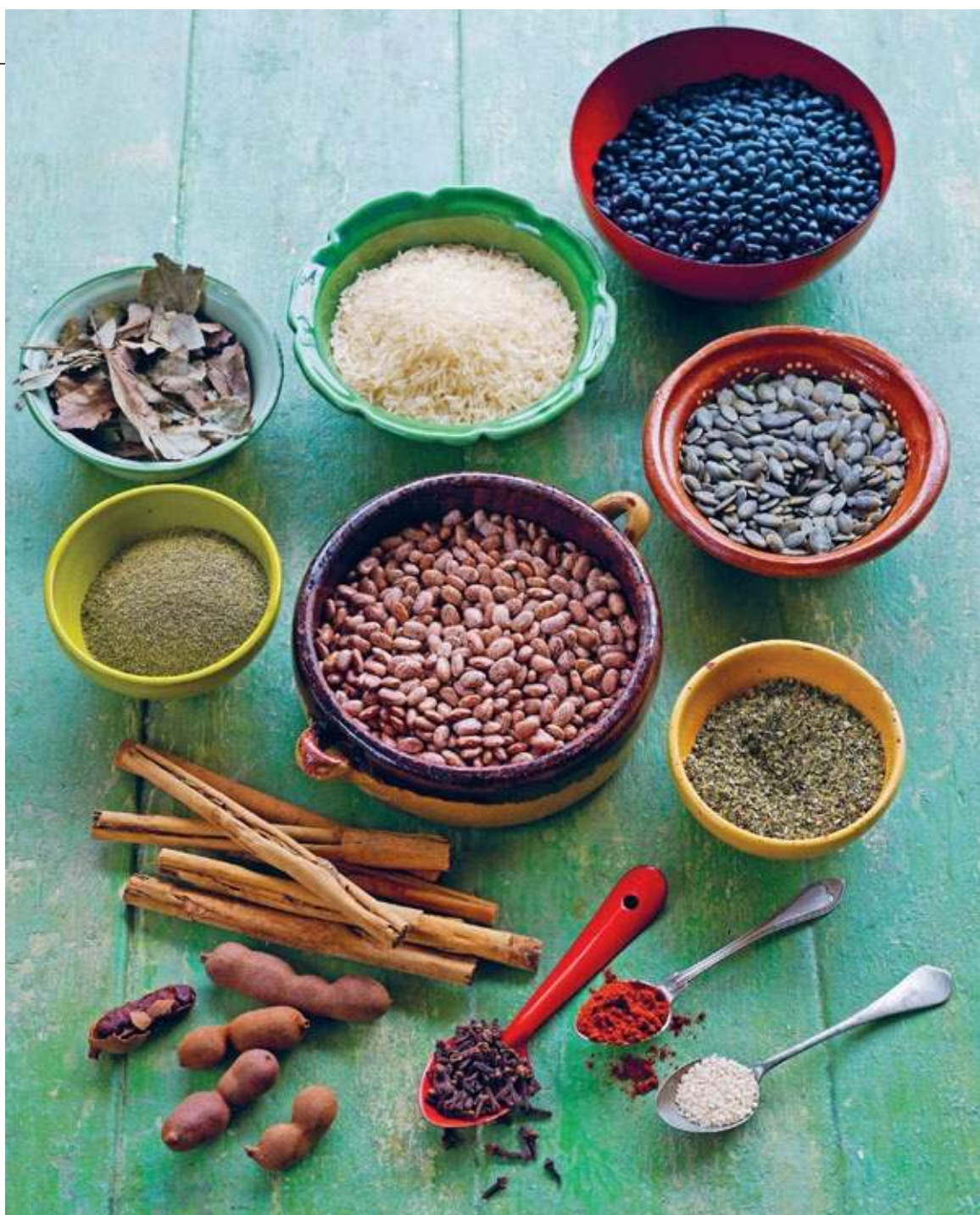
The plant is native to the Americas and was only introduced to Europe in the 17th century. Its origin said to be the Tehuacán Valley in Mexico which was the heart of the Aztec civilization. It therefore became an integral part of the people's diet.

POMEGRANATE

The look of the bright red seeds of this fruit are reason enough to use them, but they also add a sweetness to citrus salads and some meats.

ALSO ESSENTIAL garlic, onion, fresh ginger, Chiles de Arbol, Serrano chillies, Ancho chillies, sour cream, mango, watermelon, plantain





BEANS

Whether black (turtle) or pinto, beans are a staple of the Mexican diet. They are a great source of protein, fibre and iron. Use them as a side, or beef them up with some fatty cuts of pork and a little heat to make them a meal in their own right.

MASA HARINA

This flour is the product of grinding dried field corn or maize. It forms the base of corn tortillas, as well as being the core ingredient in many sauces.

AVOCADO LEAVES (SEE ALSO [PAGE 85](#))

The avocado tree is known almost everywhere in the world because of its fruit, but the leaves are a wonderful, aromatic addition to many dishes too. The dried leaves give off a smell similar to anise and go well with beans and some stewed meats.

PAPRIKA

This spice is made from grinding together sweet/bell and chilli peppers, so whether it has heat or not depends on the variety you choose. It is used both for its flavour and its deep red colour.

OREGANO

This is a gentle herb that adds a clean, fresh flavour to dishes. For the recipes in this book, we recommend dried Mexican oregano, which has a slightly stronger flavour. It can also be used as a substitute for the harder-to-find epazote.

AGAVE SYRUP (SEE ALSO [PAGE 132](#))

This syrup, or nectar, comes from the sap obtained from the stalk of the agave plant. It is commonly used as a substitute for sugar but its primary purpose in life is for margaritas!

PUMPKIN AND PUMPKIN SEEDS

Using the delicious, buttery flesh of a pumpkin as well as the seeds inside is very satisfying. The two go very well together, as the earthiness of the seeds contrasts beautifully with the delicate flesh. If you are scooping the seeds yourself, wash and dry them thoroughly before using.

MONTEREY JACK CHEESE

This semi-hard cheese has become the standard burrito cheese throughout the world. Its origins are shrouded in debate, but it is likely to have been brought to Monterey, California by Franciscan friars from Spain, via Mexico, in the 1700s.

RICE

Rice is a staple of many Mexican meals. I find that basmati rice is easy to cook and takes on other flavours well.

TEQUILA (SEE ALSO [PAGE 135](#))

This “happy” spirit comes from the region of Jalisco. It is made from the fermented and distilled juice of the agave plant, in particular the blue agave. It is the best known and most representative drink of Mexico in the world. To be called Tequila, the drink must be made in Mexico and contain at least 51% sugars from the agave, but we wouldn’t recommend anything except 100% agave.

TORTILLAS

Tortillas are the bread of Mexico. These soft, pillowy delights have been ruined by supermarkets the world over but make yourself a delicate corn tortilla (see [page 12](#)) and it will lift any dish.

CINNAMON (SEE ALSO [PAGE 114](#))

Cinnamon has a sweet, woody and spicy flavour. It is native to Sri Lanka but the Mexican version is slightly sweeter.

TAMARIND (SEE ALSO [PAGE 129](#))

Tamarind is a tropical tree, native to eastern Africa but that now exists in much of tropical Asia and Latin America. In Mexico it is grown widely in the states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas

and even Yucatán, where it is known as “pahch’uuk”. It has long been an important part of the traditional diet.

ALSO ESSENTIAL sesame seeds, cloves, evaporated milk, condensed milk, hibiscus flowers (see [page 129](#)), Mexican chorizo, epazote (see [page 96](#))

How to make corn tortillas

I grew up watching my grandmother and mother make fresh tortillas every day. They passed on their knowledge and love to me and my family and I hope to do the same with my children. Storebought tortillas are improving all the time, but they can never compete with homemade ones.

300 g/2 cups masa harina
300 ml/1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups warm water
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon sea salt
clean plastic bag
tortilla press (optional; see [page 19](#))

MAKES 10 X 8-CM/3 $\frac{1}{4}$ -IN. TORTILLAS

1 Put the masa harina, water and salt in a mixing bowl and mix well for 5 minutes. Divide the dough into 10 equal pieces and roll into balls.



2 Place one ball of dough in the middle of the plastic bag and place in the middle of the open tortilla press, if using.



3 Fold the bag in half over the dough. Close the tortilla press and push the handle to compress the dough as much as possible.



4 Open the tortilla press and check that the tortilla is nice and thin. Compress again if necessary. Very carefully peel back the plastic from the top of the dough, making sure the dough does not tear, then loosely replace it. Finally, flip it over and gently peel back the plastic.



If you don't have a tortilla press, pat a large saucepan down on top of the plastic-covered dough repeatedly, pressing down firmly and evenly. Now put aside the pan and pat firmly a few times with the palm of your hand to flatten the dough even further. Gently peel off the plastic as above.

Repeat this process until you have used up all the tortilla dough.

To cook, heat a non-stick frying pan over medium heat, then cook each tortilla for 1 minute. Flip over and cook for another minute until cooked through. To keep the tortillas warm, place them on a clean tea towel and fold the cloth over to cover them.

A good tortilla is not too thick and not too thin. If it is too thin, it will break; if too thick, it won't cook evenly. The best tortilla should fluff up when cooked.



SNACKS & STARTERS



homemade tortilla chips

I know that preparing your own tortilla chips may seem like a bit of a hassle. However, this homemade version puts the storebought variety to shame. Once you've got the hang of the timing, it is really very simple. These chips will lift the flavour of your guacamole or salsa instead of sucking it all away.

vegetable oil, for frying
8 corn tortillas, cut into eighths
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon sea salt

MAKES LOTS!

Pour some vegetable oil into a deep saucepan until it comes 2 cm/ $\frac{3}{4}$ inch up the side of the pan. Set over medium heat and leave until the oil is very hot but not smoking.

Carefully drop in the tortilla triangles, in batches of 10, and fry for about 30 seconds, turning the chips gently and often with tongs to prevent them burning.

Using the tongs or a slotted spoon, remove the chips from the pan and allow to drain on kitchen paper/paper towels. Repeat the process until all the chips have been fried.

Toss with the salt and serve warm.

pepitas

spiced pumpkin seeds

These irresistible salty snacks provide a great and authentic alternative to the normal nuts and olives. They also make a good ingredient in sauces and dressings, so it's worth getting the hang of making them.

90 g/ $\frac{3}{4}$ cup shelled pumpkin seeds
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon paprika
a pinch of sea salt
1 teaspoon vegetable oil
1 lime, halved (optional)

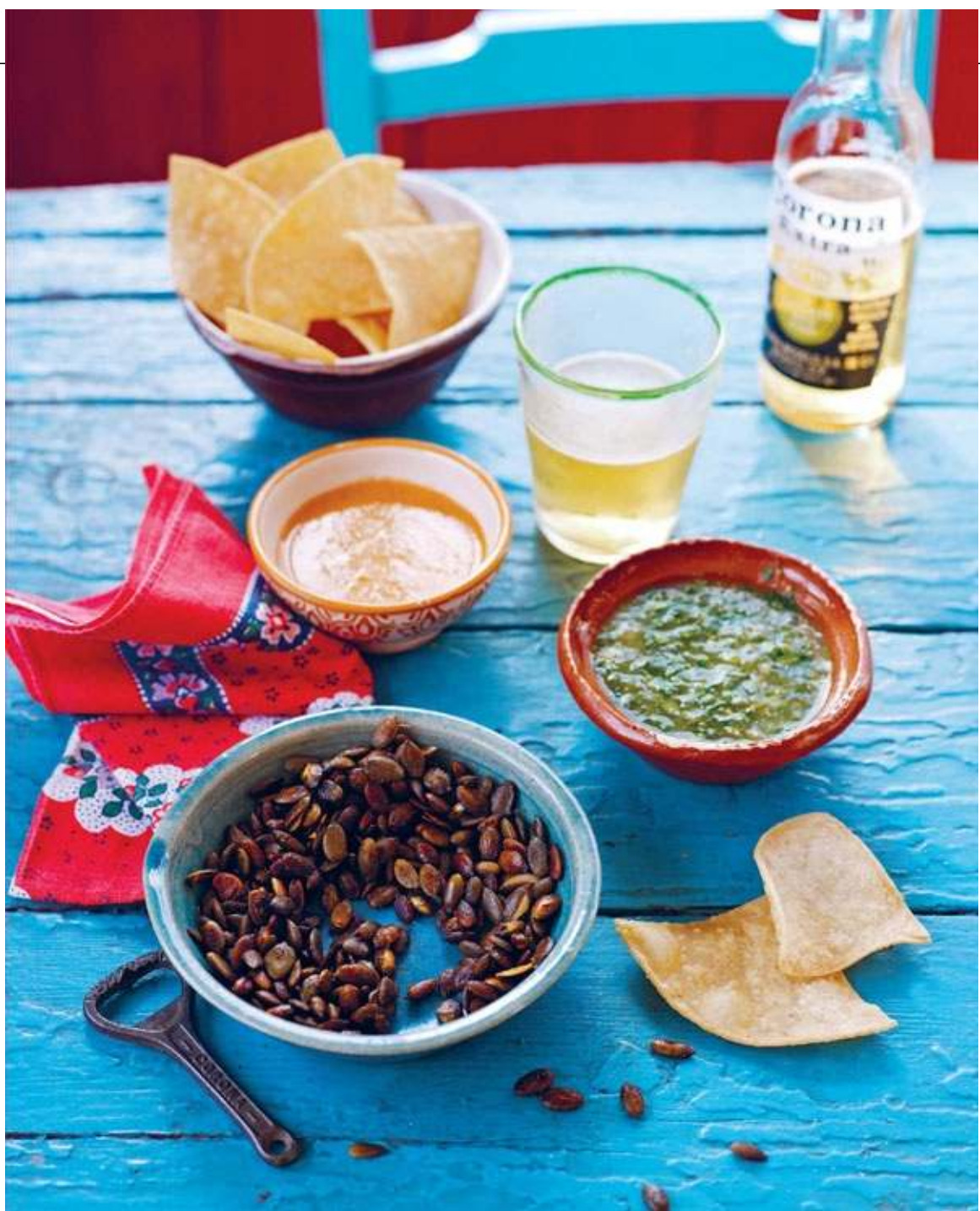
MAKES A BOWLFUL

Put the pumpkin seeds in a dry frying pan over low heat. Stir continuously for 10 minutes, taking care not to let them burn.

Remove from the heat, add the paprika, salt and oil and mix well.

Immediately transfer to a bowl to prevent further cooking.

Serve plain or with a squeeze of lime juice. They work well as a snack or as an accompaniment to your meal.





memelitas, rojas y verdes

green & red memelitas

You will find memelitas among all the late-night street vendors throughout cities in Mexico. Try them as a snack, canapé or light lunch.

125 ml/½ cup vegetable oil

½ onion, finely chopped

1 quantity dough from How to Make Corn Tortillas recipe ([page 12](#))

Salsa Verde ([page 104](#))

Salsa Brava ([page 100](#))

Heat the oil in a small, deep saucepan. Once hot, remove from the heat and add the chopped onion. Set aside until later.

Make the dough using the How to Make Corn Tortillas recipe on [page 12](#) and divide into 8 equal pieces. Roll into balls. Place one ball of dough in the middle of the plastic bag and fold the bag in half over

200 g/2 cups crumbled feta cheese

the dough.

clean plastic bag

tortilla press (optional)

MAKES 8

Flatten the dough using a tortilla press or, if you don't have a tortilla press, pat a large saucepan down on top of the plastic-covered dough repeatedly, pressing down firmly and evenly. Now put aside the pan and pat firmly a few times with the palm of your hand to flatten the dough even further.

Very carefully peel back the plastic from the top of the dough, making sure the dough does not tear, then loosely replace it. Finally, flip it over and gently peel back the plastic. The disc should be about $\frac{1}{2}$ cm/ $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick.

Heat a non-stick frying pan over medium heat, then cook each disc of dough for 1 minute. Flip over and cook for another minute until cooked through, then set aside and allow to cool slightly while you cook the remaining discs.

Take a disc and, using your index finger and thumb, pinch the edge of the tortilla all the way round and make a few pinches in the middle. Repeat with the remaining tortillas.

Return the non-stick frying pan to medium heat. Place a tortilla in the pan, pour 1 teaspoon of the reserved onion oil on top and spread it evenly. Heat for about 1 minute, then spread a little Salsa Verde or Salsa Brava over it. Sprinkle some cheese on top.

Remove from the pan and repeat with all the remaining memelitas. If your pan is big enough you can heat more than one at a time.

Let your guests choose their favourite memelitas.

TORTILLA PRESSES are traditional and essential pieces of equipment in Mexican kitchens. If you don't want to invest in one, don't let this stop you from making your own tortillas – a large pan can do the job just as well. Either way, you will need a clean plastic bag to sandwich the dough in before flattening it. A plastic bag works much better than clingfilm/plastic wrap, which tends to stick to itself and the dough.



Every bite of this colourful starter offers crunch as well as a fluffy, cheesy potato filling. It's seriously satisfying. I usually serve it with Guacamole ([page 107](#)) or Salsa Verde ([page 104](#)).

taquitos dorados de papa con dos quesos

two-cheese fried taquitos

400 g/14 oz. potatoes, peeled and cut into chunks
a pinch of salt
a pinch of dried oregano
100 g/1 cup grated cheddar cheese
16 corn tortillas
vegetable oil, for frying

TO SERVE

1 small head of Romaine lettuce, shredded
200 g/2 cups crumbled feta cheese
Pico de Gallo ([page 107](#))
sour cream
48 cocktail sticks/toothpicks

MAKES 16

Boil the potatoes until tender but not too soft. Drain and allow to cool in the saucepan.

Add the salt, oregano and cheddar cheese to the potatoes.

Using a fork or potato masher, roughly mash the ingredients together until just combined.

Warm a tortilla in a dry, non-stick frying pan until softened and flexible. When soft, spoon a little of the potato mixture slightly to one side of the middle of the tortilla.

Roll the tortilla into a cylinder and secure it with 3 cocktail sticks/toothpicks gently pushed through the cylinder. Repeat until all the tortillas have been prepared.

Pour some vegetable oil into a deep frying pan until it comes 2 cm/³/₈ inch up the side of the pan. Set over medium heat and leave until the oil is very hot but not smoking.

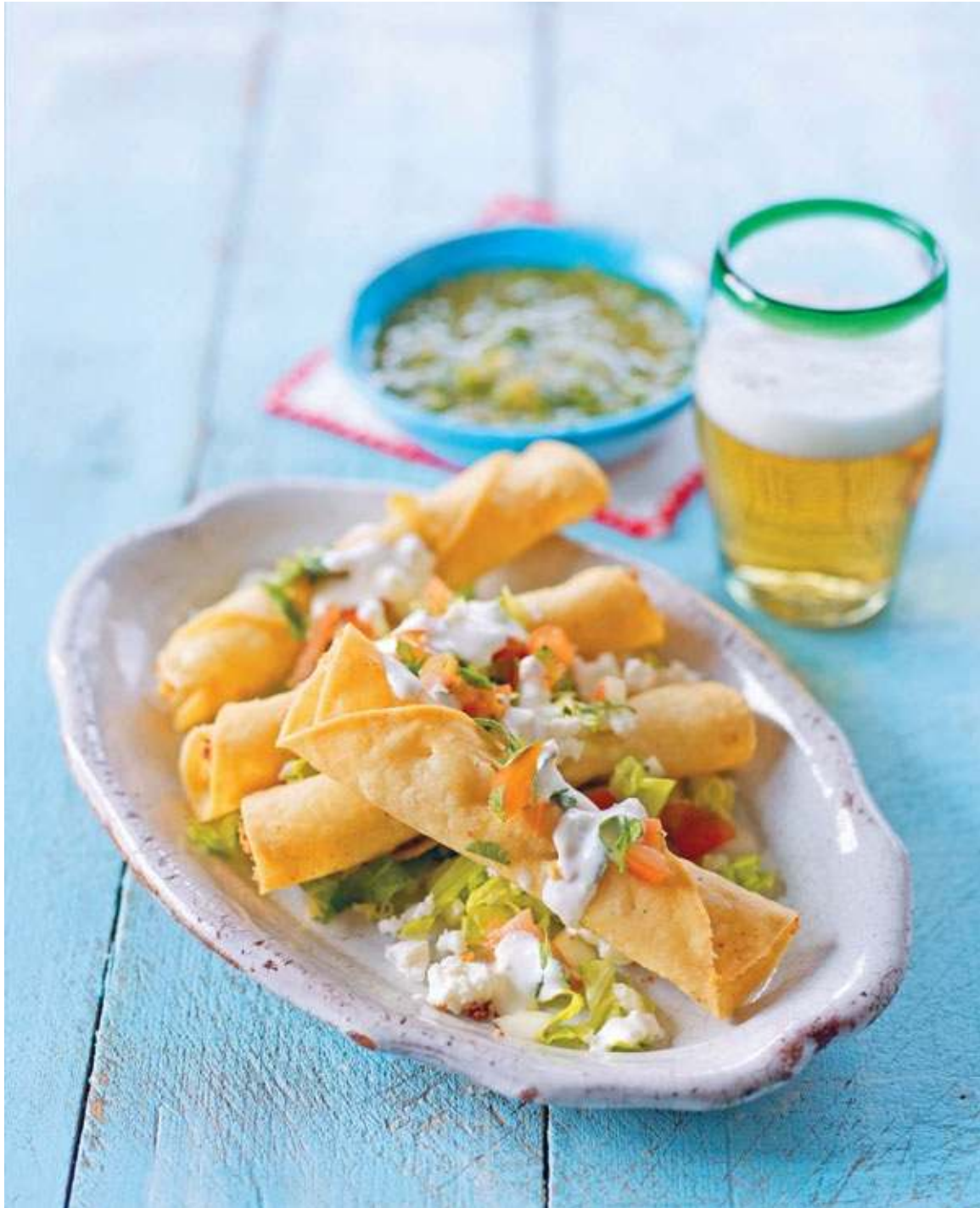
Carefully drop in the taquitos, in batches of 3–4, and fry for about 7–10 minutes, turning them gently and occasionally with tongs to prevent them from burning.

Using the tongs or a slotted spoon, remove the taquitos from the pan and allow to drain on kitchen paper/paper towels. Repeat the process until all the taquitos have been fried.

Once the taquitos are cool enough to handle, remove the sticks.

TO SERVE

Put a little shredded lettuce on each plate, lay on about 4 taquitos and top with crumbled feta, some Pico de Gallo and sour cream.



sample content of Real Mexican Food: Authentic recipes for burritos, tacos, salsas and more

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