Foods and Flavors of San Antonio

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Gloria Chadwick

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Contents

Tex-Mex Tour 9
Appetizers 15
Beverages 29
Breakfast 37
Salads 53
Soups and Stews 59
Veggies, Beans, and Rice 71
Sandwiches, Quesadillas, and Tacos 97
Chili 121
Enchiladas 133
Beef and Pork 149
Chicken 173
Seafood 197
Breads and Tortillas 207
Seasonings, Salsas, and Sauces 213
Sweets and Treats 225
Index 238

Tex-Mex Tour

I moved to San Antonio in 2004 and began exploring all the sights, foods, fiestas, and flavors that make San Antonio the Tex-Mex capital of the world. There are so many things to do and see here, and this brief Tex-Mex tour will highlight the foods and flavors that make our city special.

Remember the Alamo? How could one forget? The Alamo represents the battle for freedom that was fought on March 6, 1836. The Alamo is perhaps the most famous spot in Texas. At this site, 189 defenders were overcome after repeated attacks by Mexican general Antonio López de Santa Anna's army. Originally named Misión San Antonio de Valero, the Alamo was established in 1718 as the city's first mission. Web site: www.thealamo.org.

Next on the Tex-Mex tour is the Tower of the Americas, built for HemisFair '68, San Antonio's World's Fair. Go up nearly six hundred feet to the top to enjoy the 360-degree view of the city and surrounding area. Among the grounds of HemisFair Park are beautiful water gardens and lushly landscaped areas. Web site: www.toweroftheamericas.com.

Visit Market Square, also known as El Mercado, where you'll find everything from tourist T-shirts to authentic Mexican imports. Browse through the thirty-two indoor specialty shops, enjoy the stage show with Mexican dancers and mariachi bands, then walk across the street and visit the eighty outdoor sidewalk vendors and cafés on Produce Row and Farmers Market Plaza. Web site: www.marketsquaresa.com.

Another famous sight and a great place to explore the foods and flavors of San Antonio is the River Walk or Paseo del Rio. You can stroll along the River Walk or take a boat cruise on the San Antonio River (www.riosanantonio.com). Enjoy the sizzling fajitas and frozen margaritas at one of the outdoor cafés. Web site: www.thesanantonioriverwalk.com.

Brackenridge Park offers 343 acres of outdoor activities, including a golf course and a miniature train ride. Within the grounds of the park are the Japanese Tea Gardens—a lush, year-round garden and floral display featuring shaded walkways, stone bridges, a six-foot waterfall, and ponds. Also located in the park is the San Antonio Zoo (www.sa-zoo.org), which is ranked one of the best zoos in the nation with over thirty-five hundred animals. Web site: www.wildtexas.com/parks/bracken.php.

Next on the tour is the San Antonio Botanical Garden. This thirty-three-acre lavish, beautiful garden offers a serene native forest walk, exotic plants from around the world, aquatic garden pools, glass pyramids, and an authentic log cabin. Web site: www.sabot.org.

If you're in the mood for a museum that both you and the kids will enjoy, visit the cultural and kid-friendly Witte Museum, which focuses on South Texas history and features historic artifacts, Texas art, and a wildlife diorama. Web site: www.wittemuseum.org.

Walk through La Villita, which means little village, to see local artists display and sell their colorful artwork. La Villita was San Antonio's first neighborhood and is now a beautiful historic arts village where you can shop, dine, or just take a peaceful walk. Web site: www.lavillita.com.

Probably the best and most scenic way to get around historical San Antonio is by taking a trolley tour of the city. Traveling through the sights is a breeze on the VIA trolley, an open air, authentic reproduction of a rail streetcar that traveled the streets of San Antonio more than fifty years ago. Four streetcar routes stop at downtown locations such as the Alamo, HemisFair Park, Market Square, Brackenridge Park, the Japanese Tea Gardens, the San Antonio Zoo, the San Antonio Botanical Garden, and other historical sites as well as shopping at Rivercenter Mall. Web site: www.viainfo.net.

Speaking of shopping, you might enjoy visiting North Star Mall, featuring the giant cowboy boots (www.northstarmall.com); Rivercenter Mall next to the River Walk (www.shoprivercenter.com); LaCantera (www.theshopsatlacantera.com); the outdoor Alamo

Quarry Market with the huge smokestacks (www.quarrymarket.com); or the beautiful Los Patios, featuring many specialty shops, which offer Mexican jewelry and south-of-the-border items (www.lospatios.com).

Want more culture? Next is Mission Trail, which includes four missions and the Alamo. The Mission San José was established in 1720 and is still an active mission, featuring a Mariachi Mass every Sunday. These missions, including the Mission Concepción, especially noted for its wall paintings; Mission San Juan, with its magnificent bell tower and elaborate alter; and Mission Espada, with its displays of how local Indians were educated in blacksmithing, woodworking, and other vocational areas, are all accessible via the six-mile Hike and Bike Trail. Web site: www.nps.gov/saan.

And, then there are our festivals. Let me tell you about Fiesta: Fiesta means party, and we San Antonians know how to party. Fiesta is the biggest and the best. This ten-day event features more than 150 events and activities, starting with the Fiesta Oyster Bake; continues with a carnival; plenty of Tex-Mex food; the Texas Cavalier's River Parade; the nighttime Fiesta Flambeau Parade; and ends with the Battle of Flowers Parade. Night in Old San Antonio (NIOSA), held in La Villita, draws thousands of people to party in the streets. Web site: www.fiesta-sa.com.

The Texas Folklife Festival, held annually in June on the fairgrounds of the Institute of Texan Cultures, reflects the cultures, foods, and lifestyles that make up San Antonio. Web site: www.texasfolklifefestival.org.

Since San Antonio is the birthplace of chili, the annual Return of the Chili Queens, held at Market Square in May features—you guessed it!—chili, with a variety of chili dishes for tasting and also a chili cook-off.

The River Walk hosts the annual Mud Festival in January, when the San Antonio River is drained and cleaned, as well as a Mardi Gras Festival in February; the St. Patrick's Day River Parade in March, when the river is dyed green; and the Children's Fiesta in April.

If you want to see a rodeo, go to the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo in February and see Texas cowboys. There are many events,

including calf roping and bull riding. Attend the cowboy breakfast to kick off the rodeo, with free breakfast tacos and biscuits with gravy served at the Pro Bass Shops. Web site: www.sarodeo.com.

To get an authentic taste and feel for the foods and flavors of San Antonio, visit the Houston Street Fair and Market, held the last Saturday of every month. The fair features carnival rides, face painting, storytelling, hand-made art and crafts by local artists, drinks, food, and more. Web site: www.houstonstreetfairandmarket.com.

For more information about the attractions and festivals in San Antonio, please visit the San Antonio Convention & Visitors Bureau Web site at www.visitsanantonio.com. To learn more about the foods and flavors of the city, visit http://foodsandflavorsofsanantonio.blogspot.com.

Then there are the recipes that offer the true Tex-Mex flavor of San Antonio . . .

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