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## **Food Detective: To tame chaya leaves, cook them well**

BY DAVID HAMMOND

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My grandmother used to sing to the chaya plant as she cooked it," said Ignacio "Nacho" Hernandez, my guide through several cities in Yucatan's Riviera Maya.

Rubbing his belly, he added with a slight grimace, "So that it would not hurt us." He didn't elaborate.

In later visits to towns on the eastern coast of the peninsula, I had many occasions to sample chaya, a stupendously nutritious leaf that grows in the notoriously inhospitable soil of Yucatan's scrub jungle.

Served in posh resorts as well as gritty cantinas, chaya is reported to have twice the iron and phosphorous, four times the protein and almost 10 times the calcium of spinach.

Cooking chaya is absolutely necessary - if you want to live to eat another day. The chaya leaf contains a compound that releases cyanide. Cooking in water deactivates the potentially deadly toxins and renders chaya edible.

Chaya was an important food for the Maya of central Mexico and surrounding areas. These indigenous peoples, who built magnificent pyramids in the jungle and created a complex mysticism around corn and rain gods, had a relatively limited diet. One can see how chaya would have been a plant that was valued and also feared.

Antonio Contreras of Xni-Pec, 3755 Grand Blvd. in Brookfield, one of the few Yucatecan restaurants in the Midwest, tells me his grandmother used to "ask permission of the chaya" before snipping the leaves, cautioning that the plant speaks "only Yucatecan Mayan," the language of his homeland.

Clearly, this plant demands careful treatment and respect.

Driving through the town of Muyil, Nacho pointed to a spot on the roadside and shouted "Chaya!"

We jumped out of the van to examine a bush crammed up against a stucco building, its long thin branches crowned with clusters of deep-green leaves. I twisted a stem to pluck a leaf.

"Watch out," cautioned Nacho, ominously.

Moments later, I understood his warning: My fingers tingled and burned slightly. The stems were bristling with stinging hairs. The weaponized stem is part of the plant's natural defenses.

In the wine cellar at Xcaret, a zoological and ecological park outside of Cancun, I enjoyed lamb chops with a crisp-fried chaya garnish.

Elsewhere, I sampled chaya cooked into sauces, where it lent a light, herbal note reminiscent of spinach.

The Mayan custom of crooning to chaya seems to be fundamentally pragmatic: Sing a song of sufficient duration to ensure the chaya cooks long enough.

But this is Yucatan, so I have to believe that the other reason for the ritual is based in the magic of this mysterious plant.

David Hammond is an Oak Park writer, Chicago Public Radio contributor and founder/moderator of culinary chat site [LTHForum.com](#). E-mail [detective@suntimes.com](mailto:detective@suntimes.com).

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