

CONTINENTAL COOKBOOK

By Tammy Briggs

Chef Michael J. Cordúa

RESTAURATEUR MICHAEL J. CORDÚA is one of Continental's celebrity chefs and a founding member of our Congress of Chefs. For more than 20 years, he's blazed a trail of new-world cuisine that has kept critics raving. He is the owner and executive chef of six Houston-area restaurants, including the Amazon Grill, a Latin café; Churrascos, a South American grill, which *Esquire* named in its 20 Best Steaks in America in 2008; Artista, named Best New Texas Restaurant by *Texas Monthly* in 2004; and Américas, which *Esquire* named Best New Restaurant in America.

Chef Cordúa received the Robert Mondavi Award for Culinary Excellence in 1994 and has been featured on Mondavi's PBS cooking series, *America's Rising Star Chefs*. In 2008, he was the first Texas chef inducted into the Best New Chefs Hall of Fame by *Food & Wine*. We spoke with Cordúa and asked him for a recipe.

Q. What flavors and foods remind you of your childhood?

A. The crunch of a crispy plantain chip, the citrus-marinated flavor of seafood ceviche, the aroma of a grilled churrasco with chimichuri roasting on a wood-fired grill, and a tres leches oozing with sweet vanilla creams and a fluffy meringue.

Q. What is your favorite food indulgence?

A. I have to admit that I am weak when it comes to rich, dense ice cream — chocolate or anything with dulce de leche.

Q. How were you introduced to fine cuisine?

A. I grew up in Latin America in a foodie home. My mom loved working with food and my dad loved to eat. Then, when I worked for a maritime shipping company, I traveled extensively through Europe and was exposed to wonderful world-class cuisine. Nowadays, in the kitchens of Cordúa Restaurants, we create a new, quite unique cuisine by weaving together the excitement of Latin American ingredients with the disciplined techniques of European cooking.

Q. If you could invite anyone for dinner, who would it be, and why?

A. In the summer of 1982, I became a father. Sadly, my own dad passed away that same year. My father loved great food and great company, and my son David has become a professional chef with my company, Cordúa Restaurants. I would love to prepare a meal with David and share it with my dad — sharing the importance of father-and-son relationships, the grace and the challenges of working together, and enjoying a meal around the kitchen table with them. I can only imagine the two of them in conversation over what would surely be a lot of wonderful food. That would be a great meal.



Alfajores

Ingredients

5 cups	all purpose flour
½ cup	confectioner's sugar
1¾ cups	salted butter
6½ oz.	dulce de leche

Instructions

1. In a mixer, combine flour and sugar at low speed for 1 minute.
2. Cut butter into small cubes. Add butter to flour mixture and continue mixing at low speed until it forms dough. Increase speed to medium and continue to mix for 30 seconds.
3. Chill dough in the refrigerator for 2 hours before using.
4. Preheat oven to 300°F.
5. On a floured surface, use a rolling pin to roll out dough to ¼-inch thickness.
6. Cut dough into rounds using a 1½-inch round cutter.
7. Place cookies ½ inch apart on sheet pan lined with parchment paper.
8. Bake alfajores at 300°F for 20 minutes.
9. Immediately remove cookies from sheet pan and allow them to cool.
10. Turn cookies over so that bottoms will be on the inside of the cookie sandwiches.
11. Using either a spreader or a pastry bag fitted with a ½-inch pastry tip, pipe or spread ½ Tbsp. of dulce de leche over half the cookies, covering only ⅔ of each one. Top with another cookie to form an alfajor sandwich cookie.
12. Lightly dust the alfajores with confectioner's sugar prior to serving.
13. Store alfajores in the refrigerator if not serving immediately. Recipe yields 20 alfajores.

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