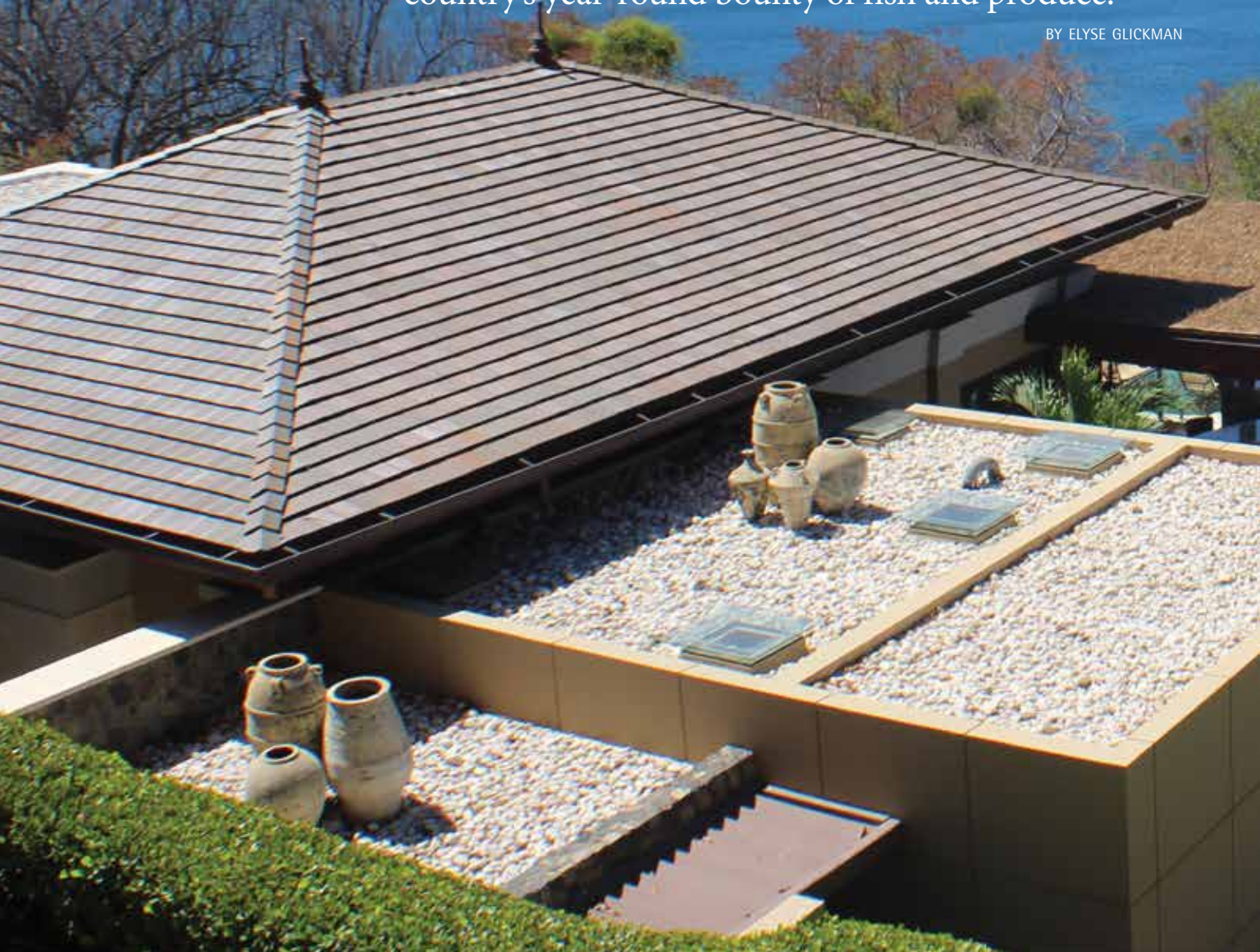


destination: COSTA RICA

A Personalized Taste of *Costa Rica*

Villa Manzu redefines the exclusive resort experience through its made-to-order approach to food using the country's year-round bounty of fish and produce.

BY ELYSE GLICKMAN





Costa Rica's Papagayo Peninsula, along the Pacific coast, has almost everything discerning travelers want in a vacation destination. In addition to being just a few hour's flight from many major U.S. cities, it offers travelers of every age and fitness level a banquet of outdoor activities, wildlife, beaches, forests and several internationally-known luxury properties promising to be the ultimate base camp.

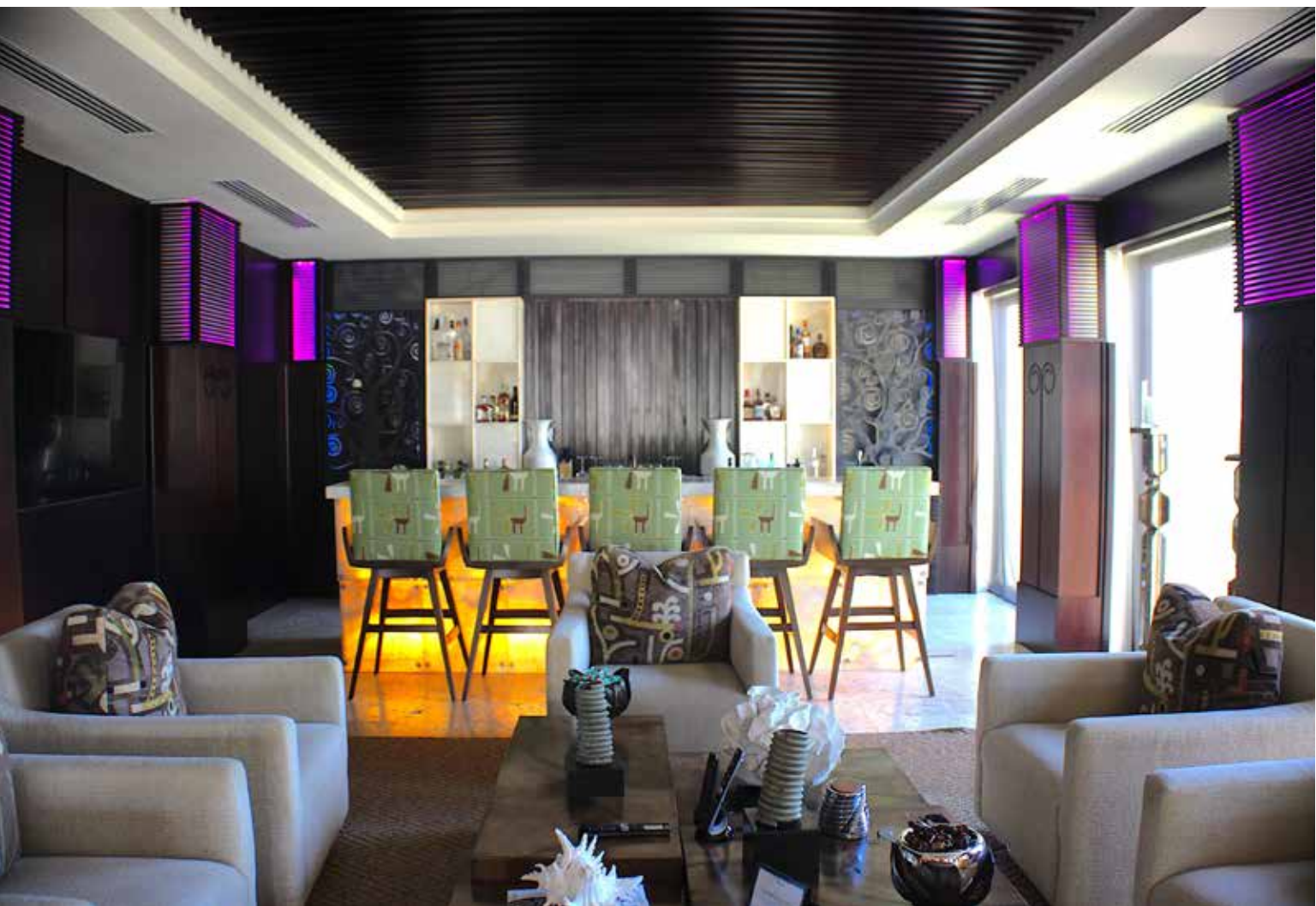
However, Patrick Callahan, an adventure travel resort developer, avid traveler and connoisseur, felt there was an even better way to fuse luxury, culture, and nature in this coastal desert oasis. To push the limits beyond the luxury hotel model, he conceptualized Villa Manzu ("friend" in the indigenous Chorotegan language) as an exclusive vacation home a visiting family or group of friends could make their own.

After picking the location, on a hill-top overlooking the Pacific ocean,



Callahan teamed up with Costa Rican architect Abraham Valenzuela and Houston-based interior designer Lynn Yellen to create a multi-story dwelling that wasn't just decorated but also curated and informed by Callahan's extensive travels. Each space and incorporates elements of Chorotegan and

other Meso-American cultures with accents, artwork, and furnishings from India, Africa, Thailand, Europe and the Middle East. Every private room is its own self-contained haven, with every comfort taken into consideration — including a snack bar and fridge that is regularly restocked.





As Callahan felt the food experience was the glue holding a group vacation together, the large open-concept kitchen was devised to be the most universal room in the house. Each is outfitted with a collection of appliances, tools and gadgets that rival many of the higher end hotels and restaurants in the area. Yet it is also, by design, welcoming and accessible to all guests during their stay. So are Executive Chef Mariano Fernandez, baker/morning chef Sabrina Dufort and Luis Morera, who handles the sommelier and beverage program duties.

The trio's jobs begin the moment a party's reservation is booked, starting with the assessment of dietary needs and food preferences of every guest. This serves as a foundation on which to build a week's worth of menus with as many Costa Rican ingredients as possible. This is no easy task, when every group has its own mix of adults and children with varying dietary needs,

weight loss goals, sports-minded regimens and allergy issues — even with a year-round growing season for produce and an abundance of fresh fish and seafood within reach. On the other hand, juggling those needs makes the jobs of the kitchen team heads all the more satisfying.

"When I first came to Villa Manzu, I felt I had met my match," says Fernandez, whose resume includes Vanilla Black, a Michelin star-rated London vegetarian restaurant, and a stint at the neighboring Four Seasons Hotel up the beach.

"Many of the other chefs I knew told me to be careful (when I accepted this job) because it was (potentially) the type of place where a chef could die creatively by becoming too comfortable. This is certainly true when working at some five star hotels. When I had my interview for the position, however, I realized that while I would not have the pressures many luxury hotel

chefs experience, I had freedom to be more creative because so many different guests and their food preferences are involved, and we strive to always have the foods they love available and then elevate local food to make it memorable."

His flair for seasoning, sauces and side dishes is particularly prominent in his care with the just-caught fish and seafood sourced just miles from the property. While grouper and red snapper are abundant, in his capable hands, every preparation brings out different nuances of flavor and texture in the fillets and the vegetables that complete the full effect.

"Even in the best properties, (chefs and cooks) are confined to a room with four walls and rarely have the opportunity to chat with the guests," agrees Dufort. "At Villa Manzu, one of the biggest draws is seeing how their snack or meal comes together in real time. I enjoy sharing my experiences in the kitchen as the guests watch me work, and I encourage them to share their stories. They'll ask me questions about (how I come up with) my recipes, how they can re-create them in their day-to-day life and adapt them to suit their dietary concerns. In addition to having this absolutely gorgeous view (of our coastline and grounds) to inspire me and the freedom to play music in the background, (our team) can request the freshest ingredients from our purveyors in a more direct way than larger hotels."

Every morning, guests wake up to rich bakery-cafe aromas of small-purveyor Costa Rican coffee and oven-fresh bread swirling together. The long counter is bookended with a mix of just-picked and sourced tropical fruits, citrus fruit and berries, that are connected with eggs and bacon as well as Dufort's star attractions—that day's flavor of muffin, a chia pudding, one or two breakfast pastries (her cinnamon rolls are always in demand) and

a selection of savory breads. If there are any muffins or rolls left over, they will be swiftly claimed by guests for snacks during their nature walk, fishing trip, or beach day.

It costs \$16,500 per night for use of the entire property, lavish amenities, and custom-planned adventures. This encompasses every personalized food plan for 15 to 22 people, as well as at least one à la minute multi-course meal by Fernandez, cooking and baking classes, spa treatments, beach barbecue day, fishing excursions, nature hikes, athletic activities, child care and activities, and exclusive access to the residents' Prieta Beach Club. The property's caretakers, however, insist it is as much a great value as it is a special indulgence, as every detail in every meal, snack, wine pairing and cocktail is addressed based on the people making up the group, from toddlers to seniors.

While there is parity between the gorgeously prepared meals and the eclectic mix globally influenced decor (Callahan, after all, designed the property for experienced travelers who expect a certain level of luxury), the chefs insist that their emphasis on local ingredients and their health benefits when presenting their completed dishes is intended to inspire guests to make better food choices when they return home and, perhaps, encourage them to become more adventurous in their own kitchens.

"While I was in London, I learned from my boss that when you cook for a couple, you are not cooking to impress the vegetarian but impress the other person," says Fernandez. "It was not only a challenge to think beyond the traditional vegetarian menu that's heavily Southeast Asian, but also work with alternative proteins. This led to my developing new and original dishes, which I am carrying over to Villa Manzu."

Because some recipes are created or adapted with certain guests in mind, Fernandez and Dufort are more than happy to share them, along with tips on how to achieve similar results at home with that recipe or collection of recipes when cooking for a family. Both chefs also stress the importance of being

flexible in the kitchen, and being willing to swap out different elements of a dish to enable everybody at the table to have a meal experience that is communal as well as delicious. Fernandes is very particular about the way he educates guests about the proper preparation of fish, which can make or break an entire dish.



“Get the freshest fish you can. Do not treat your fish as if it’s meat; it needs a different kind of handling to bring out its best flavors,” he says. “Even if you live in a place like Costa Rica, where fish is particularly abundant, it needs a different kind of attention to ensure it has a fresh flavor that harmonizes with whatever you serve with it. Baking it in the oven and finishing it in the pan to sear it, for example, keeps the natural juices and flavors intact. Use a hot pan to sear the fish filet only on one side, and cook it until it’s just crisp on the outside and flaky and moist on the inside.”

Dufort agrees with Fernandez that every meal should be a learning experience, especially when it comes to Costa Rica’s bounty of fish and produce. Whether she is preparing something for a vegan or omnivore, she believes every ingredient should be valued for all of their sensory properties. “People (watching me cook and bake) will observe that while some of the vegetables are not perfect, the final result of a dish can be,” she says. “A bent carrot will still make a great carrot cake or a bright and flavorful part of a side dish.”

Moreira applies his professional bartending experience and wine background to make sure every sip harmonizes with every bite — even if a client’s wine or spirit of choice is not available through his channels. He explains that while adaptability in making a pairing meal or pool drink work is important, it also helps open guests up to new drinking and pairing experiences, helping them find new favorites in the process.

“The ratio of satisfaction of the guest here is higher than any other resort or property because I am the one personally delivering it,” he says with a chuckle and smile that has made him a beloved presence on the property since it opened six years ago.

“For example, if a client wants a certain vintage port wine, I may find the



right vintage year but not the exact winery. I will research within my channels to see if we can find something similar to what’s being requested, as well as what will work with the dishes being planned for the guests in advance. The mutual collaboration between me and Mariano is basically along these lines. Mariano will have me sample a finished dish so I can pick the perfect wine from our cellar based on how Mariano’s menus match up with the given assets of the wine. Otherwise, I will find something new I hope will surprise and delight them.”

Another perk Villa Manzu offers guests are little gifts left on the pillows or nightstands during turndown services, ranging from hand-milled soap, to hand-carved wooden toys, to a bag of the local coffee, to a sweet treat prepared by Dufort’s team. However, the best souvenir guests receive is a package of ideas that can help them make their kitchen and local markets their own private paradise, and if they have a family, enable them to enjoy the collaborative process of meal prep. Here are a few recipes from Villa Manzu to get the process started.

SLIGHTLY CURED SNAPPER

Mariano Fernandez, Executive Chef,
Villa Manzu

SERVES 1 TO 2

When smoking fish, Fernandez prefers to use sugar cane previously chipped by knife and dried. It gives a tasty, sweet smoke. But wood chips from fruit-bearing trees, like apple or cherry, also work just fine. Serve with roasted cauliflower.

- 1 fresh fillet of spotted red snapper (about 14 ounces)

- 1 pound salt
- 1/2 pound sugar
- 1 tablespoon fresh ginger
- 3 sprigs Juanilama
- Dried sugar cane wood chips

1. In a medium bowl, blend sugar with ginger and juanilama until an aromatic and green colored sugar develops. Add salt by hand, rubbing the mix between your palms.
2. Dry snapper with a paper towel.
3. On a deep plate big enough to hold the fillet, put a layer of the salt mix, using about half of it.

4. Place the fillet on top of salt mix, skin-side down, and cover with the rest of the salt.
5. Let fish quick-cure for 20 minutes (or longer for very thick fillet). Remove fillet from salt bed; rinse salt off, dry fish with a towel and set aside.
6. Using a food smoking gun or any other technique for cold smoking, smoke the fish for 10 minutes. Refrigerate.
7. Remove skin from fish. Cut fish into thin slices.
8. This preparation will taste great on avocado toast or salads. You can also cook the fish, with the skin on.

More about this Costa Rican fish-curing technique

- * This curing technique using sugar, ginger and juanilama not only seasons the fish but creates a firmer outside layer, keeping it fresh inside. It's important to note that this technique is not useful to preserve fish long term, since it's such a short time of exposure.
- * The short smoking time on this preparation helps not only drying the outside layer, but also to deepen the flavor. We are not looking for a traditional smoked fish. The aim is to dry the outside layer and build some "earthy" notes. Properly done, your guest might not even realize it was smoke, but will appreciate the complexity of the taste.
- * Juanilama is an herb from the verbena family, traditional from Latin America and southern Texas. If you can't find juanilama, lemon verbena can be a good replacement. A bit of sage and lime skin is also a good substitute.
- * In Costa Rica, it's easy to find fishermen in small boats called "pangas" using artisanal fishing techniques and bringing fresh spotted snapper every day. Ask your local fish monger about this sourcing technique with any local sourced fish that you enjoy.
- * Fish with a tender to medium texture flesh benefits from this technique. I wouldn't recommend for flaky fillets, like big red snappers, for example.





The following recipes are by chef
Sabrina Dufort
**SPANISH STYLE EGGS
BENEDICT**

SERVES 1

- 1/2 ripe tomato
- 1/2 garlic clove
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons distilled white vinegar
- 2 fresh eggs
- 1 baguette, sliced diagonally
- 1 tablespoon butter
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 2 slices Serrano ham
- 2 stalks asparagus, thinly sliced, for garnish

For the Hollandaise

- 1 stick of butter, melted and at room temperature, to separate out the milk part as much as possible
- 1 egg yolk
- 1 teaspoon water
- 1 teaspoon lime juice

- Pinch salt
- Pinch cayenne pepper

1. Make tomato emulsion. Process tomato, olive oil and garlic in a blender until it has a medium consistency.
2. Slice the baguette and butter both sides. Toast in a skillet.
3. Bring a quart of water to a boil. Add vinegar to boiling water pot. Drop eggs one by one into pot. Poach for about four minutes.
4. Make Hollandaise sauce. Over a double boiler, whisk egg yolk and water until it makes a ribbon. Remove from heat. Wisk with a constant figure "8" motion while incorporating the butter very slowly, until the butter is fully blended in. Finish sauce with lime, salt and cayenne.
5. With a slotted spoon, take poached eggs out of water. Dry on a paper towel.
6. Pour some tomato emulsion over toasted and buttered bread, then top with Serrano ham and poached eggs. Top with Hollandaise sauce; garnish with the raw thinly sliced asparagus.

GALLO PINTO

MAKES 2 TO 4 SIDE DISH SERVINGS

Gallo Pinto is usually served alongside fried or scrambled eggs, sour cream, fried ripe plantain, fresh cheese, avocado, corn tortillas, shredded meat and chicken stew.

Lizano sauce is a popular Costa Rican sauce, available at Mexican and Latin American markets as well as on Amazon.com and Walmart.com.

- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
 - 1 small onion, diced
 - 1/2 red bell pepper, diced
 - 2 cups of black beans cooked, drained
 - 1/2 cup of the black bean cooking liquid
 - 2 cups of cooked rice (preferably day-old)
 - 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
 - 2 tablespoons Lizano sauce
 - Pinch salt
1. In a heavy skillet, heat the oil. Cook onions and bell peppers until tender.
 2. Add black beans, bean liquid, and Lizano





sauce. Reduce. Add a pinch of salt. Add rice and mix together.
3. Cook for five minutes. Finish with cilantro.

SABRINA'S SACRED CINNAMON ROLLS

MAKES 24

- 1/4 cup butter
- 3/4 cup milk
- 1/4 cup water
- 3 1/4 cup flour
- 1 tablespoon instant yeast
- 1/4 cup sugar
- Pinch salt
- 1 egg
- 1/4 cup softened butter, for spreading on top of dough
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon

For syrup

- 1/2 cup water
- 1/4 cup sugar

For glaze

- 1 cup confectioner's sugar
- 1 teaspoon milk
- Pinch salt
- Chopped nuts, for garnish

1. In a saucepan on medium heat, warm milk, butter and water.

2. In bowl of a stand mixer with hook attachment, mix flour, sugar, egg, salt, yeast and the liquid ingredients. Process for five minutes.
3. Let the dough rise, covered, in a warm place for ten minutes.
4. Roll the dough in a 12x9-inch rectangle. Spread dough with butter and mixture of brown sugar and cinnamon.
5. Roll dough cigar-style. Slice into 24 pieces.
6. Place rolls onto a parchment-lined baking

sheet. Preheat oven to 375°F.

7. Let rise for 30 minutes. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, or until they are golden brown.
8. Make syrup. Place water and sugar in a pan and bring to a boil.
9. When the rolls come out of oven, paint the syrup on top of rolls to make them shiny.
10. Make glaze. Mix confectioner's sugar with milk and salt. Add a few drops of milk if too stiff. Pour glaze on top of rolls. Sprinkle nuts on top.

