

LESSONS IN *Latin*

*From regional Mexican specialties to tropical Caribbean influences,
authentic Latin flavors continue to captivate American palates*

TODAY'S LATIN-INSPIRED CHEFS ARE USING FAMILIAR
FARE AS A BRIDGE TO MORE AUTHENTIC ETHNIC
OFFERINGS, AS IN CHEF RICHARD SANDOVAL'S
BITE-SIZED WONTON TACOS.



CHEF ERNESTO ZENDEJAS PACKS HIS MOLE WITH MORE THAN 30 INGREDIENTS, INCLUDING BANANA, TOMATILLOS AND THREE KINDS OF CHILES.



TEQUILA RANCH



TEQUILA RANCH

Not so very long ago, Mexican food meant burritos with a margarita chaser, and Caribbean cuisine wasn't even on the radar. That was yesterday. Today the siren song of the tropics is calling, and the world is falling in love with more authentic Latin flavors.

The first wave of “Nuevo Latino” chefs made its mark in the late 1980s and '90s when people like Norman Van Aiken of Norman's, Josefina Howard of Rosa Mexicano, Douglas Rodriguez of OLA and Alma de Cuba, Aaron Sanchez of Paladar, Randy Zweiban of Nacional 27 and Priscilla Satkoff of Salpicon all proved that Americans had an appetite for upscale Mexican and Caribbean food. Now, a whole new generation of chefs and restaurateurs — some of them Hispanics and some just Latino-philes — has joined the movement, bringing both authenticity and sophistication to what was once a niche market with mostly grab-and-go appeal.

And, while it does indeed seem hard to present a Mexican menu without at least a nod to the tortilla-based specialties familiar to so many Americans, more

and more chefs and operators are using these old standards as a bridge to more authentic Mexican and Latin fare.

BRIDGING FAMILIAR TO AUTHENTIC

“Our menu combines the Tex-Mex things that people are familiar with, like nachos, burritos and fajitas, with traditional Mexican specialties like mole and ceviche,” explains Ernesto Zendejas, the Mexico City-born chef of Tequila Ranch, a six-month-old restaurant in Hollywood, Fla. “Gradually, you want them to try the more authentic things.”

Arturo Gomez, Tequila Ranch's owner and the founder of the Chicago-based Rockit Ranch Productions, an entertainment-development company, agrees.

“There's demand now for more ‘serious’ Mexican food, authentic regional recipes and more creative interpretations,” he notes.

Zendejas' mole is pretty darn authentic, with more than 30 ingredients, including chocolate, banana,

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ From regional Mexican to Island cuisines — the “Nuevo Latino” forces influencing American menus
- ▶ Using familiar Latin elements like burritos and salsa as a bridge to more exotic fare
- ▶ Johnnycakes, ackee, mofongo and more: What's next for authentic Latin specialties?



ZOCALO

THE BOSTON AREA HAS EMBRACED THE AUTHENTIC REGIONAL MEXICAN SPECIALTIES AT ZOCALO COCINA MEXICANA.

roasted tomatoes and tomatillos, almonds, pine nuts, pork lard, toasted ground tortillas, fresh-ground cinnamon and three kinds of chiles — pasilla, guajillo and ancho — all adding up to a sauce of extraordinary depth and complexity. It's served in contemporary fashion, however, over a half semi-boneless chicken with sesame seeds, scallions, sour cream and semisweet chocolate shavings.

Homemade salsas are also a big deal at Tequila Ranch. Three versions — medium-hot chile ancho, a fiery habanero-and-chipotle-based salsa, and mellow tomatillo and avocado — are presented at each table. Patrons can help themselves to up to 15 other salsas at the popular salsa and tortilla bar.

Year two at Tequila Ranch will see a further broadening of the menu, with specials showcasing the variety of authentic regional Mexican food.

"It's a tremendous cuisine," says Gomez, who grew up in a Mexican household. "It can be presented at so many different levels."

CULINARY ENCULTURATION

"There are more trained chefs out there than ever, many of whom have come out of the culinary schools," says Russ Thornton, corporate executive chef of Blue Corn Café & Brewery, part of a group of casual restaurants in Santa Fe that also includes La Cantina and Rio Chama Steakhouse.

"That means that they've been classically trained in the brigade system, and they're applying those techniques to different ingredients and cuisines. They're taking their French training all the way down to South and Central America and seeing what they can create."

And, of course, there's no denying the demographic factor in our Latin fever. Hispanics, a wide-ranging group with origins in many regions, from Spain to Mexico to

South America, now represent the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States, propelling the most exciting elements of Latin culture — from food and music to language and design — into the public eye.

Not surprisingly, it's the food that is first embraced, especially in an era when American diners are already seeking flavor and authenticity in all their different guises. And that means sizzling new menu concepts like regional Mexican, upscale Caribbean and pan-Latin fusion food.

LATIN EVOLUTION

The impetus to present both authenticity and a healthier way of eating to American diners is central to a lot of what's now going on with Latin food. At Zocalo Cocina Mexicana in Arlington, Mass., "the food is very different from what people think of as Mexican, especially in the Northeast," says owner Ricardo Ramos, who is half Filipino, half Spanish and lived in Mexico for several years. He started in business in 1996 with a small takeout shop called Andale, which proved a worthy testing ground for more authentic Yucatan and Oaxacan specialties like *cochinita pibil*, shredded braised pork with tomato, orange, onions, chiles and chipotle sauce. Another hit was *legumbres en pipian*, a vegetable stew with squash, zucchini, carrots, nopales cactus and eggplant in a flavorful pumpkin-seed sauce.

"At first I was skeptical about how well food like this would be accepted," admits Ramos, "but people around Boston are well-traveled and well-educated, and they're happy to be able to try something more authentic."

Eight years ago, adds Ramos, it was hard to get key ingredients, such as the traditional Mexican herb epazote, fresh poblano peppers and some of the more unusual tropical fruits, but, with the explosion of interest in all things Latin, the situation has changed considerably.

The best-selling menu item at Zocalo is the chiles rellenos with a double-process batter, which are prepared to order, a rarity in restaurants.

"It's a very tedious process, so many cooks fry them ahead of time," says Ramos. "And that makes them very heavy."

Zocalo's chiles, which sell at a rate of 300 to 400 orders per week, are made with fresh poblanos grown to Ramos' specifications. After being blistered over the gas stove and peeled, the roasted peppers are filled with one of several different fillings — including portobella mushroom, chicken in mole sauce, shrimp or a blend of four different cheeses.

The peppers are soaked in egg white, rolled in flour, rolled in egg white and flour again, then fried in an extremely hot blend of 90 percent vegetable and 10 percent olive oils.

“The secret is the blend of oils and the extreme heat, so they stay light yet crisp,” says Ramos.

The inherent challenge with Mexican food, Ramos points out, is the cuisine’s reputation as being “bargain” ethnic food, a perception that many in the business are working to change.

AUTHENTICITY ASCENDS

“I think Latin food is finally going through the evolution from low-end ethnic into a more contemporary, universally appealing, upscale cuisine,” says Richard Sandoval, chef-owner of a clutch of trendsetting restaurants operating under the “modern Mexican” umbrella. These include Isla Mexican

Kitchen & Tequila Bar in Las Vegas; Pampano, a Mexican seafood restaurant in New York City; the contemporary Mexican Tamayo in Denver; and Zengo, an Asian-Latin fusion concept with locations in Denver and Washington, D.C.

Sandoval’s original restaurant, Maya, helped define the modern-Mexican sensibility in New York and San Francisco and is now set to open in Dubai — a development that points to the imminent globalization of Mexican food.

His restaurants sport all the accoutrements of “experience dining,” from high-tone décor and polished service to complete wine and cocktail selections — not to mention such signature menu items as Pipian de Puerco, pork tenderloin marinated in tamarind vinaigrette; Huachinango a la Talla, pan-roasted red snapper marinated in achiote with sweet and spicy chipotle rouille; and Costillas de Cordero, adobo-grilled lamb chops with achiote-truffle pan juice.

“We take the flavors and ingredients that Mexican food is known for and lighten it up, make it more contemporary,” explains Sandoval. His chiles rellenos are also a case in point. He stuffs the smoky poblano with fillings like seafood and cheese, then roasts it instead of frying: “You get the flavor of the chile, without all the fat.”



MODERN MEXICAN

FOR CHEF-OWNER RICHARD SANDOVAL, MODERN MEXICAN MEANS PLENTY OF FRESH SEAFOOD, LIKE PAMPANO'S SIGNATURE CEVICHEs.



MODERN MEXICAN

MORE LATIN FLAVOR EXPLORATION

Latin food is all about flavor, and new regional operations prove there's plenty more flavor to explore.

"I was surprised how many different kinds of people enjoy our food," says Margo Ruiz, who opened the Puerto Rican restaurant El Coqui in Antioch, Calif., a year ago with her husband, Ruben. "We get Caucasians, Asians, South Americans — all sorts of people who've never even been to Puerto Rico. They'll tell me, 'I love Mexican food, but I want to try something new.' Or, 'I love Chinese food, but I'm full up to here with it.' I realized that what they're really looking for is flavor."

Caribbean cuisine is ripe for exploration, adds Ruiz, with multicultural roots that lend an international appeal. The food at El Coqui (named after the beloved "singing" tree frog found only in Puerto Rico) is a traditional blend of Spanish, Latin American, Afro-Caribbean and indigenous influences, creating an explosion of flavors and textures. The flavor profile isn't spicy-hot from chiles, but rather rich with seasonings like olive oil, garlic, oregano and cilantro, intensified through slow processes like marinating, roasting and stewing.

Classic dishes include mofongo, a comfort food so satisfying it could be the next mashed potatoes. Adapted from Africa, mofongo consists of green plantains that are peeled and soaked in garlic-seasoned water, then cut on the bias and deep-fried until tender but not brown, Ruiz explains. The plantains are then crushed in a mortar with olive oil, pork rinds or bacon, garlic and pork jus, and served as a side dish with almost any saucy main course, such as *camarones criollos*, shrimp cooked in a tomato-based Creole sauce.

"You wouldn't think it, but all the ingredients in mofongo unite to create something really tasty," says Ruiz.

Another specialty is *pernil asado*, leg of pork marinated overnight in olive oil seasoned with garlic, oregano and lemon, then slowly oven roasted until it's falling-off-the-bone tender. *Bistec encebollado* — a server favorite at El Coqui — consists of top sirloin steak cooked in garlic, olive oil and white vinegar, then smothered with sliced sautéed onions.

Even a simple dish like rice gets a major flavor treatment in *arroz con gandules*, cooked with pigeon peas, chunks of pork or ham, garlic and fresh cilantro.

Puerto Rican appetizers are the ultimate finger foods and perfect for sharing. Various fritters made of mashed potatoes, plantains or cornmeal batter are

rolled into patties or lozenges — sometimes around a filling such as seasoned ground beef — then fried and served with a dipping sauce. And *bacalaitos* are crispy little croquettes made with flaked codfish, bound in a seasoned batter and fried. It's not hard to see how food like this would appeal to non-Hispanic diners.

FLAVOR CUES FROM CUBA

Another Caribbean cuisine poised to cross over into the mainstream is Cuban; in fact, the Cuban sandwich has already done it. This hearty signature sandwich with the dashing image is nothing more — nor less — than roast pork, ham, Swiss cheese, pickles and mustard on a soft yet crusty flat roll, pressed and toasted until the sum becomes greater than its parts.

Another well-known pan-Latin specialty that Cuba is known for is empanadas, appetizer-sized turnovers filled with well-seasoned stuffings.

Juan Fernandez wants to make other Cuban specialties just as widely known. A former corporate American whose parents are from Cuba, Fernandez and a partner opened Café Habana in Philadelphia in 2000. His goal is to introduce more people to the colorful, authentic cooking of Cuba by presenting lighter versions of the recipes he learned to cook at his grandmother's knee.

"Latins eat a lot of starch," he admits. "All the traditional plates are one starch, two starch, three starch."

At Café Habana, there's more emphasis on seafood, salads and fresh vegetables. Signature dishes include Zarzuela, a Spanish-style seafood "bouillabaisse," and *camarones al ajillo*, shrimp sautéed with olive oil and garlic, as well as three different kinds of grilled octopus and *ceviche de camarones*, a Latin-style shrimp cocktail with lemon, cilantro, tomatoes, celery, onion and garlic.

Fernandez also takes pains to remind people that Cuban food is not about chiles; it's about flavor: "Cubans do not like hot."

Many Cuban specialties are stews and braises featuring intriguing combinations of flavors and seasonings. Picadillo is ground beef sautéed with onions, green peppers, cumin, diced potatoes and Spanish olives, while *boliche asado* is a Cuban-style pot roast marinated in lime juice. As in many Latin countries, there is slow-roasted pork: *lechón asado*, or pork shoulder, marinated in both sweet and bitter flavors — orange juice, lime, roasted garlic and oregano — then roasted on the bone for six hours. And one of the most unusual dishes is *rabo encendido*,



CARIBBEAN COVE

JUDITH O'LOUGHLIN IS CONFIDENT AMERICAN DINERS ARE READY FOR THE SPICE AND SIZZLE OF GENUINE CARIBBEAN CUISINE.

oxtails braised in beef stock with red wine, thyme, tomato, bay leaf, nutmeg, garlic and a touch of cayenne.

ISLAND INSPIRATION

Yet another former island denizen who unites with fellow chefs and restaurateurs in her passion to introduce native specialties to American diners is Judith O'Loughlin. Born in Nevis, in the eastern leeward Caribbean, she opened Caribbean Cove in Oakland, Calif., for just that reason. After a building-code snafu forced her to close the original, O'Loughlin kept busy catering Caribbean-style parties until she could find a new location in Berkeley, which opened this May.

She's confident American diners are more than ready for the spice and sizzle of Jamaica and the eastern Caribbean. And it's not just the spicy, garlicky heat of a jerk seasoning she's presenting, but also the trademark cooking techniques that infuse food with seasoning.

"We do a lot of overnight marinating in the Caribbean," she says. "It makes a huge difference in the flavor and texture."

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **LATIN LITE:** Even classics like chiles rellenos and Cuban starches can be lightened up for today's health-conscious consumers
- ▶ **GET SOAKED:** Marinating both before and after cooking layers the flavors

Some foods are soaked in marinade both before and after cooking, such as Es-Cove-ich Fish, based on the Spanish escabeche method of returning freshly fried fish to a marinade and allowing it to cool in the flavorful steep. Usually made with flaky rock cod, the fish is marinated in seasoned oil, then fried and bathed in some of the remaining oil, which is also used to sauté the peppers, garlic and thyme; the resulting sauce is brightened with vinegar and tops the finished dish.

Ackee and Salt Fish — practically the national dish of Jamaica — is another Caribbean Cove specialty, in which salt cod is desalinated by boiling, then flaked and mixed with olive oil, onions, thyme, garlic, tomatoes and boiled ackee, the fleshy fruit of a tree originally brought from Africa by Captain William Bligh.

"Ackee is very spongy and neutral, so it really absorbs the flavor of the seasonings," explains O'Loughlin.

The pride and joy of O'Loughlin's kitchen, however, are Cove Cakes — her take on a Caribbean-island specialty variously known as bake, float, johnnycake or hoecake. This rudimentary form of unleavened bread inspires fierce loyalties among its fans. O'Loughlin kneads and flattens her version so that it puffs upon hitting hot oil, allowing it to be opened up and stuffed with any number of fillings.

As Caribbean Cove gets further along in its new market, O'Loughlin hopes to introduce more little-known Nevis specialties, including dumpling and salt fish, yellow cornmeal and okra with steamfish, and coconut dumpling. She also hopes to launch a retail line based on the staples of her catering parties: beef patties; rice and peas, made with coconut milk and pigeon peas; and tropical juices and the like.

Just a recitation of these dishes gives an idea not only of what cooks on this tiny island had to work with before the advent of air travel, but also the bounty the island and its neighbors can offer American menus. Now that we live in a global marketplace and diners are craving authenticity, expect fresh tropical influences to breeze through more menus. ☺

JOAN LANG, founder and editorial director of Full Plate Communications in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, can be e-mailed at klang@full-plate.com.