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Long before Mexico was Mexico, there was Aztlán. Stay with us here, we’ll get to burritos in a minute. But for now, let’s go back to Tenochtitlán, the vibrant megalopolis where the Aztecs built the Western Hemisphere’s greatest urban area of the pre-colonial era. Today, their ingenuity lives on as Mexico City. Back in the day, Aztecs traced their origins to an idyllic locale, somewhere on a distant coast, northwest from the floating gardens and pyramids of their own region. They called this heavenly paradise Aztlán. Here in Los Angeles, however, Aztlán was reborn in the 1960s and ’70s, when Chicano activists, poets and artists reclaimed the myth, reimagining that perhaps, Los Angeles was this promised land, the Eden on the ocean, where the indigenous Tongva and Chumash peoples could conjure crops from the seemingly magical soil and haul in bountiful catches from the endless sea.

Like the folks of that pioneering Chicano movement — whose re-envisioned Aztec myth recontextualized the city we live in — today a new generation of Angeleno chefs is reshaping the way we think about Mexican cuisine in our town. L.A.’s Mexican food is legendary, but this legion of hometown heroes is creating dishes with a distinctly Angeleno approach. Think locally sourced ingredients and cross-cultural mashups; health-consciousness and flavor-forward experiments. These chefs take traditional recipes and reinvent them according to their own rules, forged by the L.A. experience, where culture collisions are the defining characteristic of what makes this place great.

While this issue is about some mind-shatteringly great Mexican food and new restaurants that are changing the game, we are featuring chefs who are bringing novel ideas and revolutionary philosophies to the edible artistry they create. There’s Ted Montoya, whose otherworldly pozole at Caló Provisions showcases his hybridized Chicano cooking. Visionary chef Ray Garcia’s haute cuisine at Broken Spanish strives to distinguish Los Angeles as a distinct region in the culinary pantheon of Mexican-American culture. And mole queen Rocio Camacho’s ancient recipes with a modern twist fall in line with the rising trend of “decolonizing the diet,” which seeks to bring Latin American food back to its pre-Columbian roots.

We trace the refocusing of Los Angeles’ culinary districts, as more unmissable eateries open away from the traditional centers of restaurant hot spots, instead looking to the southeast enclaves of Whittier and Bell. Then there’s the recent rise of Sonoran-style spots, featuring food from that Mexican state, which has been often underrepresented on Angelenos’ plates.

Is Los Angeles really Aztlán? Only the gods know. But for us mortals, we know that Los Angeles is the holy land for a new wave of modern Mexican food. —Drew Tewksbury
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THE RISE OF NUEVA CALIFORNIA

These chefs will change the way you think about Mexican food

BY SARAH BENNETT

Over the last decade, a new kind of Mexican-inspired California cuisine has emerged. And Los Angeles is its hub. Food writer Bill Esparza once dubbed the Southland’s modern Mexican revolution “Alta California cuisine” to distinguish it from a movement happening in Mexico itself, where contemporary chefs are reimagining menus and experimenting with ingredients that extend far beyond what many Americans consider to fall within the borders of “Mexican food.”

Here in Los Angeles, the revolution continues, as Angeleno chefs take a unique approach to our state’s regional cuisine. And there’s a very real potential that this reconfigured Mexican cooking will become the next national obsession. Every movement needs a name, and we’re just going to call it Nueva California. It’s a hat tip to our state’s own northern Mexican roots, where families from Sonora and Sinaloa helped found the pueblo in the late 1700s. Among the arid hills and alluvial plains where Los Angeles sits today, the Spanish first christened our entire region with this very name: Nueva California. Today it seems to be an apt description for our new California—which is demographically more like old California—where Latinos are the largest ethnic group in the state, with Mexicans comprising nearly 80 percent of their population in L.A. County alone, according to a recent Pew Research study.

Dozens of second- and third-generation Mexican-American chefs are embracing this multiplicitous mélange of Angeleno identity. These chefs use food as a way to express the complexities of growing up in this cultural landscape, whether they present it on artfully composed plates or nestle it between handmade tortillas.

A cadre of flag-bearing chefs is leading the way, influenced by lessons learned in la cocina de la abuela, as well as from kitchens steeped in classical French cooking. There’s Ray Garcia, whose year-old, high-end Broken Spanish earned him—and the so-called “modern Mexican” movement in L.A.—national acclaim. Wes Avila, whose Guerrilla Tacos truck lifts the humble street food into works of art, also cooks with a seasonal array of complex ingredients that use masa as a canvas.

There’s also an entire subset of new restaurants that is quietly bringing a new kind of Mexican food, made with the natural bounty of California, into the middle- and upper-middle-class Latino enclaves of Southeast L.A. Together, they reveal Los Angeles’ signature breakdown of the so-called high and low categories, with dishes such as Santa Barbara uni tacos, mesquite-grilled carne asada and craft cocktails sharing the table.

Like the California-style cuisine preceding it, Nueva California could really only happen here, a place where fresh ingredients are not just accessible but the norm. L.A. also has a sense of history and compels the diverse generations to reflect on its Mexican past and present. After all, the past is the cliff from which we leap forward. And for Nueva California cuisine, traditional Mexican cooking is the point of departure.

South by Southeast: Ricardo Diaz

The range of L.A. restaurants currently operating on the Nueva California wavelength is astonishing. Just to name-drop a few, there’s the Cocinas y Calaveras group, featuring Jesse Gomez and Jose Acevedo’s downtown casual Yxta Cocina Mexicana; Mercado in Mid-City, Hollywood and Santa Monica; and seafood-centric Maradentro in Studio City and Brentwood. Chef Eddie Ruiz’s now-shuttered, damn-we-already-miss-it Corazon y Miel was a revelation in the city of Bell, and now he also has antojitos at Public Beer and Wine in Long Beach. Esdras Ochoa’s open-air, Sonoran-style Salazar in Frogtown has just made a splash. And there’s Alan Matheus’ chef-driven mariscos at newly renovated Puertos del Pacifico in Boyle Heights. They’re all rightful destina-
Ricardo Diaz has long been one of those chefs, opening and closing multiple Nueva California restaurants on L.A.’s Eastside, focusing on top-notch ingredients in dishes like ceviches and tortas, or serving high-quality comida casera (homestyle food) at his restaurants Guisados, Bizarra Capital and Colonia Publica.

The Boyle Heights native’s grandfather — who’s from Zacatecas — launched the family’s first taco stand in the late 1960s, serving carnitas, barbacoa and various guisados, or braises. By the time he was 9 years old, Diaz was dicing onions and chopping through cases of tomatoes at El 7 Mares, his family’s second venture into food service, a popular mariscos restaurant on Whittier Boulevard in East L.A.

At one point, El 7 Mares, the little Mexican seafood restaurant that his father and uncle started in the early 1970s, bloomed into a 26-unit enterprise — fish markets, fast-food stands and distribution centers spread throughout the Southland. Diaz became a project manager for the family business, spearheading new restaurant openings and setting up purchasing offices in Sinaloa or Indonesia.

“El 7 Mares was a powerhouse,” Diaz says. The restaurant served immigrants mainly from the interior part of Mexico; they didn’t know how to cook seafood, making the restaurant a special treat. “Our customers would work at the factory, get paid on Friday, go spend it all with us.”

But Diaz wasn’t content to be just an executive. A creative person who says he would have been an architect if not for the long days required at a drafting table, Diaz finally broke out on his own in 1997 and opened Dorados in Monterey Park. The restaurant reinterpreted the fast-food seafood dishes his parents sold at El 7 Mares — the streamlined recipes used olive oil instead of butter, and food was grilled and steamed instead of fried. “It was a fresher, healthier alternative to classic Mexican cooking,” he says.

Ten years later, he started Cook’s Torras, also in Monterey Park, a Mexican-style sandwich shop built on an undeniably new tradition. Some of the fillings were familiar — lengua, chorizo, milanesa. The toppings — garlic mayo, cream cheese, fried sage — were not. And instead of using the gummy white bolillo or telera bread, Diaz recruited his then-brother-in-law, a baker who worked for Thomas Keller in Napa, to help craft the ideal bread. The resulting house roll, made with a Bouchon starter, wasn’t too crusty and had enough crumb to capture each creation’s abundance of sauce.

“I’m more mainstream than I am probably Mexican,” Diaz admits. “I was raised in a Spanish-speaking home and my mom was an OK cook, but it was more about me experimenting, working in the [family] restaurants on the weekends, loving to eat and always trying new stuff. I guess as an artist you’re always wanting to create new things, whether it’s on a canvas or on a plate.”

Creativity came swiftly for Diaz in the years following the opening of Cook’s Torras, every year bringing a new project inspired as much by his childhood as a Mexican American from L.A. as his years spent traveling throughout Mexico. “I wanted to bring some of those recipes back and show people Mexican food is more than just carne asada and beans and rice,” he says.

Next came Monterey Park’s Dorados Ceviche Bar, with experimental ceviches from around Latin America. Then the first of the braise-filled taco chain Guisados, which Diaz opened with partner Armando de la Torre on a block near his old home in Boyle Heights. There was the too-short-lived Colonia Taco Lounge in the lonchera land of La Puente; Bizarra Capital, Uptown Whittier’s still-thriving Mexican gastropub; Colonia Publica, which is home to fancy nuyen-style versions of sopa de fideo and craft beer micheladas; and, most recently, Colonia Tacos Guisados, which took over a defunct El 7 Mares off the 605 freeway in Whittier to sling quick-service versions of Colonia Taco Lounge’s beloved crafty tacos.

Diaz moved to Whittier in 1992 and takes special pride in feeding his city. The area, in part because of his various restaurants, is emerging as a culinary oasis in an otherwise suburban landscape. Whittier, of course, is home to a thriving, economically diverse Latino population. Diaz’s next imminent adventure is Whittier Brewing, a small craft brewery that’s being built out in a warehouse near his home. He’s already found two brewers and is planning to serve his take on pizzas. Or maybe, he says, tlaxiudas, a Oaxacan demi-pizza made with a toasted tortilla and covered with a base layer of beans instead of tomato sauce.

“I still think my food’s pretty basic. I’m already doing what works, what I grew up with and what my community eats,” Diaz says. “I’m just trying to take better Mexican food wherever I go. I’m not plating pretty or trying to create some sort of fusion. I’m taking what I enjoy eating and trying to make it as best as I can.”

Love and Tacos: Thomas Ortega

If Diaz’s Eastside empire is putting Whittier on L.A.’s restaurant radar, Thomas Ortega’s three restaurants rock the southern suburbs harder than that terrible Ben Folds song. Nine years ago, after a career in fine dining that included stints at Spago, the Water Grill and the Four Seasons in Newport Beach, the Cerritos native opened Ortega 120 in Redondo Beach, not knowing if anyone would be interested in enchiladas topped with Oaxacan cheese or burritos that weren’t drenched in ranchero sauce.

“At Ortega,” he says, “I had a fear of going too unfamiliar. So I kept it there but went a tad above sea level.”

Ortega grew up watching his grandmother, who emigrated from Juarez, make handmade tortillas every day, but he never went into the kitchen himself. Still, when he
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decided to open his own restaurant, he didn’t look to what he’d learned in culinary school for inspiration but rather to his own family.

“I’m a pocho. I’m a Chicano. I’m a Mexican,” he says. “Why not put my restaurant background into food I watched my grandma make growing up and blend the two together?”

At Ortega 120, it’s entirely possible to order the same thing one would at an El Torito or insert-chain-Mexican-restaurant-name-here and have the dish come out as a completely new experience. His enchiladas are made with a thick, red guajillo chili house sauce, stuffed with chili-braised beef short rib and topped with Oaxacan (not yellow) cheese. The chilaquiles are served with homemade corn tortillas under a bed of duck confit, roasted poblano chili sauce and two kinds of Mexican cheese. Ordering a mojado (wet burrito) isn’t an option but getting a burrito stuffed with all-day-braised carnitas is.

**Border Dreams: Jen Feltham & Teodoro Diaz-Rodriguez**

It’s only been open for a few months, but Sonoratown in downtown L.A. already has regulars. People of all backgrounds make a daily stop at the tiny taco counter to check in with owners Jen Feltham and Teodoro Diaz-Rodriguez; then order $2 chicken, tripa and carne asada tacos, made according to a regional style that’s having an “it” moment in L.A. right now.

Sonoratown’s tacos are estilo Sonora — Sonora-style. Despite the Mexican state’s proximity to SoCal — it borders Arizona — few local restaurants have focused on one of its culinary joys: fresh, mesquite-grilled steak in thin, pressed flour tortillas. Known as Mexico’s meat capital, Sonora is home to a large percentage of the country’s cows.

“In L.A. you’re content if you’re paying $1.25 to eat whatever meat they put in a taco,” Feltham says, “and most of the time, it’s over-

“Every visit to Diaz-Rodriguez’s mother meant bringing back a cooler full of Asadero Campas’ irresistible tacos, filled with flavorful, fatty short rib topped with chopped cabbage, spicy chile de árbol salsa and a cooling avocado sauce made with pureed iceberg lettuce. When a craving hit them at home in L.A., the couple went to Esdras Ochoa’s infamous (although mesquite grill–free) Mexicali Taco in Chinatown or the so-called Tire Shop Taqueria in South L.A., which grills over mesquite but uses corn tortillas, Tijuana-style.

When they’d saved enough to put a down payment on a house, the two former Bäco Mercat servers decided to re-create their favorite Sonoran tacos here. Campas gave them his blessing and consulted on the project, sharing his proprietary salsa recipes and helping them find the perfect flour tortilla press, which had to be imported from Mexico. “Bäco taught us that you could get fine dining–quality food without all that bullshit,” Feltham says. “All that white-tablecloth stuff that comes with fine dining, that’s not L.A. We’re all about the food — the more important thing. We care more about what’s actually put in front of you.”

Sonoratown isn’t the only spot on a quest to bring the best damn flour tortillas and wood-smoke–perfumed meats of Northern Mexican cooking to L.A. The recently opened Loqui in Culver City riff’s on the extra-loaded carne asada tacos found at Rosarito’s famous open-air taqueria, Tacos El Yaqui, upgrading the original streetside experience by offering indoor dining, wine from Valle de Guadalupe and bottles of Baja craft beer.

Then there’s Ochoa’s new outdoor endeavor, Salazar in Frogtown, where the talented, Mexicali-bred taquero is firing up the mesquite grill of his dreams. He’s also branching out into experimental takes on everything from flank topped with popcorn to pescado zarandeado, made with a whole Idaho trout.

“For so long, ‘Mexican food’ has been writ large to mean food from all of Mexico, but now people are starting to take things seriously and are learning that there’s so much that Mexico has to offer,” Feltham says, adding that similar attempts to explore regional cuisine are taking place in L.A.’s Chinese food community. “It makes up for us not doing due diligence to the fact that Mexico is culturally rich and diverse. Moving from one state to the next will mean totally different staple foods and totally different culinary experiences.”

**Multikulti Master: Mario Christerna**

Mexico’s gastronomical range is vast, but it has nothing on L.A. Here, entire swaths of the grid serve the foods brought by immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America and beyond, and adventurous chefs are more than happy to let us taste the inevitable fusion-future that happens when you combine elements from disparate places.

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Christerna, the passionate, eloquent Chicano behind eclectic, 2-year-old downtown restaurant the Briks. Although it’s just a few blocks from Ray Garcia’s nationally recognized modern Mexican marvel Broken Spanish, the Briks is so distinct from its Nueva California peer that it might as well be serving sushi.

While Garcia and other Mexican-American chefs are weaving between France, California and Mexico, Christerna is using the world as his color wheel, crafting dishes like North African puff pastries (briks) filled with chorizo and salsa ranchera, and a Mary’s free-range roasted chicken served with Israeli couscous prepared Spanish-style with simmered tomatoes.

“I always felt like I was a global person, even though I grew up in Boyle Heights and I’m Chicano to the fullest,” the abundantly tattooed chef says. “That is why my food is like that — global — because I have always loved travel, I have always loved to meet new people, and I love to speak a bunch of different languages and try new foods. I have always felt that I belonged to the world.”

Christerna’s worldly influence is in his blood; his mother’s family came from Northern Mexico, his father was half Spanish, half Indian. His stepfather was Cuban. He started cooking by necessity at a young age and says he always knew he wanted to be a chef.

Plans changed after high school, though, when the lure of money drew him into stints in club promoting and car-stereo installation, eventually landing him a nearly decade-long career in the music industry, most of it spent as a globe-trotting tour manager for up-and-coming Spanish EDM DJs.

Christerna realized that food, not music, was his true passion, so he dropped the jet-set life to finally pursue his dream. He attended Le Cordon Bleu in Pasadena, studying under his mentor, North African chef Farid Zadi.

“This is not just a torta place or a taco place,” Christerna says of the Briks. “I wanted my first restaurant to be a reflection of my struggle. I wanted to transmit my journey through my food, through my art. Coming into here is like coming into my heart, coming into my brain, coming into my palate, coming into my life.”

With such a tangle of influences, a meal at the Briks can seem either gloriously hodgepodge or culturally chaotic. The tables are covered in a collage of punk-rock magazine photos, Garbage Pail Kids cards and images of old Hollywood films. Kung fu movies play on TVs in the dining room while 1990s R&B blasts in your ears.

The aroma of Christerna’s secret ras el hanout spice blend wafts through the restaurant. On your plate might be a whole branzino marinated in Moroccan chermoula or a Spanish-style flatbread topped with Merguez sausage.

The experience feels like an album of remixes, created from all the songs Christerna has collected in his lifetime. It’s an entirely danceable debut that sounds very much like the crossroads of the world that is L.A.

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“As chefs, we are like musicians, and it’s our job to create new music for people to hear,” he says. “It’s like, why keep playing the same songs? You evolve, and that’s what food does, too.”

For restaurant locations and information, see our curated Mexican restaurant map on page 36.
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Time has come, and he’s banking on his very specialty in the spotlight. He’s even made it his mission, infused with nontraditional flavors and ingredients, to garner the same brand of crossover culinary attention as the taco has become a staple of myriad Mexican restaurants. Pozole, the popular hangover “cure” and weekend staple of myriad Mexican restaurants. Pozole is often overshadowed by, if not entirely belong to America. I feel the same about my food and style of cooking. Are there Mexican roots? Without a doubt, but my cooking is also very California.”

—TED MONTOYA

Handmade salsa verde or smoky red salsa quemada can be added, too, though Montoya says his pozole “white broth” is quite good unadorned. Toppings, including everything from pickled onions and pepitas to shaved chicharrón and crushed coriander, make for interesting textures and a unique take on the traditional dish that’s earned Caló Provisions a growing following, as well as a fair amount of local and national media attention.

As the weather has heated up, Montoya has had to put the pozole on hiatus and focus on more summer-appropriate dishes. However, he’s still making use of many of the flavors and components of his signature dish, as he did recently with a ceviche-style hominy, which he marinated in a mixture of cucumbers, salsa verde, radishes and citrus and served on a tostada. At a recent installment of Smorgasburg, the recurring food fest that takes place Sundays at the Alameda Produce Market, the chef wowed with a 2-pound, mole-glazed turkey leg, paired with garlic-braised collards.

Montoya considers festivals and pop-ups a training ground for his ultimate goal of opening his own restaurant, which he envisions as an affordable spot, serving experimental food, good beer and, of course, pozole — the kind of place that cooks could bring the family to on their day off. “It’s fun to do the outdoor thing, you know, setting up tents and serving the public, and there will be time to do that still, but I want a place of my own,” Montoya says.

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“BEING CHICANO MEANS TO ME BEING A PART OF A SPECIFIC COMMUNITY — ONE THAT DOESN’T BELONG TO MEXICO, BUT DOESN’T ENTIRELY BELONG TO AMERICA. I FEEL THE SAME ABOUT MY FOOD AND STYLE OF COOKING. ARE THERE MEXICAN ROOTS? WITHOUT A DOUBT, BUT MY COOKING IS ALSO VERY CALIFORNIA.”

—TED MONTOYA

A MORE PERFECT POZOLE

This Chicano chef’s stew will make your abuelita jealous

BY VALENTINA SILVA

While the taco has become the unofficial food of Los Angeles, reaching peak consumption and cultural significance in the past decade, there are plenty of other worthy Mexican food traditions that have yet to garner the same brand of crossover culinary fame. Pozole is one of them.

With its hominy-and-meat base, the hearty stew is often overshadowed by, if not mistaken for, its tripe-laden sister menudo, the popular hangover “cure” and weekend staple of myriad Mexican restaurants. Pozole shows up on restaurant menus, too, but more commonly the dish is reserved for family celebrations, especially during the Christmas holidays, when it’s served along with other labor-intensive foods, like tamales and sugar-topped buñuelos.

Ted Montoya is hoping to change that. The young Chicano chef believes pozole’s time has come, and he’s banking on his version, infused with nontraditional flavors and multicultural influences, to finally put the specialty in the spotlight. He’s even made it the focus of his food startup, Caló Provisions.

“It’s just been a big part of our lives, so we decided to do pozole. Nobody makes pozole as good as what we make,” explains the chef, who even credits the dish with helping him woo his wife, and sometimes prep assistant, Melissa Montoya.

A native of the Southeast L.A. enclave of Santa Fe Springs, Montoya got his start in the industry at Alvin Cailan’s Eggslut when it was still a food truck. The business had begun for only a week when Montoya met Cailan. Seizing on the fact that he, and his family, actually liked it, he began perfecting what he describes as a “Latin-inspired dashi,” which takes about 18 hours to prepare and replaces the dried kelp and bonito flakes used in the traditional Japanese stock with banana leaves and chicharrón.

“These were just ideas I had. Then we tested them, and they were delicious,” Montoya says.

His liberal use of garlic, shallots and oregano help maintain a distinctly Latin flavor with subtle hints of Asian influence.

His recipe evolved further once he began working with Eddie Ruiz at the chef’s former restaurants Corazon y Miel and Picnik (and, currently, at his latest endeavor, Chicas Taqueria). Under Ruiz, Montoya has learned more about bringing out the complexities of Mexican food. “[The idea is] how can we make it the best thing you ever ate but still feel like your mom made it,” Montoya explains. “So, yeah, that’s kind of how I’ve developed my style.”

Montoya debuted his pozole with a pop-up at Primera Taza Coffee House in Boyle Heights last year. While the response was mostly positive, he says that some customers were skeptical of unorthodox additions, such as a ramen-inspired poached egg, but he wasn’t discouraged. “First off, it’s really good,” he says defiantly. “Second, it’s an add-on, so if you don’t want it, don’t get it.”

Montoya has moved on to food festivals and events, where customers have the freedom to build their own bowls, starting with a choice between vegan shiitake or pork-based broth. The hominy, which has the tendency to overwhelm in some pozoles, doesn’t in this case — the tender purple and white kernels are expertly balanced with such proteins as pork shoulder, carnitas, confit chicken thigh or roasted tofu with blistered kale.

A more perfect pozole will make your abuelita jealous.

Caló Provisions’ pozole

A MORE PERFECT POZOLE

This Chicano chef’s stew will make your abuelita jealous

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Holy Mole

Rocio Camacho’s Contemporary Take
On the Ancient Oaxacan Dish
Can Only Be Described as Celestial

BY CARRIEBAN FRAGOZA

Legend has it that Mexican mole was originally created for royalty and the gods. It makes sense that it would require nothing short of a deity to take the celestially savory sauce to the higher level. And in the City of Angels, we have our own official mole goddess: Rocio Camacho.

In a city known for its unparalleled Mexican cuisine, Camacho holds her title, Diosa de los Moles (Goddess of the Moles), with graceful confidence. “I was born with this gift. It’s something that comes very easily to me,” she says.

Camacho’s restaurant, Rocio’s Mexican Kitchen, stands modestly on a suburban corner in her hometown of Bell Gardens.

Her moles are nothing less than virtuosic, attracting a devoted clientele from across the city, eager to taste her brilliant traditional Oaxacan and Poblano moles as well as her inventive, modern interpretations.

Her range in mole is ever-expanding, from the smoky, dark flavors of mole Oaxaqueño to the sunny notes of a fruit-in-fused golden mole. Camacho prepares an elegant, almond-based white mole, while mancha manteles — the “linen stainer” — may catch you off guard with its spicy rumble, which quickly gathers momentum after a first taste of sweetness.

Camacho is executive chef at Don Chente Bar and Grill, owned by Vicente Ortiz, of the popular family-owned chain El Pescador, but evidence of her culinary genius appears on the menus of numerous other Mexican restaurants in L.A., including La Casita Mexicana and La Huasteca in Lynwood’s Plaza Mexico.

After years of working in restaurants, she finally earned her undisputed title after opening Mole de los Dioses in Sun Valley. However, after that restaurant burned down in 2015 in an unresolved case of arson, followed by a split from her business partner, Camacho knew it was time to take her traditional, one-of-a-kind moles to the next level — so she started her own business. In the year since she opened Rocio’s Mexican Kitchen, she’s been fully committed to her heavenly calling.

Her kitchen is both library and playground. She changes her menu every three months. “I have a lot of respect for the traditional recipes. But I like to give them my special touch. Here, I do what I want,” she says, experimenting not only to satisfy her own curiosity for new flavors but also to expose her clients to the mosaic of Mexico’s cuisine. “Mexico is so extensive in its gastronomy. I want people to taste as much of it as possible.”

With their complex flavors and textures, Camacho’s moles tell an ancestral culinary story. She says that while many restaurants and chefs serve very good mole, they rarely demonstrate knowledge of its deep emotional and geographic associations. Camacho’s dishes are infused with the smoky essence of wood-fired brasas, which for her evokes the flavor of charred leaves from a generations-old avocado tree in the Sierra Nevadas.

Mole’s origin tale has several versions. One says that mole was invented in the kitchen of resourceful nuns, who concocted the first mole when they got news of an impromptu visit by the Spanish viceroy. They frantically threw together every ingredient they could find ... and voilà! Mole was born.

The story Camacho believes to be true is less common but more fascinating. She’s certain that the word “mole” comes from “molli,” an ancient Nahuatl word for a rudimentary chile sauce made by the Toltecs. This base sauce was mixed with amaranth seeds and the blood of sacrificial victims. It was baked in the sun and formed into bite-size cakes, which were consumed by priests during ceremonial dinners.

Over time, “molli” has evolved to include a large array of ingredients (sans the human blood), in varieties that are not only limited by region, mainly Oaxacan and Poblano, but enhanced by the curiosity and invention of Rocio Camacho and other mole divas.

Camacho takes pleasure in the rich colors and textures of her moles as much as the flavors. In her more recent experiments, she’s added sweet wines, or played with coffee and Kahlúa. These days she’s in love with one of her more exotic variations: Chicken with mole Oaxaqueño.
a rich, golden mole that includes mango, passion fruit, golden raisins and a touch of ripe habanero for a spicy kick.

“Es una belleza,” she says. She’s right: Her mole is a beauty.

**Camacho comes from** a long line of moleras, which she traces back to her great-grandmother in their ancestral hometown of Huajuapan, in the Mixteca highlands of Oaxaca state. Camacho learned to be a proud molera by watching her grandmother and by helping her mother.

Their matrilineal role as the moleras in their village placed them at the heart of Huajuapan’s social life, preparing exquisite mole dinners for every baptism, quinceañera and wedding.

Camacho remembers her mother preparing for parties two months in advance. She would start by cleaning the chilies and laying them out on petates (reed mats) to dry in the sun, before they were toasted on large clay griddles, soaked and softened.

She ground the chilies on metates (large stone slabs) with smoked cacao beans, almonds, pepita seeds, walnuts, peanuts, almonds, amaranth, cinnamon, thyme, oregano, garlic, raisins and plantain.

Not only an alchemist of flavor, Camacho also cares about cooking healthy food. She’s learned to make vegetarian and vegan versions of her dishes, and she puts fresh aloe vera and chia seeds in her jewel-colored aguas frescas to stimulate digestion and revitalize hair and skin. For her, a vegetable-based diet was simply part of her humble upbringing, part of her heritage as a Mixteca, one of Oaxaca’s diverse indigenous population. “My family grew up very poor but very healthy. We were always fed very healthy and delicious foods,” she says.

Vegetarianism isn’t a novelty in Mexican cooking. After all, the holy trinity of the Mexican diet consists of corn, beans and chili, along with healthful greens such as nopales (cactus), verdolagas (purslane), squash blossoms and the exotic corn fungus huitlacoche.

Recently, more chefs, foodies and health-conscious folks are taking up the “decolonize your diet” movement in an effort to reclaim ancient culinary traditions that return to largely plant-based, precolonial foods. Pork, beef and dairy products, common culprits of obesity, diabetes and other dietary malignancies, are all foods that migrated to the Americas from Europe. An obesity epidemic has hit Mexico hard in recent years. The 2012 National Survey of Health and Nutrition found that nearly 56 percent of Mexico City’s population was overweight or obese. In a city of around 21 million, that’s a big problem. So the decolonized diet could be a healthy solution and connection to Mexico’s indigenous history.

Camacho cares deeply about passing along culinary and cultural knowledge to new generations. She hopes to start a series of casual classes to share her knowledge of traditional Mexican foods, starting with the basics and ingredients, eventually moving into sauces. “A lot of our young people in this country don’t know about our traditional foods,” she says. “Their parents didn’t get a chance to talk to them about our gastronomy. People ask me, why don’t you guard your recipes more? I tell them, there’s no reason to keep them to myself. It’s good to share. It’s better to teach.”

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BEYOND ELEVATION

RAY GARCIA’S RESTAURANTS AIM TO MAKE ANGELENO MEXICAN FOOD INTO A REGIONAL CUISINE ALL ITS OWN

BY ELINA SHATKIN

Contemporary chefs often stake their reputations on mastering regional cuisines of far-off locales from around the world. But for chef Ray Garcia, his culinary terrain is much closer to home. He aims to showcase L.A.’s modern Mexican food as its own regionally focused style, just like the fare coming from Mexico City, Baja or the Yucatán.

“I knew it wasn’t going to be a region-specific study on Central Mexican food,” he says. “It’s more about feeding my curiosity as a chef.”

He’s referring to the food at his two restaurants, B.S. Taqueria and Broken Spanish, which he opened in 2015, less than 90 days apart. At B.S. Taqueria, in the center of downtown, tacos are works of art. Behold Manila clams, diced Creminelli lardo, serrano chilies and crisp garlic chips on an heirloom masa tortilla dabbed with puffs of whipped lardo.

A few blocks south, Broken Spanish is an upscale joint where the masa on the lamb neck tamale is soft enough to cradle a precious emerald. The poached Okinawan sweet potato is heaped with pig snout, ear and tail (the better to showcase their varied textures), and the chicharrón is cooked for 36 hours before being deep-fried and served in a round slab that’d shame most steakhouses.

At both, Garcia fuses the badassery of a five-star chef with a love for what L.A. has taught him. A Los Angeles native, Garcia, 40, grew up splitting his time between Cypress Park and the east San Fernando Valley, where his grandmother watched him on weekdays while his parents worked. The UCLA grad deferred law school and ended up in the food world. He spent six years at the Belvedere, in the Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills, where he started at the bottom and worked his way up to executive sous chef. He jumped to Fig at Santa Monica’s Fairmont Miramar Hotel, transforming it from a forgettable hotel restaurant into a farm-to-table powerhouse that drew on ingredients from the nearby Santa Monica Farmers Market. Angelenos took notice.

Broken Spanish and B.S. Taqueria have given Garcia free reign to explore his palate — while winning critical raves and hungry eaters. He mashes up styles in a hybrid that has become his signature.

And if he helps redefine Mexican food along the way, so be it. “Sometimes, there’s a pressure for forced authenticity,” Garcia says. “This adaptation, this modification — that’s the new thing. That’s what’s genuine.”

Elevating Mexican food. Do you think that’s a fair description?

RAY GARCIA: I guess it’s fair. “Elevating” makes something sound like it’s very low or that it needs help. I never say I’m cooking elevated Mexican cuisine. We’re showcasing Mexican cuisine. We do it out of an appreciation for the food as opposed to “Let me see how I can chef it up.” I say no. Let me understand the dish. Let me fall in love with it. Let me share that with you. It’s not “Let me fix your broken plate of food.”

That’s why I asked. I feel like people intend that phrase as a compliment. The notion of “elevating” food has a fraught history. It’s rooted in these culturally biased notions — haute cuisine, basically European food, versus “ethnic” cuisine.

I think if I look at my recipes versus my grandmother’s, there is a consistency. I’m working within my means and I’m putting all of the resources I have onto a plate. If somebody makes you a great grilled cheese sandwich with artisan cheese or bread, it’s not to pooh-pooh what your mom made you with tomato soup on a rainy day.

How important are precolonial, Mesoamerican cuisines to your cooking?

I won’t remove the Spanish contribution to my food — cheese, pork, chicken, animals — but we also have an heirloom variety of alocote beans on the menu. We use pre-Columbian herbs like epazote and papalo. I try to use them instead of coriander, cinnamon or other flavors that were not native to Mexico. You put a little epazote in a pot of beans and it’s completely different.

Did you grow up eating these ingredients, or did you discover them later?

After tasting them, I’d go, “Oh, that’s that flavor.” But it was not something I originally put on my grocery list. My understanding and comfort with it have increased. We have some epazote on our counter in little pods that we can pick fresh. The primary use is refried lentils. It’s my take on refried beans. It’s very, very California.

How does the kind of food you eat growing up influence what you’re cooking now?

Some dishes are almost a direct replica of what I grew up eating. When we opened B.S. Taqueria, I had a bologna taco on the menu. We made our own homemade bologna and mayonnaise. That was my after-school snack. Tamales are one of the staples at Broken Spanish. I want to show the versatility of that dish. There are some direct tie-ins to the food I ate, but it’s more the taste and the kind of soul that goes into what I cook. I am a third-generation Mexican-American. There’s definitely been Mexican culture in the kitchen, but it was usually in the back of the house. It wasn’t the culture or voice of the person who was driving the menu.

How do you feel about being grouped with other “pocho chefs” — Eddie Ruiz of Corazon y Miel, Carlos Salgado of Taco Maria, Wes Avila of Guerrilla Tacos and a few others — as a new wave of Mexican cuisine?

I don’t know how it started. They started to bring our names up in this group and we started to form relationships. I wish the list was longer than five to 10 people. It’s great that we’re being seen as this new group, but each one of us has our own identity, our own style, our own purpose in food.

It definitely seems like a “high tide lifts all boats” sort of thing. It is not a sea without choppy waves. I think there is still a lot to overcome.

Does it bug you when people say, “Why should I go to a fancier Mexican restaurant when I could go to any truck and get a taco for two bucks?”

It’s incredibly frustrating. I get that everyone is operating within their means, but if you’re on the consumer end, you can’t be an idiot. To say that anything with a tortilla and some sort of topping is a taco so you should only pay a dollar is close-minded. People say, “I can’t pay $15 for a tamale. It’s just a tamale.” No, it’s not. It’s this heirloom corn, this lamb, this sauce. It’s this amount of time, this technique, this cook.

What’s the question you never get asked that you want people to know?

I get asked all the time: “What part of Mexico is your family from?” I can generate some sort of response that will get you off the hook. “What’s the question you never get asked?” I can generate some sort of response that will get you off my back, but I’m from Los Angeles. My experience is uniquely Angeleno. Sometimes your culinary roots, where you draw from, is your current address and not 3,000 miles away, 150 years ago.

Broken Spanish | 1050 S. Flower St., downtown (213) 749-1469 | brokenspanish.com

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A ROUGH GUIDE TO MEXICAN RESTAURANTS

There are countless Mexican restaurants around Los Angeles, from street-corner grills to high-end haunts. The options are almost overwhelming, so to help get great Mexican fare into your face, here are some of our favorites from across the city.

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See for yourself how tasty and versatile Hatch Chiles are when you attend a roasting event at Gelson’s.

You can sample Hatch Chile specialty items, learn about the growing process, and get serving and cooking ideas from experts.

**Hatch Chile Roasting**
**Fridays: 5–9pm**

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