

Norteño Nosh

Cross the border (into L.A., that is!) for the best gourmet Mexican cuisine in SoCal

| By Joshua Lurie |

L.A.'s Mexican restaurants have enjoyed a renaissance in the past few years. So though O.C. can be proud of the new Raya at the Ritz-Carlton, Gabbi's in downtown Orange and a select few others, for truly diverse and creative Latin cuisine, the City of Angels' old- and new-school haunts are just a short drive away.

Rivera (1050 S. Flower St., L.A. 213.749.1460; riverarestaurant.com) is the most ambitious Latin restaurant in L.A., if not all of California. Chef John Rivera Sedlar tells the "3000-year, three-continent story of the Spanish world" using three distinct rooms and three unique menus. Sangre traces "the dawn of Latin food" on the Iberian Peninsula; Samba tells the story of South America; and Playa Bar encompasses coastal Mexico. Raw ingredients fill glass display cases and fuel dishes like a Pismo clam tamal served in the shell with poblano chiles, sweet corn, garlic, oregano and a rich green chile meunière and tempura-fried guero chiles filled with crab and corn, served partially submerged in a broth of soy ginger scallion broth. Conexiones, available restaurant-wide, is a fourth menu that draws from each room—perfect for indecisive diners.

Bartender Julian Cox oversees a seasonal cocktail menu that isn't limited to tequila and mezcal, and does not include a Margarita. His signature Barbacoa layers smoky mezcal with chipotle, jalapeño, ginger and agave syrup and hosts a beef jerky garnish. Sedlar infuses tequilas with seasonal ingredients like grapefruit and blood orange, and his timeless Mujer contains both Madagascar and Tahitian vanilla. "There are 28,000 restaurants in L.A. County," says Sedlar. "My goal is to be different from every one."

The hottest new spot in SoCal, **REDO** (8155 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood. 323.655.5009; redorestaurant.com) is the first full-service restaurant outside Chicago to offer Mexican cuisine by star chef Rick Bayless. G+ Gulla Jonsdottir Design crafted the chic West Hollywood hot spot, fronting the sprawling venue with a space-age metal bridge. Foliage includes massive vases filled with palm fronds, black roses creeping up a bar column and mesh wire fencing that supports black metal tree roots. A serpentine glass lined with shelves of tequila bottles leads to a bar with a palm tree that rises through the roof.

ANGELENO EATS

Clockwise from near right: Steamed mussels with chorizo and chiles at Rivera; the plush interior of RED O in West Hollywood; RED O's duck taquitos.



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Bayless' "Bright Bites" consist of acid-tinged starters like Alaskan halibut ceviche with cucumber, avocado and cilantro-Serrano chimichurri. His "Savory Snacks" include husk-free tamales filled with beef short rib and smoky chipotle chile sauce. Mexico's Celebrated Seven include seven twists on iconic Mexican dishes, including wood-grilled *pescado zarandeado*, a striped bass fillet served with an Aztec pyramid of plantain rice.

O.C.'s own Richard Sandoval, who just

opened Raya at the Ritz-Carlton, adds **La Sandia** (453 3rd Street Promenade, Santa Monica. 310.393.3300; richardsandoval.com/llasandiasm) at the revived Santa Monica Place to his restaurant empire from Denver to Dubai. "Los Angeles is a very inspiring place, with a diverse selection of Mexican cuisine," says Sandoval. "Angelenos have put their own unique twist on traditional Mexican cooking, the type of cooking that I learned from my grandmother. At La Sandia, CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED diners get an authentic, understated atmosphere, unparalleled views of the promenade, and over 250 tequilas—all in an approachable, affordable setting.” Sandoval is a proponent of Latin fusion, but his Mexican classics include roasted corn soup, shrimp ceviche in a citrus-habanero broth and pescado Veracruzana: snapper fillet with capers, bell pepper and onions in sweet-spicy tomato broth.

AvroKO designed La Sandia’s hacienda-inspired space, with terracotta roof tiles and a retractable glass skylight that draws in fresh sea air. As for the name, Sandoval says, “Sandia translates to ‘watermelon’ in Spanish—it has connotations of something fresh, approachable and meant to be shared.”

One of SoCal’s first gourmet Mexican restaurants, **La Serenata de Garibaldi** (1842 E. First St., L.A., 323.265.2887; laserenataonline.com) found new life earlier this year when the Gold Line light rail blazed a path into East L.A., with a stop just outside the landmark Boyle Heights hot spot. Jose Rodriguez and wife Aurora opened their hacienda-like

restaurant in 1985, honoring the mariachis of SoCal and Mexico City’s Plaza de Garibaldi. Since then, they’ve expanded to West L.A. and Santa Monica, and Jose has become known as the “Maestro de Salsas,” making more than 30 varieties.

Seafood is La Serenata’s focus, and specialties include Camarones Isla Mujeres, with a creamy white wine sauce (named for an island near Cancun) that’s herb-flecked and served with jumbo shrimp. Pepper-dusted salmon and scallops arrive Campeche style, with piquant toppings that include spinach, jalapeños, garlic and tomatoes. Son Marco Antonio makes desserts like coconut flan and guava cheesecake.

Another breakthrough in L.A.’s Nuevo Latino dining scene came when chefs Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger opened **Border Grill** on Melrose in 1985. Their Mexican concept proved so popular that they moved to Santa Monica in 1990 (1445 4th St., 310.451.1655; bordergrill.com). The duo’s sprawling, two-floor restaurant resides near the Third Street Promenade and features colorful murals depicting mariachis, El Diablo and more.

Border Grill’s encyclopedic menu includes options like the ceviche trio (ono, sea bass and shrimp) and a grilled pork porterhouse slathered with smoky chile-garlic sauce. Margaritas are available straight, on the rocks or frozen, flavored with cucumber honeydew or ginger pomegranate. Desserts live in a case near the entrance, including Mexican chocolate cream pie with a meringue crust, sliced almonds, whipped chocolate mousse and cinnamon.

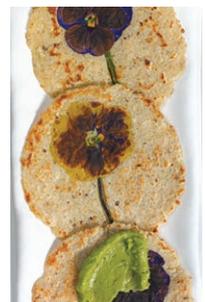
Far off the beaten path is **La Casita Mexicana** (4030 E. Gage Ave., Bell. 323.773.1898; casitamex.com). Chef-owners Jaime Martin del Campo and Ramiro Arvizu met while working for the airlines and left to follow their passion for Mexican cooking. The Jalisco natives opened “the little Mexican house” in 1999 and have become popular far beyond Bell due to their traditional recipes, community-first approach and weekly cooking lessons on Univision.

Arvizu said their mission is “to make the most authentic Mexican food possible.” National pride extends to the plate, where tortillas (and several dishes) boast red, white and green, the colors of the Mexican flag. Chiles en Nogadas feature blistered poblano chiles stuffed with seasoned ground beef, dried fruit, walnuts and candied cactus, smothered with pecan cream sauce and pomegranate seeds.

La Casita serves three meals per day, beginning with fluffy tortas de huevos (omelettes) and six types of chilaquiles. Later in the day, Arvizu and Martin Del Campo grace pork or chicken with scintillating moles: burgundy-hued poblano, serrano-spiked pipián verde and burnt-orange pipián rojo. Aguas frescas include lemonade with sunken chia seeds. Ch-ch-ch-chia!

Downtown L.A.’s **CASA** (350 S. Grand Ave., L.A. 213.621.2249; casadowntown.com), Mario del Pero’s modern Mexican restaurant, proved popular from its December 2008 beginning due to happy hour, an indoor/outdoor bar and big booths of varying heights (and privacy levels). Now del Pero is placing greater emphasis on food under chef Alex Moreno, recently of San Francisco’s Tres Agaves, who mans the open kitchen. Del Pero describes CASA as “a modern Mexican restaurant that pays tribute to the local neighborhood taquerias.” The USC grad adds seasonal touches like flambéed farmers market peaches in a corn tortilla, carnitas and queso “sandwich.” Crispy shrimp tacos include candied almonds, caramelized pineapple and citrus-y slaw. And his grilled corn is a play on Mexican street food with cobs coated in chile aioli, candied pepitas and Parmesan.

L.A.’s range of Mexican restaurants is unprecedented north of the international border, with offerings O.C. can only dream of—at least for now. 



BORDER BITES
From far left: Short rib sopes at RED O; the WeHo restaurant’s tequila lounge; Rivera’s handmade corn tortillas.