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Meitus: Modern Mexican ace Sandoval dishes out the fresh ideas



Marty Meitus
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October 31, 2006

Richard Sandoval and I are sitting down to chat at his new restaurant, La Sandia, in Northfield Stapleton. Sandoval is a busy guy these days, between Zengo, Tamayo and La Sandia restaurants in

Denver and a number of successful restaurants in other cities, including New York City, San Francisco and Las Vegas. Last year, he says, he flew 140,000 miles.

I've crossed paths with Sandoval several times since he opened Tamayo seven years ago. The chef-restaurateur is in and out of Denver often, checking on his restaurants. Recently one of the food magazines named him restaurateur of the year. Although he's received the most acclaim for his modern Mexican food, each restaurant concept is different. Zengo, in the Little Raven area, is Latin/Asian. La Sandia is Mexican comfort food - "all the finger foods of the Mexican markets," he says, with Sandoval's own playful touches.

For starters, he points out that guests can make their own guacamole at the table. "Don't you think that's fun?" he says. "I think kids will love it."

Two thoughts flash through my brain. The first is kids with guacamole. The second is "fun?"

"You invited me here to cook?" I say in jest.

As the words fall out of my ever-diplomatic mouth, sure enough, the server brings over all the fixings for guacamole - freshly cut avocado, diced serrano chiles, onions, tomatoes, a three-legged bowl called a *molcajete* and a wooden spoon. I make no move toward the spoon, the bowl or the avocado, or maybe Sandoval is just quicker on the draw. He mixes the guacamole, dips a chip and asks for more salt. If he's pleased, I'm pleased - after all, he attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. I eat one bite, then another. Pretty soon, I'm cutting a path through the guacamole.

"Don't worry," I say, warming to the concept after all, "I'm not double-dipping." No matter. Sandoval is sitting back, pretty much afraid to get in my way lest I chew off his arm. "It's so simple and it's really fresh, isn't it?" he says. That may be the understatement of the year.

Sandoval spent his early years in Mexico, where his father is still a successful restaurateur. When Sandoval began his own restaurant business, he didn't expect to be playing hopscotch across the country, developing new concepts and once in a while repeating a restaurant or two.

"It was never about one concept to do across America," he says. "People kept

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approaching me." As with most restaurateurs who are able to pull multi-restaurants in multi-cities out of a (chef's) hat, no one restaurant depends on him. His job is to create opportunities for the chefs he hires.

The restaurant makes its own tortillas and tamales, and the rest of the lunch is delicious. I particularly like a Chicken Pibil, which has a corn pico de gallo, pickled onion and an achiote-chile broth. I might have topped it with some of that guacamole, but it's already gone. And on this day at least, I'm not cooking up any more. You'll find Sandoval's recipe for guacamole on **12D**.

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About Marty Meitus

Marty Meitus is the food editor for the *News*. She recently completed her cookbook **Recipe Please**, compiled from a weekly column published in the *News* since 1997. The cookbook has 166 recipes requested by readers from local and national restaurants.
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