

BY JULIE BIELENBERG

## RICHARD SANDOVAL

THIS MODERN MEXICAN MASTER CHEF HAS WON THE CULINARY LOTTERY IN DENVER.

**A**s with the delicate and precise entrees that have made chef Richard Sandoval a culinary giant in Denver, it takes time, energy and experience to create an empire. Compared to many of his contemporaries, Sandoval's success came quickly from the time he opened Maya in New York in 1997. Six years later, he and business partner Plácido Domingo began spreading Sandoval's knowledge of fine Mexican-inspired cuisine around the world.

Sandoval grew up in Mexico City, where food is a central element to the culture of the people. "I lived with my grandmother while my parents were going through a divorce. I watched her cook and prepare the dishes; this is where my food relationship began," says Sandoval. His father was a successful restaurateur in Acapulco and owned two eateries where Sandoval honed his business and sociability skills.

After leaving Mexico, he attended the Culinary Institute of America, where he began training — not with his native authentic Mexican fare, but rather, in modern French restaurants in New York. Once he garnered attention, it was time to roll out the master plan, Modern Mexican cuisine. He started with Maya, his flagship restaurant in New York City, and spread the concept west. Denver's Tamayo was his first venture here, opening on the corner of 14th and Larimer in 2001. Zengo followed in 2004; La Sandía, Northfield, in 2006; and the most recent La Sandía at the Vistas at Park Meadows last October.

"Before Richard Sandoval, a lot of Denver thought that Mexican food was limited to chimichangas, burritos and tacos," says Zenon "Zee" Ferruffino, CEO and owner of Latino Communications, a holding company for numerous Spanish-dominant ventures such as Mexican radio stations and Latin concert promotions. "By opening up Tamayo, he introduced Denver to a completely different culinary and cultural tradition of Mexico and Latin America. I not only consider Richard Sandoval to be just a superb chef but a cultural ambassador."

The Sandoval restaurant empire now counts 13 restaurants under its global umbrella with Modern Mexican establishments from New York and Acapulco to Las Vegas and Dubai. However, it is here in the Mile High City that the chef has left his largest mark. "I love Denver. I adore coming here and the wonderful opportunities that have arisen for me in this city," he says. "I love to ski, and the ambiance of the peaceful communities is enticing."

However, don't expect a Zengo in Aspen or Tamayo in Telluride; Sandoval likes to stay close to the Mile High City where his signature brand of upscale Mexican cuisine has been warmly received. "The Denver community has been so welcoming. People in this town are loyal, and they continue to dine at the restaurants," says the chef. "The mountain communities are very seasonal, and during struggling economic times, those towns can be hit the hardest. In addition to the financial fluctuations, staffing the locales can be a challenge as workers are seasonal as well."

"The opportunity was in Denver," says Sandoval of his decision to expand. "We created La Sandía to coincide with [Park Meadows]. The price point is more affordable and lower than our other locales, and the response has been fantastic." The restaurant — sandía is the Spanish word for watermelon — represents a subject taken from the colorful lottery cards of

his native Mexico. As with Tamayo, the restaurant is focused on providing customers with a fun, high-energy and colorful experience.

As his empire grows, world-traveling clients have come to depend on Sandoval's excellence. "I frequent Tamayo often and absolutely crave their guacamole on a regular basis. We do a lot of business in Brazil, and if you can't be on the beaches of Rio sipping a mojito, you should be at Zengo — often the view is better, too," says Gareth Heyman, vice-president of global sales and operations for MorEvents, an event production company with operations in Latin America.

It's all work and very little play for this culinary entrepreneur, but it does not stop him from enjoying his love of food while at home. "I cook for the family, usually pretty simple items — grill fare and some vino tinto, not for the kids, of course," he says. Sandoval grew up surrounded by his family and spends any free time he can with his wife and two kids. "I have an eight-year-old daughter who enjoys gymnastics and tennis and a 12-year-old son who likes to surf and skinboard, so between their activities and taking my wife to the occasional movie, I'm out of time."

If continued success, innovative cuisine and unbridled passion isn't enough to keep Sandoval at the cutting edge of the culinary world, it has certainly kept him busy. The internationally known chef spends a majority of his time flying to the farthest regions of the globe in an effort to put the finishing touches on his latest restaurant, the fourth installment of Pampano, which will open in the State of Qatar later this year. "My visit to Denver is always cut short. Who doesn't wish they had more time?" ■

# denver

MAGAZINE®

//

BEFORE RICHARD SANDOVAL, A LOT OF DENVER THOUGHT THAT MEXICAN FOOD WAS LIMITED TO CHIMICHANGAS, BURRITOS AND TACOS."

— ZENON "ZEE" FERRUFFINO

PHOTOGRAPHED AT LA SANDÍA, PARK MEADOWS