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Mexican Food Debuts in Abu Dhabi

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In about the time it takes for one of his line cooks to apply crema fresca to a quesadilla, Richard Sandoval has probably opened another restaurant.

Since leaving his native Mexico 12 years ago, the 39-year-old chef has cut the ribbon on more than 10 different properties, from a Latin-Asian fusion factory in Denver to a modern Mexican restaurant in Dubai. He's showing no sign of stopping anytime soon. New restaurants are slated to open in Abu Dhabi, Acapulco, and Mexico City, increasing the international territory of Sandoval's mini-empire of Mexican eateries. (Currently, Sandoval only has one restaurant abroad, Maya, at Le Royal Meriden Hotel in Dubai.)

Such gusto for growth sometimes puts the chef-cum-restaurateur in critics' crosshairs. A [newspaper](#) in Denver recently wrote that Sandoval's "business is not so much about creating great restaurants as it is about creating great food-service machines that can run flawlessly in his absence." With his new Denver restaurant La Sandia, a bit of big-chain gimmickry is creeping into some of his dishes, like a make-your-own guacamole that has reportedly frustrated some diners and amused others.

We talked to Sandoval about how he keeps his budding restaurants in line with expectations, and where he'll be opening up next.

In September 2006, you opened Maya in Le Royal Meriden in Dubai. Why did Dubai make more sense than, say, London or Hong Kong for your first international restaurant?

Basically, when I started everything 12 years ago, I never had a plan in place. People have come to me, and they like what I do, and offer to me to go into these different markets. Not having any real capital, I go where an opportunity is. Dubai came up the same way.

You also have plans to open up another restaurant in Abu Dhabi. Why does Mexican food seem to work so well in the Emirates, of all places?

I've always looked at food as either good or bad. You put out great food or you put out mediocre or bad food. The right flavor profile, the right balances, the right contrasts works anywhere. Mexican food is around the top four or five foods in the world. In a tourist place, it goes very well. Especially with tequila and margaritas.

Still, people don't want to experiment. People will shy away from something they don't understand. That's why simple dishes like enchiladas are popular [in Dubai]. But we try and get the waiter to redirect them. The most important thing is your wait staff. Their training is very important. They give a little bit of a story of what modern Mexican is.

It's hard to think of a fusion cuisine that gives better expression to what's popular in food right now than Latin-Asian. Your restaurant Zengo, in Washington D.C. and Denver, attempts to fuse those two cuisines. How does it work?

I've always loved Asian food. I've traveled through Asia. And I love Japanese food. Zengo in Japanese means "give and take." When we were creating the menu for Zengo, I'd do a Latin dish and [a Japanese consulting chef] would Asianize the dish. He would do an Asian dish and I would Latinize it.

We did a spare rib, an Asian-spiced pork spare rib. And I added piloncillo (a Mexican sugary substance) and some cilantro. I just got back from India, so we did a tandoori chicken mixed with Indian herbs. But instead of the lentils, we used black beans. The two cuisines are so similar as far the sweetness, the acidity, the spices. They use a lot of chilies. Asian chefs use a lot of rice. Mixing Latin with Italian would almost be impossible. You couldn't do it.

It seems opening restaurants abroad is becoming a trend for you. Tell us about some of your other new projects.

We're opening two restaurants, one in Mexico City and one in Acapulco. Mexico City will be a Pompano (like the one in New York City).

I left Mexico 12 years ago. It almost makes sense now to go back to Mexico and give back what I've learned. Give back to younger generations. We're doing a training program at the restaurant in Acapulco, where Mexican chefs will learn in that restaurant and then we'll send them to Dubai or Las Vegas.

Acapulco's going to be a collage of all my restaurants. We're going to have food from all my restaurants. We're going to do Asian, Latin, French...American. I took over my father's restaurant in Acapulco 25 years ago. So this is like a homecoming. It'll be open in September or October 2007.

How do you maintain a consistent level of quality in all of your restaurants?

I'm very hands-on. I try more than anything to be in the restaurant. The key to my success is the people that work with me. I'll get up and go to my corporate office [in New York City]. Then I'll go to Pompano for lunch. I'll be there in the kitchen, meet with the chefs. Then it's Maya for dinner. That's what I do. Half of the time, of course, I'm on the road. But it's the same thing in Denver as in New York City. I'm out visiting the restaurants.

---Stephen Heyman



Richard Sandoval



Maya, Le Royal Meriden Hotel, Dubai



Spicy Tuna Miso Chicken, Zengo



Pompano, Denver