

In New York City Sandoval gained stateside recognition at Savann and Savann Est. He then decided to showcase his innovative take on *alta cocina*, or Mexican haute cuisine, in his own restaurant. "Mexican food is not just burritos over rice and beans," he asserts, calling his unique style "old ways in new hands."

#### TRADITION

The "old ways" include using traditional Mexican staples found in the resort city of Acapulco, which is blessed with perfect weather, abundant seafood, and fabulous produce—including avocados, cilantro, citrus fruits (especially lime), jicamas, mangoes, onions, papayas, peppers, pineapples, tomatillos, and tomatoes. Sandoval purchases his supplies, including the Oaxacan chocolate used for the Mole Poblano, from local specialty purveyors in each city.

Corn, the familiar foundation of many native dishes, reveals its subtle complexity in Sandoval's hands. He uses masa, or corn flour, as a thickening agent in sauces, makes fresh corn tamales and tortillas, and serves a superbly creamy husk-roasted corn soup with huitlacoche dumplings.

Other typically Mexican products are less familiar to Americans. For example, Sandoval serves the huitlacoche, a corn fungus with a distinctive earthy, mushroomlike taste, in a dumpling made from a wonton wrap. He also uses other authentic ingredients such as grilled cactus leaves, pumpkin seeds in sauces, achote paste (made from the husky-flavored seeds of the annatto tree), and adobo (a mixture of ground chiles, usually chipotles, and herbs and vinegar).

Most of the seafood on Sandoval's menu—*atun* (tuna), *robalo* (bass), *huachinango* (snapper), *camarones* (shrimp), *almesas* (clams), and *ostiones* (oysters)—are typically found in the Pacific. Manchego, an Oaxacan cheese, and *crema fresca*, which is a Mexican version of *crème fraîche*, also appear frequently on his menu.

#### INNOVATION

Sandoval adapts classic cooking techniques acquired at the CIA—such as braising, pan-roasting and sautéing—to his creations. For example, he pan-roasts the fish for Pescado a la Talla, roasts poblanos to caramelize the sugars before stuffing them, braises lamb shanks before blanketing them with a green mole sauce, and sautés vegetables to order with south-of-the-border garnishes. "I learned from the CIA to make the stocks that are the bases for most of my sauces," he explains. "For instance, I use regular chicken stock as the base for mole, and a reduced chicken stock for emulsions. I also use veal stocks."

He melds classic French ingredients—such as shallots, butter, cream,

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goat cheese, and squash blossoms—into his modern Mexican cuisine. Naturally, chiles predominate in Sandoval's kitchen; they infuse his dishes with the *picante* heat that Mexican cooking requires. In Mexico, Sandoval explains, there's a saying that indicates just how intrinsic chiles are to native cooking: *Sin chile, no creen que estan comiendo*, which translates to "Without chiles, people don't believe that they're eating." Sandoval likes to use heart-shaped poblanos for Chile Relleno, plump, medium-hot jalapeños in guacamole (a chiffonade of jalapeños are also served alongside the guacamole to add spiciness to taste), round or heart-shaped habaneros served with lobster, and chipotles (in infused oil and rouille).

But it is Sandoval's use of chiles, the most traditional ingredient, that illustrates his contemporary edge. For instance, his take on the classic French rouille is a savory marriage of hot chiles,

garlic, and olive oil. "The traditional French recipe for rouille, a Mediterranean mayonnaise, is made with olive oil, egg yolks, roasted garlic, and cayenne pepper, which gives it the spice," he explains. "I take a rouille and add chipotles or habaneros. It creates more heat and transforms the traditional mayonnaise into something with a unique Mexican flair."

Sandoval also has a collection of squeeze bottles filled with chile-infused oils used to sauté, to garnish, or to use as a sauce. There's a bright red chile de arbol, an earthy brown chile mulatto, and a brown chipotle oil that's a bit less *picante*. "First, I pan-fry the chiles in canola oil," he notes. "Then I add cold canola oil and purée them together." He estimates that he uses about two chiles to each cup of oil, sometimes adding more.

Anyone looking at a Sandoval menu recognizes standard Mexican fare: Ceviche, Chile Relleno, Ensalada, Gazpacho, Guacamole, Quesadillas, Tacos, Tamales, and Mole Poblano. But his more innovative modern touches become obvious upon further reading.

Oysters, which are common in Mexican cuisine and less common on stateside menus, are used to create Ostiones Sandoval, a fusion of baked oysters topped with goat cheese, habanero-chive rouille and crispy bacon, served with a black bean and apple salad. He also prepares a lobster marinated in adobo, and a pan-roasted salmon served with chayote gratin and a black bean reduction in a roasted tomato and chile pasilla vinaigrette.

The Pipian de Puerco, a Sandoval specialty, is pork tenderloin marinated in tamarind vinaigrette glaze and served with roasted corn purée and pumpkin-seed sauce. For the glaze the chef uses "a Thai fruit paste that I boil and pass through the food mill." Some menu items, however, like Sandoval's faithful interpretation of Mole Poblano—a complex sauce made with chilies, coriander, cumin, chocolate, and cinnamon—