

**Food & Beverage** UNDER THE TOQUE

# Richard Sandoval

Multiconcept operator tweaks concepts as he expands • BY LISA JENNINGS

**R**ichard Sandoval has opened 10 restaurants in the past 15 months, and he's not ready to slow down. The chef-restaurateur is riding a wave of interest in contemporary Latin cuisine. He has become known for putting a modern spin on the flavors he grew up with in Mexico.

The son of a veteran restaurateur in Acapulco, Mexico, Sandoval is a Culinary Institute of America graduate who initially went home to work with his father. There, he earned the National Toque d'Oro, or Chef of the Year award.

But it didn't take long for him to be lured back to the United States, where he landed in New York.

"I wanted to see if I could make it," he said.

Now, Sandoval has 22 restaurants, including multiple concepts across the United States, Mexico and in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, under Richard Sandoval Restaurants. His business partners include famed Spanish tenor Placido Domingo.

Most recently, this summer, Sandoval has opened three restaurants in Southern California — his first in the region, which is also home base for the chef and his family.

At the Ritz-Carlton in Laguna Niguel, Calif., Sandoval developed the high-end Raya featuring pan-Latin dishes. In Santa Monica, Calif., Sandoval has installed two of his concepts on the rooftop of a newly renovated Macerich lifestyle center called Santa Monica Place. One

**TITLE:** chef and founder, Richard Sandoval Restaurants  
**BIRTH DATE:** Sept. 19, 1967  
**HOMETOWN:** born in Mexico City; now living in Newport Beach, Calif.  
**CAREER HIGHLIGHTS:** winning National Toque d'Oro, or Chef of the Year, in Mexico; being listed among "Best Chefs of 2003" by New York Magazine; Pampano being named among "Best New Restaurants in America" by Esquire magazine in 2003

is the casual-dining La Sandia Mexican Kitchen and Tequila Bar, a fourth location for the more traditionally Mexican concept in which Domingo is partnered. Right next door is Zengo, also a fourth location for that concept. At Zengo, Sandoval's playful small-plates menu fuses Latin and Asian flavors with dishes like Peking duck daikon tacos orachiote-hoisin pork arepas.

Sandoval's other concepts include Maya, with locations in New York and Dubai; Pampano in New York, Mexico City and Acapulco; Tamayo in Denver; and Isla in Las Vegas.

This fall, Sandoval is opening a concept similar to Zengo in Mexico City, which he is calling Tuna. Also there, Sandoval is developing a Mediterranean concept for next year, as well as another new project in Dubai to be called Toro Toro.

**You're a busy man. How do you manage all of your restaurants?**

People ask me where I live, and I say, 'on a plane.' Four days of the week I fly to various cities, and I come home on the weekends.

You're really only as strong as your last link. It's all about the people who work for you.

**You've just opened restaurants in Southern California for the first**



**time. Do you find your audience is different here?**

Californians are much more savvy about what real Mexican food is. They know more than just the mom and pop with authentic salsas. For me, it's good because people understand what I do.

**You opened Maya, the first of your current concepts, in 1997. How did it stand out?**

Maya was something new in Mexican food at the time. What people saw in the U.S. then was Tex-Mex with the combination plates; it was very standard. But that was not what I was used to in Mexico.

Maya was traditional recipes that I modernized. I didn't reinvent them — a mole is a mole — but instead I worked on presentation and made them more appealing for today's diners. Now, you see a lot more of that — food that is more representative of what you might see in Mexico, now.

**How did you get involved with Placido Domingo?**

Placido, at that time, had a restaurant called Domingo's in New York, and I knew him from Acapulco, where he vacationed. We met in New York and decided to reconcept Pampano, and that was the first one he got involved in. Now, he's involved financially in nine restaurants. He loves food.

**Why open two restaurants right next to each other, as you've done in Santa Monica?**

They asked me to do one restaurant in a 15,000-square foot space, but I decided it would be better to break it up and do two. You get the cross marketing benefit because people have to walk through La Sandia to get to Zengo and its beautiful terrace.

The two concepts also offer price point options. At La Sandia, the average check at dinner is about \$27-\$28 per person, where at Zengo it's about \$45.

**What was appealing about fusing Asian and Mexican dishes at Zengo?**

The two cuisines naturally blend together. Both use rice as a base, and both combine spicy with sweet. When I was developing the menu, I brought in an Asian chef who I had met in Singapore. He would do an Asian dish and I would Latin-ize it, then visa versa.

And the menu is all about smaller plates for sharing. This is the direction the culinary world is going toward.

**How are your restaurants faring in this recession?**

As a whole, we were down about 17 percent in 2009 compared with 2008. This year, so far we're up 4 percent to 5 percent store to store.

We did readjust our menus and move toward smaller plates and prix-fixe. We offered a wider variety of options. We're seeing a lower check average but higher traffic. ■

ljennings@nrn.com