

Bon Appetit: featured chef



:: John Calloway of Modern Mexican Restaurants ::

Words: Alex Grier, images: Diaz/Weber Photography

Color and flavor is what Executive Chef John Calloway of Modern Mexican Restaurants creates for the family of restaurants that he oversees for the corporation. Here in Denver, the hip restaurants include two of my favorites to frequent, Tamayo and Zengo, as well as La Sandia in the Stapleton area that I have yet to try. All three are distinctly different. John has been overseeing the three Colorado restaurants, as well as one in Chicago, for two and a half years.

Each of the three Denver concepts are quite unique, allowing John the creative spirit he so enjoys. Zengo, located just off Little Raven in the LoDo area, offers a trendy and sexy atmosphere while it presents lively flavors focusing on a Latin-Asian Fusion. Tamayo, in the heart of downtown on Larimer, is casual, fine dining that mixes traditional dishes from Mexico with a Euro-American influence. While La Sandia, located on East 49th Avenue in the Stapleton area, provides casual Mexican with large portions in a comfortable family style.

Being the executive chef for all three keeps John stimulated and on the move. When I asked John the most difficult part of his job, he said, "not having enough time in the day to do everything I want to get accomplished." That speaks miles for the kind of passion John has for The Modern Mexican Restaurants. "The key is in finding the right people to manage the kitchens," John says. "Like the restaurants, each of his kitchen managers are all very unique." John says he makes the major changes on the menu at each restaurant every fall before it gets cold and every spring before it gets warm. He works with the kitchen team and trains them on each of the new features. "Everything that is served in all three restaurants is made on site from scratch," John adds. He finds the freshest ingredients and a team that comes in each morning to do the prep work.

John, coming from the east coast, fell in love with the restaurant industry at the tender age of 14. He said that he was instantly attracted to the energy and the multi-tasking that the industry requires. After seven years of intense restaurant work, John burned out and took a break from the world he loved. He joined the army reserve to further his education and found himself teaching Food History and Basic Cooking classes. John was once again ignited by the passion he felt in the kitchen and returned to his true love.

John recently spent time in India, where the company was looking into opening a new restaurant. This trip inspired one of his new favorite dishes on the Zengo menu, the Chicken Tandori. It has rapidly become a customer favorite with the exotic flavors from the Far East.

When I asked John what he liked to cook when he wasn't at work, he said he truly enjoys baking. "I love to eat dessert, so I found that I enjoyed baking and trying new things." John said, "dessert is the last impression a restaurant can make." Whether that memory is good or just okay will help sway a guest to return. John has created a return customer out of me.

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