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# FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

## MaxiMex

THE BUSINESS OF QUALITY JUGGLING TIME ZONES AND PRICE POINTS, ENTREPRENEURIAL GLOBE-TROTTER RICHARD SANDOVAL TAKES HIS DISTINCTIVE CUISINE ON THE ROAD. BRYAN MILLER REPORTS.



Catching up with **Richard Sandoval**, the Mexican chef and indefatigable entrepreneur, requires persistence, patience, and a working familiarity with airports around the United States and Mexico. On the day I cornered him for an interview in New York, he had just rebounded from a two week business trip that took him to Dubai, Acapulco, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Denver, and New York City. ➤



Artfully presented examples of Sandoval's interpretation of modern Mexican cuisine include shrimp/Manchego cheese empanadas with pineapple/bell pepper relish and chipotle vinaigrette (previous page) and *huachinango*, whole baby red snapper with cactus tomato salad (below). Above: Richard Sandoval at Pampano. Photos by Courtney Grant Winston.

"It's a lot of flying," he sighs over an alfresco lunch on a blazing mid-August day, looking surprisingly chipper for someone who had suffered the gauntlet of indignities that passes for air travel today.

"If you're going to open restaurants, you have to be in the cities to see if they are the right fit," he adds. So frequent are his travels that, by his own admission, much of the "quality time" he spends with his two young children transpires at 30,000 feet.

"Fortunately, they think airplanes are fun," he says.

We lunch at **Pampano**, an upscale Mexican seafood restaurant on Manhattan's East Side that he owns in partnership with the famed tenor **Placido Domingo**. On the menu: octopus carpaccio with arugula, avocado, and a fiery—to my fragile palate—chile serrano emulsion; grilled salmon with Peruvian corn (do we really import corn from Peru?), chayote, shiitake mushrooms, and a chile de arbol glaze; and a striped bass steamed in a banana leaf with bell peppers, tomatoes, and *boja santa* (a fragrant Mexican herb).

Sandoval, 39, is best known for **Maya**, his flagship restaurant in Manhattan, a tasteful (if loud) incubator of what he promotes as modern Mexican cuisine: traditional ingredients prepared with international techniques and artfully presented. The menu features a wider variety of meats and seafood than is found in typical Mexican restaurants.

The late summer at **Maya** carried Sandoval creations like halibut steak with citrus and tamarind, garnished with mango, jicama, and cilantro; and chile/sesame crusted tuna with boniato puree, fennel/cucumber/peanut sauce, and tamarind/ancho chile emulsion.

Two other offspring in the chef's expanding brood are in Denver: a Latin-Asian restaurant and lounge called **Zengo** (there is also one in Washington, D.C.) and a semi-casual spot, **Tamayo**. And, it should come as no surprise, Sandoval has joined the culinary chorus line in Las Vegas, this time with the sexy **Isla Mexican**

**Kitchen & Tequila Bar** at **Treasure Island** hotel. And there's more. A pair of ventures have sprouted in the past two months: the **Hippodrome Boutique Hotel & Hip Kitchen** in Mexico City (he is also the principal owner) and **Maya Dubai**, a flashy 250 seat operation at **Le Royal Meridien Beach Resort and Spa**, which is a mere taco's toss from a magnificent Persian Gulf beach.

You might think that Sandoval, who has enough frequent flyer miles for many Samoan vacations, would slow down and take stock. To the contrary, this month he rolls out what could be his biggest burrito to date: colorful Mexican cafes that he hopes to plant in shopping malls around the United States à la the **Wolfgang Puck Express** chain. Called **La Sandia** (watermelon, which is a salute to the green, white, and red Mexican flag), the prototype opened in Denver in the past month.

"The idea is that you can go there and have anything from a taco or fajita to more sophisticated dishes like we serve at **Maya**," he explains. "You can spend \$15, or you can spend \$50. Nothing like this exists in the States."

Sandoval is affable, articulate, and, one soon notices, an intense listener—a rare trait in self-promoting restaurant impresarios. Of average height and build, he wears slicked back dark hair, a fashionably cropped salt-and-pepper goatee, and slender Prada eye-glasses through which he gazes quizzically, especially when a speaker strays from the topic at hand. To a visitor he comes across as both contemplative and creative, traits that evidently cut a very favorable figure with investors.

"I don't have to go out there and look for projects—they come to me," he posits. (Truth be told, I considered, right then and there, passing him a \$50 bill as a stake in his next undertaking; unfortunately, it would have been a journalistic conflict of interest.)

For the most part, Sandoval's long-term success hinges on the premise that Americans, who have always considered Mexican food a cheap and starchy Tequila sponge, will see the light and embrace Mexican "haute cuisine"—which to some might be akin to placing a Mercedes body over a tractor. ➤



"It's still true that most people in this country see Mexican food as a combo platter with rice and beans and hard tacos," he says. "My goal when I opened Maya was to create Mexican food that was authentic and great looking on the plate, something that could be considered fine cuisine. And I think we're finally getting there with more modern, sophisticated high-end restaurants around the country."

Sandoval is not the first to proselytize for this cause, although he may be the most ambitious. For almost 20 years the American born **Rick Bayless**, who owns two restaurants in Chicago, **Frontera Grill** and **Topolobampo**, has served forth the idea of authentic,

(sure) citizens of Dubai be attracted to scorching jalapeño peppers and steaming tortilla soup? With papaya Margaritas?

"It's something different for them," he allows. "They already have French, Italian, and other things in the hotel. And a lot of the customers will be vacationers and businesspeople."

It's easy to see how Sandoval came around to examining his native cuisine through a global lens. His early childhood was spent in Mexico City and Acapulco, where his father owned two restaurants, one of them Italian. At age 8 he was shuffled off to live with his Canadian born mother in Newport Beach, California. Consciously



Strikingly distinctive decor inflects each Sandoval restaurant with its own vibrant accent. From left: Maya, New York City; Zengo, Washington, D.C.; Pampano, New York City; Tamayo, Denver.

stylish Mexican food; so, too, did **Dean Fearing** when he was at **The Mansion on Turtle Creek** in Dallas (lobster tacos anyone?), and **Stephan Pyles**, who has an eponymous Mexican-Southwest restaurant also in Dallas. More than 20 years ago, **Zarela Martinez**, the owner of **Zarela's** in Manhattan, rose above the pack by offering sophisticated high-end regional Mexican fare, and her son **Aarón Sanchez** has joined the fray at **Paladar** and **Centrico**, also in Manhattan. At the same time there appeared the similarly ambitious **Rosa Mexicano**, which, with **Roberto Santibañez** now at the helm, is opening outlets along the Southeast, most recently in Palm Beach, Florida. **Susan Feniger** and **Mary Sue Milliken** pioneered the genre in Santa Monica with their **Border Grill**. At all of these places, including some other exemplars such as **Eduardo Prialé** of **Eduardo de San Angel** in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, **Hugo Ortega** of **Hugo's** in Houston, and **Sue Torres** of **Sueños** in New York City, it's easy to spend over \$50 to \$60 for dinner, depending on libations. That's a lot of combo plates.

"In modern Mexican cooking we use the same halibut as other top restaurants, the same lamb, the same filet mignon, and we make the dishes look great on the plate with creative garnishes," Sandoval reckons. "We're not **Taco Bell**, so why can't we charge the same prices as French and Italian restaurants?"

Changing the subject for a minute, I had to ask one lingering question: why would the cash-gorged, fun-seeking, tee-totaling

or not, it was here that a seed was planted for his eventual career.

"It was California, after all, so I expected Mexican food there to be the same as back home," he relates with a grin. As he describes in his 2002 cookbook, *Modern Mexican Flavors*, he soon realized that Newport Beach was no Acapulco. Shortly after enrolling in elementary school, he was standing in a cafeteria line when he noticed tacos on the menu. Homesick for Mexico, he couldn't wait to bite into one. "I spotted the plate," he writes. "Two curved, hard tortilla shells stuffed with ground beef, shredded lettuce, sour cream, and some sort of red sauce."

"I never even knew there was such a thing as hard tacos. What *are* hard tacos?" he laughs, leaning back in his chair.

His first passion was not cooking. In California he developed a fierce and competitive obsession for tennis. He was very good, strong enough to make the professional circuit and compete in the United States and Europe.

"But I always knew deep down that I really wanted to be a chef," he recalls. He logged two years at The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, coming away with the basics as well as some notions about cross-cultural cooking. Upon graduation in 1991, he returned to Mexico to work with his father. In 1995, he moved to New York City. Unhampered by modesty, he decided to open a restaurant right off the bat, which he did with partners, on the Upper West Side, called

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Above: Torani Pure Flavor.

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**Savann.** Presenting a contemporary French menu, it received generally favorable reviews, spawning another a few years later, **Savann Est.**

In 1997, he left Savann to test his global Mexican theory by opening the 205 seat Maya. He described it as a relatively low-budget operation—and, two months after opening, he was financially tapped out.

“We were doing OK, but I was down to my last \$1,000,” he said. “It wasn’t smart to open like that, but that’s all I had.”

Shortly afterward, he received a visit from Ruth Reichl, the *New York Times* restaurant critic, who wrote, “The food at Maya is unlike just about anything else being served in New York City. Salads have grilled cactus leaves, a quesadilla is stuffed with zucchini blossoms, and pork comes in a pumpkin seed sauce. The chef uses many chiles, and I would guess that no other restaurant in the city offers corn in so many guises.”

Her two-star rating stoked Maya’s campfire, making it one of the hottest restaurants on the East Side, and it remains so today.

As if rehabilitating Mexican cuisine were not enough, Sandoval also wants to hang the gong for Mexican wines, which have never found favor in the United States.

“There is some really nice stuff coming out of Baja,” he opines over dinner at Maya.

As a demonstration of his commitment, two years ago he bought a 50 percent interest in a Baja winery called Mariatinto, whose wine is a blend of Tempranillo, Barbera, Syrah, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon. The first vintage sold out in Mexico, so there isn’t much to go around in his restaurants. Based on a single tasting, I can say that it’s a big, ripe, brawny red—definitely a food wine.

Pumping helium into a company as quickly as Sandoval carries certain risks. “Do you worry about losing control as the company expands?” I ask him.

“That’s always a worry,” he answers. “That’s why I just hired a CEO to take care of all of the business stuff. I can’t focus on the food if I’m running around looking at real estate leases.”

“I’m a chef; I love to cook,” he adds, apologizing as he answers his cell phone.

“So when do you have time to work on new recipes?” I ask.

“I mostly think about food on the airplane, as crazy-ass as that sounds,” he laughs. “I start thinking about an ingredient or ingredients and start putting things together in my head. Believe it or not, I can even smell the dish as I create it.”

I don’t think I’ve ever met a big-time, entrepreneurial chef who has not remarked that, in an ideal world, he or she would love to go back to cooking full-time in a highly personal restaurant. This may merely be part of the PR shtick, I don’t know.

“I’d love to have a little place, maybe 60 seats, where we could do great modern Mexican cooking,” Sandoval muses. “But then, you do what you have to do to pay the bills.”

Clearly, he is very excited about La Sandia shopping mall cafes.

“So, do you think you’re going to be the Wolfgang Puck of the guacamole set?” I ask.

“Naaaaaah,” he demurs, stroking his goatee. “Actually, I think La Sandia is going to be the last new concept.”

I nod knowingly.

“But there are still a lot of good ideas out there, aren’t there?” I suggest.

“Well, I was thinking...a Mexican steakhouse could be really interesting.” ■



Above: “Portrait of the Artist’s Father” (school of social realism) by 8 year old Gian Carlo Sandoval.