

## TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

### Mexican Makes Moves

*In a new embrace of Mexican cuisine, chefs are adopting recipes and ingredients as their own*

By Katie Ayoub

Manolin in Seattle features a seasonal menu of moles to accompany such dishes as black cod, salsify and Savoy cabbage. It is not a Mexican-themed restaurant; it describes itself as a new American eatery. Seasons 52, Darden's American grill and wine bar with more than 40 units nationwide, has featured a small plate of Tamale Tots on its menu. April Bloomfield serves a beer-battered fish filet taco with Mayan mayo at Salvation Taco in New York, her internationally inspired cantina. These examples illustrate a growing trend of chefs raiding the Mexican pantry with abandon. They're extracting what they need from Mexico's flavor-forward cuisine to create uniquely modern American dishes.

Focusing less on regionality or authenticity and more on innovation, this trend extols the virtues of a rich food culture without necessarily being tied to that culture. It symbolizes the very best of the American melting pot, adding the likes of bold Mexican chile peppers, complex moles, smoky mezcals, versatile tortas and tacos, comforting chilaquiles and tamales, thirst-quenching micheladas and aguas frescas, and adaptable carnitas and pibils. This modern Mexican trend encourages operators to feature poblano on a burger, for instance, without labeling the menu item with a touristy name like "El Guapo." Mexico is the next flavor frontier, easily translatable and already well loved because of its proximity. Chefs are now exploring untapped opportunity, showcasing Mexican flavors and forms in unexpected, seductive dishes.



Dove's Luncheonette, an eclectic diner in Chicago, serves this Pozole Rojo, melding braised pork shoulder in guajillo chile broth with hominy, lime, avocado, cabbage, cilantro, radish and crispy tortillas.

*"Today's savvy diners are more familiar with the regions of Mexico and their various culinary differences, so don't be shy about calling these out on menus. There is no one Mexican cuisine, so highlighting origins and key regional ingredients lends an authentic feel to a menu and dish. We've seen an uptick in Yucatán pibil, the sour orange and achiote marinade for pork and chicken that has roots in Spanish colonial foods." - Kara Nielsen*

That ease of translation cannot be overstated. Mexican food is not exotic in this country. But the trend in modern adaptation pays tribute to the elegant and the authentic parts of Mexican fare—this trend is not about migrating chimichangas onto American menus. It’s about the Pepper & Potato Hash at Dove’s Luncheonette in Chicago, sporting shishito peppers, aioli, charred scallions and queso fresco. It’s the Green Chilaquiles with Carnitas and Eggs at The Cheesecake Factory. And it’s the “Cochinita Pibil” Hummus with pickled onion and charred pita at Son of a Butcher Tavern in Chicago.

Certainly, a growing Hispanic population in the United States helps make the translation more fluent. “Thanks to concepts like Chipotle and outspoken evangelists like Rick Bayless, Mexican food has become a cultural norm among a wide and expanding audience across the country,” says Eric Stangarone, creative director with The Culinary Edge and chef/owner of En Su Boca Restaurant in Richmond, Va. “These missionaries of Mexican food and culture are well supported by a growing Millennial population that simultaneously identifies as both Hispanic and American. The result? The younger generation of eaters is looking for both traditional and innovative Mexican fare.”

## Full-Circle Cuisine

by Christopher Koetke



At Coasterra in San Diego, Chef Deborah Scott’s Camarón Masa Flatbread is a craveable blend of cuisines.

This trend is the realization of an important dining dynamic in our country, signifying something special. In the 1960s and ’70s, we adopted French food as the standard of great global food. As such, we recreated French recipes, restaurants had French menus, and we warmed up to French wines. Over time, as more American chefs cooked in these restaurants, they started to veer away from classic French dishes and adopt the ingredients and techniques that they had learned in favor of their own creative instincts and their own cultural backgrounds.

We’re seeing that now with Mexican flavors, ingredients and techniques—the familiar chiles, Mexican cheeses and certainly tortillas. They’re eagerly breaking free of their traditional moorings, while less-common ingredients like huitlacoche and cajeta are primed for creative chefs’ inspiration. Classic preparations like moles, tamales, pipians, barbacoa and cochinita pibil are not only served in their traditional style, but as a concept, flavor profile or as part of other complex dishes.

## Street Smarts

In addition to the growing exploration of Mexico’s flavor-packed pantry, another influencer in this trend is street food. Urban food trucks that hawk burritos, tacos, chilaquiles and other dishes have done two things to elevate familiar Mexican food. First, they gave it credibility, using more authentic flavors and forms,

reintroducing the American diner to the true wonder of this craveable cuisine. Second, they granted it snacking status, moving these dishes into any daypart, anytime, while adding a hip subculture vibe.

The other big influence from street food that has affected how this trend is taking shape is the Kogi Taco concept by Roy Choi in Los Angeles. Choi pushed forward the notion that Mexican fare screams for global mash-up creativity, baptizing the innovation that we're seeing on progressive menus today.

*“Authentic Mexican cuisine is permeating menus everywhere due to the availability of simple, high-quality ingredients, its rusticity, and its ability to translate nicely in scratch-made preparations. Also, there’s so much diversity and regionality within the lexicon of Mexican cooking.”* - Mike Buononato

“This re-imagining of what Mexican food can be is attracting new guests to foods they didn’t know about,” says Stangarone. “One way to address these Millennial needs in Mexican cuisine is to embrace the cross-fertilization of flavors and forms, with outside influences that pair well in an offering.”

Comida in Denver was spawned from a food truck, bringing Mexican street food with an American sensibility into a bricks-and-mortar restaurant. It features dishes like Stella’s Pork Carnitas, starring pork shoulder slow-cooked in Stella Artois over smoked Gouda sweet potato mash with a pineapple-habanero salsa. Chicago’s Big Star calls itself a taco-slinging, late-night honkey tonk inspired by Mexican street food. Dishes include Tacos de Zanahoria, with mole-spiced carrots, chipotle-date yogurt, pumpkin and sesame seeds, almond and cilantro.

“Mexican cuisine is one of the most well-known cuisines among consumers, with nine in 10 having tried it at least once,” says Annika Stensson, director of research communications for the National Restaurant Association. “The trend toward street-food-inspired dishes also continues to grow, and Mexican cuisine features many items that can fit into that category at varying levels of complexity.”

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## **The Flavors of Mexico**

by Chris Casson

Mexican food continues to gain popularity in American foodservice, in every segment from food trucks and fine dining to family restaurants and QSRs. Mexican cheeses are growing in popularity—Cotija, asadero and panela, to name a few. Also evolving is the world of proteins. Chicken breast, pork butt and skirt steak will always have a place in this cuisine, but pork cheeks (cachetes de puerco) are making their debut as chefs look at secondary cuts or byproducts of the animal. Other on-trend proteins that bring Mexican cuisine back to its roots include octopus, red snapper, suckling pig and goat.

Produce also plays a large part in this evolving category. We see more pickled or fermented vegetables being incorporated into traditional-style dishes. Increased use of sour flavors means a wider variety of sour ingredients, including traditional Mexican flavors like tamarind.

Mexican cuisine has a history of vibrant spices. A personal favorite is achote, which stars in a popular marinade in the Yucatán region. A paste made primarily from the hard red annatto seeds, it provides a bright red color and unique flavor that complements many items, from protein to vegetables. When combined with a small amount of sugar (agave, honey, etc.), it enhances the flavor and caramelizes on a grill or in a hot cast



iron skillet. Other interesting spices and herbs on the horizon include dried ancho powder, hierba santa, recado rojo and papalo.

Traditionally from Oaxaca, smoky mezcal was enjoyed by the working class but now carries a premium in many on-trend restaurants. The smokiness of mezcal works great in marinades, too, with the alcohol tenderizing many proteins through the process.

A critical component to this trend is the story. Just as we have seen with other cuisines, the consumer wants to know the story behind the food: In what region did this dish originate, and with what traditional, local flavors? Be sure to consider all of these factors when incorporating Mexican ingredients into your concept.

## Sabor Equals Success



A specialty of Guadalajara, the torta ahogada is submerged in a chile sauce. It just might be the next Mexican sandwich on American menus.

Familiarity, flavor and versatility light the path here for successful innovation. Carriers like tortas and tortillas work with just about anything you'd put in a sandwich. Son of a Butcher Tavern menus a Pork Cheek Sandwich on a torta with panela cheese, chile morita jam, charred avocado and orange crema. Common Bond Cafe & Bakery in Houston serves a Chicken Torta with guacamole, salsa roja, Cotija, jalapeños and lettuce on a telera roll. Chilaquiles offer a comfort base with all-day menu potential.

Moles—those complex, ethereal sauces from Mexico—are easily adaptable, bringing a bit of intrigue and a lot of umami to the table. Laughing Planet Café, with 13 units in Portland, Ore., and one in Reno, Nev., serves a Hole Mole Burrito, with pinto beans, chicken, Jack cheese, brown rice, pico de gallo and homemade mole sauce. And, of course, chiles like poblano, chile de árbol and guajillo are ready to take the baton from jalapeño and chipotle.

*“Moles in particular give an operator a chance to enhance the diversity of Mexican flavors on the menu. When one thinks of mole, it evokes the wonders of the state of Oaxaca—a word not easily pronounced, but made familiar*

*and desirable by distinguished culinary guides like Diana Kennedy and Rick Bayless.” - Sharon Olson*

“Why not use mole as part of a hamburger build or in a barbecue sauce, or even in a dessert concept?” poses Christopher Koetke, vice president of Kendall College School of Culinary Arts. “Why not slow-cook lamb or pork in these traditional underground styles but vary the flavor profiles? Why not grate queso añejo onto roasted root vegetables or on top of pasta? Americans have readily embraced these flavors and are ready for these dishes to move beyond their traditional sphere into the American melting pot.”

Cliff Pleau, vice president of R&D for Bonefish Grill, sees the opportunity with Mexican through the lens of that seafood-centric concept. “At Bonefish, we think of life on the coast, so when we play with Mexican flavors, they come from the Yucatán: avocados, tomatillos, green chiles, mango, jicama for crunch,” he says. “We look

at roasted fish on wood fires, spicy slaws—no holding back on spice, like achiote, which has mild flavor, but great color.”

At Etch in Nashville, which boasts an eclectic menu, chef/owner Deb Paquette frequently looks to Mexico’s arsenal of flavors. “People are discovering what really good Mexican flavors are all about,” she says. “There’s a large umami factor in the ingredients.” She makes a black-olive mole with olives, tomatoes, roasted carrots, onion, mushroom confit, jalapeño and guajillo, serving it with her Trio of Setas. She has also run an ancho-cherry plum jam as an accompaniment to venison and a pepperoncini-tomatillo vinaigrette for a house salad.

*“Cooks and eaters alike are excited about the growing availability of Mexican-inspired cheeses. Queso fresco, Cotija, añejo, Oaxaca, panela, Chihuahua, asadero and melting American-Mexican styles like queso quesadilla—as well as other dairy ingredients like crema and requesón (like ricotta). Not only are these cheeses more available, but most of them are now authentically produced in the United States.”* - Robin Schempp

At 701 Restaurant & Bar in Washington, D.C., Executive Chef Benjamin Lambert serves bone marrow with mole, short rib and preserved lemon. “I adapted the mole recipe from a Mexican chef. I mix it into the short ribs,” he says. “The smokiness of the mole gives you a lot of opportunity across the menu. It’s complex and versatile.” His mole combines ingredients like ginger, raisins, dates, peanuts, thyme, aji amarillo and chipotle.

Mezcal, that smoky, sexy cousin of tequila, is another Mexican ingredient that has broken free of the postcard personality, leaving the worm out of its modern moves and making big flavor plays on modern cocktail menus. It has a great narrative, telling stories from Mexican villages about origin and tradition. At Oak at Fourteenth in Boulder, Colo., Bryan Dayton serves Oaxacan Breakfast, a cocktail made with Oak Suerte, Vida Mezcal, H&G Oloroso Sherry, Angostura syrup and cold-brew coffee. Jacques Bezuidenhout, master mixologist for the Kimpton Group, makes a Maguey Sour, combining mezcal, Bénédictine, fresh lemon juice, orgeat, egg white and nutmeg.

We have only just begun to explore the wonders of Mexican ingredients. With today’s diner always looking around the next corner, perhaps the most exciting trend lies just over the border.

## **The Mexican French Dip**

By Gerry Ludwig

One of the most delicious sandwich treatments in Mexican cuisine is the Guadalupe “ahogada,” where a torta sandwich is generously “drowned” in a spicy chile de árbol sauce (see photo above). Since a sauce-covered sandwich is a bit messier than most restaurant patrons enjoy, one solution is to cut the torta in half, skewer the halves and set them cut-side down in a shallow bowl of the sauce, creating a Mexican twist on the French Dip.

Another option is to serve the sandwich “pambazo style,” brushing the roll with the chile sauce and then placing it in a hot oven to slightly dry and set the sauce on the roll before building the sandwich. This treatment may still leave the fingers a bit sticky, but nothing an extra napkin or two won’t remedy.