



L.A. Mexicano: Recipes, People & Places

Bill Esparza

Staci Valentine, Photographer

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It's a zig-zag journey with author Bill Esparza, redolent of chiles, citrus, and freshly made tortillas, to sample the dazzling varieties of Mexican-American cooking through sprawling Los Angeles. Forty profiles of cooks and artisan producers, food highlights of each neighborhood, recipes, food and cultural history anecdotes, and color photos of markets, food trucks, landmarks, and street murals all document an exciting coming of age for this regional cuisine. The story of Mexican food in America has been "an asymmetrical narrative told by outsiders," overlooking a food scene that was largely enjoyed only by other Latinos.

The book covers a lot of ground, but the "Magellan of Menudo" is an expert guide; he neatly classifies the food scene into its subspecies. Pocho (once a disparagement but now embraced by Chicanos) describes the old-school eateries, like *Ciro's*, famous for huge portions of rice, beans, enchiladas, and burritos slathered in sauce, which "bind the community together in a tapestry of melted cheese." More authentically Mexican, and newer on the scene, are the restaurants and entrepreneurs specializing in food from Mexico's thirty-two diverse regions. Oaxaca is represented by Soledad Lopez and her pioneering import business and restaurant which satisfied LA's appetite for such items as tlayudas, grilled tortillas topped with beans, lard, avocado, chorizo, and stringy Oaxacan cheese.

The innovators of the new Alta California cooking are discussed here too. There's Wes Avila, who makes sought-after street tacos with fresh combinations of ingredients and fine-dining techniques, and Tommy Ortega, who reinterprets Mexican haute cuisine, like his signature Puerto Nuevo Lobster, blanched, grilled, and served with a smoky tomatillo sauce. Finally, the book discusses other baristas, bakers, brewmasters, artisanal food makers, food trucks, and markets that are all contributing to this renaissance.

Esparza is knowledgeable, passionate, and fiercely protective of the LA Mexicano food scene. He bristles at food writers, restaurant owners, and diners that have not valued Mexican restaurant workers or their cuisine. Rick Bayless is also singled out several times; Esparza views his ascendancy as America's best-known Mexican food authority as just another Anglo appropriating minority culture.

More positively, the author champions the members of the LA food community who are reconquering their Mexican American culinary inheritance and forging a chef culture that elevates Mexican-American cooking to its rightful place in the pantheon of great world cuisines.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (May/June 2017)

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