

Chimichangas to Chimichurri:

The Evolution of Latin Food Trends

Way back in 1992 National Public Radio reported that salsa had begun outselling ketchup in the United States. While this claim is both true and false (Americans spend more on salsa but consume more ketchup by volume) it does illustrate the extent to which “Mexican” food has become just regular, everyday food to most Americans. Salsa, guacamole, and tortilla chips may have foreign origins, but they no longer seem foreign in the melting pot of American food habits.

Familiarity, however, means restaurants have to go further in order to differentiate themselves. The evolution of Asian cuisine offers a comparable example, where early versions of Chinese-American food (does anyone order chop suey anymore?) evolved into more authentic dishes with a regional emphasis (Szechuan, Hunan), which opened the door to influences from other Asian countries. While the original version remains popular, chefs are drawing inspiration from additional ethnic ingredients and techniques to create new dishes with their own signature style.



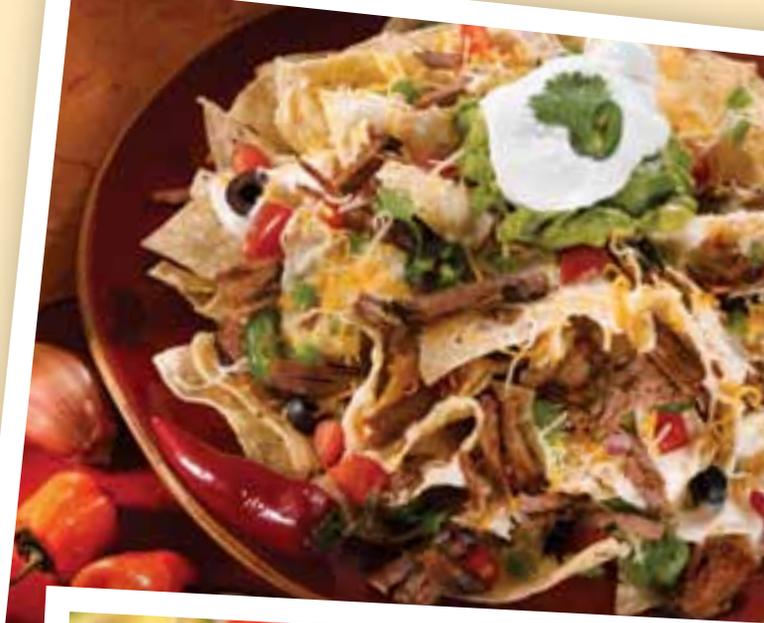
Latin cuisine has followed a similar trajectory. Underlying it all has been a trend toward increased diversity – of chefs, available ingredients, dining tastes, and the U.S. population as a whole. An early fondness for Tex-Mex (which continues to grow in popularity) evolved into an interest in authentic, regional Mexican cuisine, which broadened further to an appreciation of Latin American dishes generally and then a kind of Latin fusion cuisine that has come to be known as “Nuevo Latino.”

ON THE BORDER: TEX-MEX COOKING

At one time, roughly before the Civil War, there was no dividing line between Northern Mexico and what is now the Southwestern U.S. Peoples and cultures mingled freely. The term Tex-Mex was coined around 1875, originally in reference to the Texas-Mexican Railway. The long border and constant traffic created myriad connections between Northern Mexico and the Southwest U.S., and with the movement of people and goods came the intermingling of cultures and food preferences. However, the first printed instance of Tex-Mex in relation to food came as late as 1963.

Tejanos, or Texans of Mexican descent, are credited with being the originators of Tex-Mex cookery. It started out with traditional low-cost foods such as corn, chiles, tortillas, goat meat, barbecued cow heads, and dried beef. Fortunately, over time other ingredients were added that weren't traditionally Mexican. These included meltable cheese, increased reliance on beef and pork, and imported spices such as cumin. Texas-style chili con carne, chili con queso, and nachos were some of the offspring. Tex-Mex restaurants can also be credited with early adoption of the combination plate.

Chimichangas and fajitas are relatively new Tex-Mex inventions, and they won't be the last, thanks in part to the product development specialists at Chili's, Chipotle, and a long list of other national chains.





LA COMIDA AUTENTICA DE MEXICO

Mexican food is varied and, like all living cuisines, continues to spawn creativity; it can be called “authentic” if it uses only the phenomenal diversity of ingredients found in Mexico. This includes many tropical fruits, such as papaya and guava, and indigenous plants such as jicama root and nopales (prickly pear cactus). Mexican cuisine benefits from a climate that yields fruits and produce in abundance, the influences of Mayan and Aztec cookery (including cocoa as a spice ingredient), and a process of assimilation over hundreds of years with New World ingredients and cooking styles.

Ironically, the first recognized authority on authentic Mexican cuisine is an English expatriate named Diana Kennedy. Back in 1972, after many years of living and traveling in Mexico, Kennedy published *The Cuisines of Mexico*. By defining what true Mexican food is, Kennedy also promoted a clearer definition of what it isn't – helping to establish Tex-Mex and Southwestern cuisines in their own right.

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More recently, Rick Bayless has been at the forefront of introducing Americans to

authentic Mexican cuisine.

His first book, *Authentic Mexican: Regional*

Cooking from the Heart of Mexico was hailed by

New York Times food critic Craig Claiborne as the “greatest contribution to the Mexican table imaginable.” Bayless’

authentic Mexican restaurants in Chicago, *Frontera Grill*

and *Topolobampo*, have an international following, and his

PBS television show, *Mexico – One Plate at a Time* is currently in its seventh season.

Bayless’s *Frontera* line of prepared

salsas, chips, and grilling rubs allows consumers to enjoy these authentic flavors at home.

Mexico has a range of climate zones that gives rise to significant regional variations. Southeastern Mexico, for example, has a considerable Caribbean influence due to its location, with an emphasis on seafood – there is even a Mexican style of the Peruvian ceviche. The Yucatan peninsula is known for sweet and citrusy flavors and a varied use of spices. Achiote is also prominent, in such dishes as *puerco pibil*, in which pork is cooked slowly in banana leaves. Goat meat is popular in mountainous regions such as Jalisco, and Northern Mexico specializes in roasted meats such as *carne asada*.

While “nacho” and Monterey Jack cheeses are not part of authentic Mexican cooking, the country does produce more

than 20 indigenous varieties of fresh and aged cheeses.

Most fresh cheeses are made with unpasteurized milk and include varieties such as Oaxaca and panela cheese.

Aged cheeses include

Chihuahua, which is mild and meltable, and Cotija, which imparts a sharp flavor and is great as a topping. Manchego, a mild, aged Spanish cheese that melts well, sometimes makes it into a Mexican dish.

THE NUEVO LATINO REVOLUTION

Miami, closest to Latin America of the major U.S. cities, emerged as an early hub of Latin American cuisines. Los Angeles, on the opposite coast, and cities in Texas and the Southwest were cooking up revolutions of their own. Florida's large population of Cuban Americans had long been experimenting with Spanish, Cuban, and Central American influences. It was only a matter of time before a star chef rose to prominence, and American palates grew sufficiently adventurous, for those influences to attract nationwide attention.

Douglas Rodriguez is widely regarded as one of the first proponents – some have called him the godfather – of nuevo Latino cuisine. In 1989 he opened Yuca, an upscale Cuban restaurant in Coral Gables, and by age 24 had been crowned Miami's Chef of the Year by The Chefs of America. By 1994 Rodriguez had migrated to New York City and opened Patria, which quickly won three stars from The New York Times and rave reviews from The New Yorker magazine. He thought of his restaurant as a laboratory of Latin cuisines, and he is credited with popularizing the term nuevo Latino. In 1995 Rodriguez published a book by the same name, firmly establishing the term within the pantheon of recognizable culinary styles.

Nuevo Latino cuisine was perfectly timed with broader cultural shifts that continue today. The Internet in particular makes it possible for any great restaurant to quickly gain national attention, from where traditional media and the exploding genre of food television can spread the word further. The Internet boom also ushered in an era of affluence and novelty, with more money being spent on upscale dining. Chefs became celebrities. At the same time, natural and organic foods were becoming more mainstream. Uncertainty about biotech rekindled an interest in pure ingredients, with a growing emphasis on fresh, local and seasonal sourcing. To top it off, the Latino population continued to grow and settle in more and more regions of the U.S., which meant a larger talent pool for the restaurants as well as more potential diners for the food.

Latin America's unusual ingredients and bold flavors – as well as the loose parameters opened up by an entire continent of choices – appealed to the imagination of

creative chefs. A kind of Latin fusion cuisine emerged, combining dishes from practically every country in the Western hemisphere with classic cooking techniques and locally available ingredients. Among the standout restaurants to gain national prominence was Nacional 27 in Chicago, in which the "27" refers to the number of countries in Latin America.

Sancocho, feijoada, chimichurri and ceviche may not yet be household words (in non-Hispanic households), but diners in every part of the country have welcomed the opportunity to try new Latin dishes, and restaurants that serve authentic versions of these dishes continue to gain prominence.

