

March 17, 2010

Rediscovering Salsa, the Soul of Mexico in a Bowl

By [JULIA MOSKIN](#)

IT'S not easy being a Mexican restaurant in the United States. Some customers are outraged if the menu doesn't have burritos; others, if it does. Some see authenticity when chips and salsa aren't on the table; others see a rip-off.

"Everybody here thinks they know what Mexican food is," said Nicholas Cox, the chef at La Esquina in NoLIta. "Especially if they're from Texas or California."

Salsa, in particular, has emerged as Mexico's most misunderstood culinary export. In Paris, Mexican restaurants make it with minced cornichon pickles and ketchup; in Japan, with green shishito peppers and Kewpie mayonnaise; in American factories, with corn syrup and red bell peppers.

Soon after the United States "discovered" salsa in the 1980s, it soared to popularity, famously outselling ketchup by 1992. American cooks flirted with peach salsa and corn salsa, while supermarket salsa evolved into a thick, sweet mix.

But on its global journey, salsa as it is actually made in Mexico often became lost.

Irma Verdejo, an owner of Tulcingo del Valle in Hell's Kitchen, said that her customers often see it as a generic mix-and-match condiment.

"I fight with people about salsa all the time," she said. "They want to put this salsa with that dish, or they want it more spicy, or less spicy. And they always think it should be free."

Javier Olmedo, a Oaxaca University student and aspiring chef, said: "Watching someone shovel in salsa with tortilla chips is strange to Mexicans. Like how an American would feel watching someone drink [salad](#) dressing out of the bottle."

Salsa is a cornerstone of the Mexican kitchen, a contrast for a repetitive diet of corn, squash and beans. Just as French cooks understand that béarnaise sauce suits some dishes, hollandaise others, Mexican cooks know salsas have different qualities and functions.

Recently, true salsas have been finding their place at the Mexican table in New York. "Now there is a conversation between Mexico and the United States about what is good Mexican food," said Iris Avelar, who grew up moving between Guadalajara and the San Francisco Bay Area, where her parents had a restaurant. She is an owner of La Superior in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which specializes in carefully made Mexican street food.

"When my parents opened their restaurant 20 years ago, we had to have a 'gringo salsa' with no chilies at all," Ms. Avelar said. "That would never happen now."

Brilliantly flavorful salsas, made in the classic way, have become much easier to find here, both at hipster magnets — like La Superior; Cascabel Taqueria on the Upper East Side; Mercadito in the East Village; Barrio Chino on the Lower East Side; and Hecho en Dumbo, which just opened on the Bowery — as well as at traditional places like Tulcingo del Valle, as well as Tortilleria Nixtamal and Tia Julia, both in Queens.

The chefs in these kitchens create salsas that go way past “red or green” and “mild or hot.” They highlight the green, herbaceous flavors of fresh chilies and the raisiny sweetness of dried; they use heat judiciously, to contrast the richness of meats like house-made chorizo or braised veal tongue; they let some salsas rest overnight to soften their flavors and make others to order to emphasize the snappiness of the ingredients.

These places do not serve what chefs call “contemporary Mexican cuisine,” a sophisticated blending of Mexico, Spain, France and the Americas. Instead, they are fashionably glorified taquerias that give respect to Mexico’s most basic and widespread snack.

“A great taco is a perfect food,” said Danny Mena, the chef at Hecho en Dumbo, who is from Mexico City. “A tortilla, a protein and then the salsa is just the genius Mexican way of seasoning every bite with acidity, heat and salt.”

Felipe Mendez, an owner at La Superior, said, “In Mexico, we say that the meat is what makes a taco good, but the salsa is what makes it exceptional.”

The word “salsa” does simply mean “sauce” in Spanish, but in truth salsa in Mexico almost always means there will be chilies.

But salsa is not simply a liquid delivery system for the chilies’ heat: it is meant to have flavor and depth, with a mix of tart, sweet, salty and hot effects. It should be “poignant” with heat, Mr. Mena said, but not hit you over the head with it. (Only salsa picante — thin red sauces like Cholula, Tapatío and Valentina — is simply hot.)

Salsas can be made with fresh chilies (like serrano, jalapeño, poblano or habanero) or dried chilies (guajillo, cascabel, ancho, morita or chipotle), but the two are rarely combined.

There are salsas rich with [pumpkin](#) seeds and peanuts or warmed with cloves and canela, the cinnamonlike native Mexican bark. There are salsas of tomatillos and [tomatoes](#), and salsas that are raw (cruda) and cooked (cocida). A cooked one, like salsa ranchera (country sauce) or salsa verde (made from tomatillos), can be used as a table sauce or a cooking medium, in dishes like chilaquiles (fried tortillas simmered in salsa).

Raw salsas are explosive, setting off fireworks of heat and acid in each bite. Cooked salsas are more like candlelight, shedding a slow, steady warmth.

The most basic fresh salsa of finely cut tomatoes, green chilies and onion — basically what’s served with chips in neighborhood Mexican restaurants — is often called “pico de gallo,” in North America, but simply “salsa Mexicana” in most of Mexico.

Most authentic salsas are based on just a few ingredients — chilies, tomatoes, onions, garlic — which are easy for home cooks here to get their hands on. What produces the dizzying range of flavors, tastes and textures is how those ingredients are cooked (or not) — charred on a dry surface for smokiness, shallow-fried in oil for creaminess, simmered in water for brightness or simply buzzed in a blender for punch.

One of the best salsas in the city is the balanced, slow-burning salsa ranchera at La Esquina, made daily by Gloria Reynoso, who has been with the restaurant since it opened in 2005. Its base is a thick crimson paste, sweet but with bitter and earthy undertones, made from soaked dried guajillo chilies. The salsa combines lusciously with runny egg yolk and soupy black beans in the restaurant's huevos rancheros.

"That liaison is just so correct," said Mr. Cox, the restaurant's chef, who also uses the salsa on roasts and, as he said, "when the braised beef turns out drier than you wanted it." Another authentic use for salsa, as a moistener for dishes that become dried out by cooking or time, is a handy trick for home cooks.

Other memorable New York City salsas: Mercadito's salsa de cacahuets, an unctuous blend of peanuts and four different types of dried chilies; salsa borracha, traditional "drunken" salsa spiked with tequila and sweet with long-cooked onions, which tops roasted goat at Cabrito in the West Village; and a not very authentic but wonderful red sauce at the newcomer Dos Toros near Union Square, made with flowery, fiery fresh habanero chilies, which are rarely used for salsa outside the Yucatán.

At Tulcingo del Valle, a creamy salsa roja is spiced with cloves and canela, the Mexican cinnamon that comes in soft, balsa-like shards. Jesus Verdejo, the chef, said that this is the basic red sauce in his hometown, Puebla, and it tastes rich and complex. Because the dried árbol chilies and onions are fried in oil, the sauce turns creamy pink when emulsified in a blender, a key piece of modern Mexican cooking equipment.

The traditional tools for making salsa are a molcajete, a rough-textured mortar, and a tejolote (pestle) made from black volcanic rock, which can pound ingredients into a fine purée. Sometimes, that texture is desirable, but most of the cooks interviewed said that a completely smooth salsa is the modern restaurant standard, here and in Mexico.

Mr. Mena, of Hecho en Dumbo, uses a big, hungry-looking hand blender for his excellent salsa verde, a rounded, tomatillo-based trickle of concentrated flavor with serrano chilies. He said that salsa is infinitely adaptable, defying labels, able to accommodate whatever good cooks want to do to it.

In modern Mexico, salsa often gets extra savor from salsa inglesa (Worcestershire sauce), salsa de soya (soy sauce), jugo Maggi (an MSG-based sauce) or spoonfuls of chicken broth.

"Salsa is not even vegetarian in Mexico," Mr. Mena said in discussing what makes salsa genuine. "How can anyone know what authentic is?"

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 24, 2010

An article last Wednesday about salsa misstated Felipe Mendez's role in the restaurant La Superior in Brooklyn. He is an owner — not the chef, a job held by Nacxitl Gaxiola.

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)