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WEEKEND IN NEW YORK

The Mexican Experience: La Gran Manzana's Homey Side

By [SETH KUGEL](#)

IT was a challenge to find a genuine Mexican meal in New York City 15 years ago, in part because it was a challenge to find a genuine Mexican.

To dedicate a whole trip to Mexican culture in La Gran Manzana, you probably had to build it around Cinco de Mayo, or Dec. 12, the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe. But now, with New York's Department of City Planning reporting that the number of Mexicans has more than quadrupled, to about 300,000, since 1990, any weekend can be a Mexican weekend.

There are art exhibitions, of course, and concerts and fine dining. The Web site of the Mexican Cultural Institute of New York (www.mciny.org) can help you with coming events, including an exhibition of Martín Ramírez's drawings at the [American Folk Art Museum](#), which opens tomorrow.

You could also build a long weekend around rock en Español's megastar band, Maná, at [Madison Square Garden](#) on March 15. Sophisticated takes on Mexican cuisine abound in chic, successful restaurants like [Rosa Mexicano](#), [Maya](#), [La Esquina](#) and [Sueños](#). But for most Mexicans living here, Mexican New York is more about homey restaurants, stores that sell Abuela-brand hot chocolate and fresh-baked conchas, and churches where well-behaved children are rewarded with a treat from the churros vendor after Mass.

To find those spots, I surveyed 40 Mexican New Yorkers awaiting assistance at the Mexican Consulate on East 39th Street about their favorite restaurants, food shops, nightclubs and churches.

These admittedly unscientific results provide grass-roots insight for anyone planning a Mexican weekend in New York.

No surprise: Of the 10 restaurants getting multiple votes, 9 were nowhere to be found in most guidebooks, including the 2007 [Zagat](#) restaurant survey. The exception was Mamá México, with two locations (the Upper West Side and Midtown), which has live mariachi music, a vast menu and an unusually mixed English- and Spanish-speaking crowd. It was second, with five votes.

The other top three have a lot in common. They are cozy and inexpensive spots outside Manhattan, with red-and-green signs, a Mexican clientele and a television on which to watch telenovelas and soccer games. They are also all within three blocks of subway stops.

The winner (seven votes) was Tacos Mexico, whose main branch sits beneath the tracks of the No. 7 train in Queens. It's bigger than it looks, with a busy bar in the center, and a menu that runs from tacos to bistec a la tampiqueña, a thick-by-Mexican-standards steak smothered in peppers and tomatoes and served with refried beans and rice.

Next was the favorite of Bronx Mexicans: La Estrellita Poblana, which had four votes. A bustling, crammed and

ultracausal place with two locations, both under elevated tracks. A good sign is that everyone there seems to be eating something different, from rib platters to made-to-order huaraches (thick flat tortillas covered with meat, cheese and other goodies). Finally, Antojitos Mexicanos in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, got three votes and was the only winner not in the shadows of an elevated train. Go for lunch or an early dinner; it closes at 8 p.m.

The food-shopping category — mentioned here for visitors who wish to soak in atmosphere as much as to buy — ended in a tie between Tulcingo Deli in Corona, Queens, and Little Mexico in East Harlem.

Tulcingo is a combination bakery and grocery, with the stress on bakery, which is temptingly full of sweet, warm Mexican breads like conchas and ojos. There you can act as if you were in Mexico, taking a silver platter and tongs, serving yourself and bringing your choices to the register. (It's owned by the same people who own Tulcingo Restaurant across the street, another vote-getter with show-stopping mole poblano, chicken in a complex chocolate-based sauce.)

In East Harlem, the two branches of Little Mexico have mountains of imported products, showing that business is brisk and that Mexicans are united in their love for hot chocolate, chili-powder-covered candy and prickly pear. A trip there is a good excuse to visit the main drag of Mexican East Harlem, 116th Street between Second and Third Avenues, to savor a block of restaurants, taco stands, barber shops and clothing stores.

Night-life suggestions were mostly for places with D.J.'s where men pay women to dance with them on a \$2-per-song basis. (During grinding reggaetón songs, this essentially becomes a \$2 lap dance.) Some visitors will not feel comfortable in these spots, but for the curious, one place that is friendly to couples, in an entertaining neighborhood and across the street from a smaller branch of Tacos Mexico, is El Otro Rollo, in Astoria, Queens.

Twenty different churches got one or two votes each for Spanish-language Mass; none got more than two. But St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church on East 117th Street, founded in 1834, serves as a center for the Mexicans of East Harlem (you can combine it with your visit to Little Mexico and 116th Street). It's one of those beautiful Manhattan buildings stuck on a side street where you can't back up far enough to take it all in. But inside, there is stained glass and a soaring wooden vault.

You can tell from the shrines dedicated to the patron saints of Latin American countries (identified by flag) that immigrants from many of those countries attend the church. There's the Virgin of the Cloud for Ecuadoreans, for example, and the Virgin of Altagracia for Dominicans. But the Virgin of Guadalupe's shrine is by far the most popular at Sunday Mass. And, of course, the churros man is waiting outside when church lets out.

Details

RESTAURANTS

Tacos Mexico, 88-12 Roosevelt Avenue, Elmhurst, Queens, (718) 899-5800. Take the No. 7 train to 90th Street. Also at 32-08 38th Street, Astoria, Queens, (718) 545-5888, and 41-10 102nd Street, Corona, Queens, (718) 505-0332.

Estrellita Poblana I, 2247 Westchester Avenue, Bronx, (718) 518-7425. Take the No. 6 train to Castle Hill Avenue.

Estrellita Poblana II, 2819 White Plains Road, Bronx, (718) 654-7652. Take the No. 2 or No. 5 train to Allerton Avenue.

Antojitos Mexicanos, 107 Graham Avenue, East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, (718) 384-9076. Take the L train to Montrose Avenue (not Graham Avenue).

Mamá México, 2672 Broadway, Upper West Side, (212) 864-2323. Also at 214 East 49th Street, (212) 935-1316.

OTHER

Tulcingo Deli, 40-19 National Street, Corona, Queens, (718) 457-9262. Take the No. 7 to 103rd Street.

Little Mexico, 2119 Third Avenue, (212) 828-0500. Also at 2001 Third Avenue, (212) 289-2640.

El Otro Rollo, 41-02 Broadway, Astoria, Queens.

St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church, 113 East 117th Street, (212) 534-4422. Spanish Mass: Saturday, 9 a.m., Sunday, 10:30 a.m.

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