

- home
- music & nightlife
- movies
- the arts
- restaurants**
 - FIND A RESTAURANT
- classifieds
- columns
- news & features
- the papers
- blogs
-
- contests
- coupons
- [advertise](#)
- [about us](#)
- [contact](#)

restaurants Silicon Valley

07.15.09

[home](#) | [metro silicon valley index](#) | [silicon valley restaurants](#) | [review](#)

Nuevolution

The rest of the country has enjoyed the modern ambience and unique regional dishes of high-end Latin restaurants for years—why has it taken so long for Silicon Valley to catch the Nuevo wave? **Joya, Mezcal and others are leading the charge.**

By Stett Holbrook
Photographs by Felipe Buitrago

ADOLFO GOMEZ moved to San Jose from Oaxaca in southern Mexico 20 years ago. Although he worked in the restaurant and hospitality industry here, Gomez longed for the tastes of home.

"I was always looking for a place to eat real Oaxacan food," Gomez says.

Once, he found a little place in Redwood City that specialized in the distinctive cuisine of Oaxaca, but the restaurant quickly bowed to market pressures and dropped the complex moles and tlayudas in favor of carne asada and al pastor tacos, like every other Mexican restaurant in the Silicon Valley.

"I like that food, but I always miss my cuisine," Gomez remarks.

Only now, two decades after arriving in San Jose, can Gomez enjoy the flavors of home. That's because he opened Mezcal, his own restaurant in downtown San Jose, last November.

The economy notwithstanding, Gomez says the timing was right to open a new kind of Mexican restaurant because of the dining public's growing sophistication and awareness of the distinctive styles of regional Mexican cuisine.

"I think they're more open to try something different," Gomez tells me. "I think if I had opened a Oaxacan restaurant 20 years ago, I would have ended up doing burritos and enchiladas."

In addition to the excellent Oaxacan food, what makes Mezcal a standout is its cool, modern, minimalist design. You won't find sombreros and serapes on the wall here. Instead, there are colorful animal sculptures from Oaxaca set into recessed displays backlit with colored washes. An exposed brick wall backs the beautiful bar. An airy courtyard sits off the dining room for outdoor seating.

Gomez says that although the ambience of his restaurant strikes many diners as upscale, it's middle of the road by Mexican standards. But it's top of the line for Silicon Valley Mexican restaurants.



TRES ELEMENTS: Mezcal in San Jose offers a mole triplet (below) while **Joya in Palo Alto serves a three-way ceviche platter (above).**

Mezcal is more than a good, albeit atypical, Mexican restaurant. It is one of a growing number of Silicon Valley restaurants embracing the contemporary Latino aesthetic, a culinary undercurrent that offers a break from the same old rice and beans.

Also known as Nuevo Latino, the trend has flourished across the country for two decades but largely passed Silicon Valley by. Until now. Nuevo Latino restaurants fuse traditional and nontraditional ingredients with high-style dining rooms accentuated with contemporary art and design.

New Tastes

In addition to Mezcal, Reposado and the Oaxacan Kitchen in Palo Alto and Casa de Cobre in Saratoga offer traditional and inspired menus of Mexican food backed by thoughtfully designed, lively dining rooms. A few other places have dabbled in Nuevo Latino with varying degrees of success.

As far back as the mid-'90s, Aquí Cal-Mex chef Rob Francis was experimenting with unusual Cuban and Asian-influenced specialties at Aquí. Don Durante and Lisa Rhorer's excellent Cin-Cin in Los Gatos and Durante's Cascal in Mountain View incorporate Nuevo Latino influences with excellent results.



NEW TASTES: The ensalada de mariscos with ceviche callejero at Reposado reflects the inventive cuisine at many Nuevo Latino restaurants.

Cin-Cin's menu darts all over the globe but includes a few Latin-inspired dishes such as wild mushroom and manchego cheese empanadas with truffle oil and tuna-stuffed piquillo peppers. Cascal takes a more direct approach with a Spanish and Latin American menu of tapas and larger plates. Look for dishes like the "Cuban wrap"—sliced, adobo-marinated pork tenderloin rolled in a tortilla with cilantro mojo sauce, watercress and a piquillo pepper salad; and Mexico City-style braised beef short ribs with red onion-cilantro salad and a fresh corn arepa. The compelling menus are backed by stylish, urbane dining rooms.

And then there's Joya Restaurant and Lounge in Palo Alto. It's a showcase for Latin American and Spanish food presented with style and sexy swagger.

The rise of these restaurants offers a glimmer of what could be: the celebration of Latino food with a generous serving of glamour on the side. So what took so long?

The Nuevo Latino trend emerged in Miami in the 1990s. The city's slavishly trendy pan-Latino culture was the perfect breeding ground for a hybridized cuisine rooted in the culinary traditions of Latin America but updated with a contemporary, north-of-the-border sensibility.

Nuevo Latino restaurants proliferated across the United States as the vibrancy and vitality of the cuisine found a receptive audience with diners eager to open their minds and mouths to new flavors and culinary creations.

Given that the Nuevo Latino wave is more than 20 years old, it's probably inaccurate to call it a trend anymore. Restaurants like Topolobampo in Chicago, Calle Ocho in New York City, Azuca in San Antonio, Ciudad in Los Angeles and Destino in San Francisco are fixtures of their city's dining scenes.

But somehow Silicon Valley didn't get invited to the party. In spite of the fact that we are a wealthy and food-conscious area with a large Latino population, Nuevo Latino never caught on here. That fact is especially puzzling when you consider that other cuisines endemic to Silicon Valley have evolved into new, hybridized categories of dining.

Tamarine in Palo Alto and Xanh in Mountain View serve inspired, contemporary Vietnamese food. Amber India in San Jose and newcomer Sakaan in Mountain View have given Indian food a modern spin. Sino in San Jose and Gochi in Cupertino have done the same for Chinese and Japanese food, respectively.

Chef Rachael Spivack ventured into high-end Latin influences at her acclaimed dotcom-era restaurant, Spivac's, in San Jose's Silver Creek. Before the short-lived restaurant closed and morphed into a steakhouse, Spivack showcased dishes like chipotle-lacquered salmon with agave nectar, mini sopas with cilantro lime crema, and ceviches.

Spivack says that San Jose still has a long way to go before Nuevo Latino takes hold.

"San Jose hasn't evolved," she explains. "It's still the '80s and the '90s: rice, beans and enchiladas, Tex-Mex burritos ... very traditional American-Mexican cuisine. It's still very one-dimensional.

Mexican cuisine is multidimensional with subtle flavors and fresh ingredients. It's not just chips, salsa and guacamole."

The Plates Are Hot

Silicon Valley's low-priced ethnic-food scene has plenty to offer, but at the upper end of the spectrum conservatism and outright dullness dominate the restaurant market. Until now, that's been particularly evident in Mexican restaurants.

The twin forces of assimilation and commercialization in America turned Mexican food into Mexican-American food long ago. Along the way, one of the world's great cuisines was reduced to a dozen or so dishes that all seem to be united by an excess of cheddar cheese, too much sour cream and the words "careful, the plates are hot."



MODERN ARTISTRY: The bar at Mezcal, backed with contemporary art set in the walls, shows off the cool, minimalist aesthetic of Nuevo Latino restaurants.

There are approximately 20,000 Mexican restaurants in the United States, yet most of them seem to be cooking from the same stubbornly familiar menu: chips and salsa, tacos, burritos, enchiladas, nachos, quesadillas, tamales, chimichangas, tostadas, chiles rellenos, chile verde and chile colorado. But here in Silicon Valley, it's ironic there hasn't been a greater variety of Mexican food.

In spite of its modern style, Mezcal is basically a traditional Mexican restaurant. To the extent to which people are familiar with Oaxacan cuisine, it's probably mole negro, a velvety, bittersweet, chocolate-looking sauce typically served with chicken. Mezcal's version is seductive and subtle, but the restaurant offers two other kinds of mole as well—coloradito and estofado.

A complimentary sampling of the moles with chips is presented at the beginning of the meal. Tortilla chips are a concession to gringo preferences since they're not served in Mexico, but Gomez offers them because his diners always asked for them and he figured it would be a good way to introduce them to the restaurant's three kinds of mole.

The negro and coloradito are best. The negro is more savory than sweet and has a pleasing hint of bitterness. It's the smoky, smoldering heat and flavor of the poblano chiles that really distinguish the sauce. The red-tinted coloradito is spicier and a delicious balance of sweet and bitter.

While the moles are good, it's the chapulines people will remember most whether they liked them or not. The toasted grasshoppers, a traditional, protein loaded snack, are tossed with chile powder, lime juice and salt and make for a great cocktail or beer accompaniment. They taste like spicy nuts that happen to be bugs.

Given how different this kind of food is from gringofied Mexican-American food, it can be an eye-opener for diners who grew up on Pedro's or Chevy's. A taste of the real thing can be revelatory, even revolutionary.

Mezcal is also unique in that it showcases its namesake spirit. Tequila is really a variant of mescal made from blue agave whereas mescal can be made from several different kinds of agave and generally has a smokier flavor than tequila. Gomez offers a number of small, premium mescals made by producers who are making mescal in the finer, barrel-aged style that's come to characterize many top tequilas.

Drawing on influences from Spain and South America, Joya in Palo Alto is the most overtly Nuevo Latino restaurant in Silicon Valley. And it's one of the most gorgeous restaurants of any kind. Shopworks, a design firm with clients that include W Hotels in New York, Chicago,

San Francisco and the Plumpjack Group, designed Joya, which occupies a prime corner spot on University Avenue that formerly housed a bank.

The restaurant underwent a top-to-bottom remodel and has been done up in a crisp, modern style with horizontal wood panels, exposed steel and a glassed-in wine cellar featuring selections from the eclectic global wine list. The wall of windows at the front of the restaurant can be pulled back to open to the sidewalk, perfect for warm afternoons. In addition to the dining room, Joya has an appealing lounge and a cozy bar.

The menu draws in equal measure from Spain and the New World with a fresh sprinkling of California fresh and seasonal sensibility tossed in. The appealing list of tapas ranges from the traditional, like the boquerones and camarones al ajillo, head-on white shrimp from the Gulf of Mexico suffused with a rich, garlic-laced, piquant pimento sauce, to the inventive, with such dishes as the trio of short rib tacos with horseradish cream and Kobe-style beef sliders with Oaxacan cheese, chorizo and chipotle mayonnaise.

Although not everything at the restaurant succeeds, there's plenty of good food on the ever-changing menu to match Joya's good looks. The baked, banana-leaf-wrapped king salmon with English peas, artichoke hearts and cilantro-chile cream pretty much screams Nuevo Latino. On my visit, the Cuban spiced pork tenderloin was a standout as was the grilled Pacific halibut matched with a velvety romesco sauce and braised chard.

Authenticity and Innovation

By and large, Mexican food ceased to be a foreign or ethnic food long ago. It's American food or, at best, Mexican-American food. Mexican-American food is the norm, while straight-ahead Mexican food that doesn't cater to U.S. tastes is much harder to find.

Mexican food's price of admission to mainstream America was to leave many of its defining characteristics—labor-intensive preparation, regional variation, small portions, the use of lard—at the border. The reward for this dumbing down was the widespread acceptance of "Mexican" food. Tacos and burritos are now as "American" as hot dogs and hamburgers. But the cost of becoming American, says Andrew F. Smith, a culinary historian at New York's New School, was that Mexican food "lost its soul."

As a new cuisine enters the United States, it must pass through a filter that strains out strong flavors and unfamiliar ingredients in order to be commercially successful. Just as Italian food was reduced to lasagna, pizza and spaghetti with meatballs, and Chinese food became chicken chow mein, egg rolls and mu shu pork, Mexican food too found its base level.

"The mainstream view of Mexican food in America is Taco Bell," says Smith. "It's the mainstream that [establishes] what restaurants offer."

Because Mexicans have been in the United States for so long, Mexican food is ingrained here and no longer "foreign," says Tomas Jimenez, a Stanford University sociologist. "People are just as likely to grab a burrito as a burger."

Mexican food became more American. Or maybe American food became more Mexican. But Jimenez sees the narrow range of Mexican food in U.S. restaurants widening as the cuisine leaves the confines of the taqueria.

"I think Mexican food is [now] taking its place along the other grand cuisines," he says.

The cuisines of Mexico's 31 states are so much wider and deeper than the truncated menu of often goopy, cheesy and fried foods served in Mexican restaurants here. In her book *My Mexico*, esteemed Mexican food authority Diana Kennedy recalls a television interview in which she was asked to describe Mexican food.

"I found myself floundering hopelessly and helplessly—where to begin, what to encompass, ... to do justice to the foods of this extraordinarily complex country would take many lifetimes of research and travel. For complex Mexico is."

Yet that complexity is poorly represented north of the border.

Elsewhere, the famously acerbic Kennedy remarked on Mexican food in the United States: "Many people outside Mexico still think of [it] as an overly large platter of mixed messes, smothered with a shrill tomato sauce, sour cream, and grated yellow cheese preceded by a dish of mouth-searing sauce and greasy, deep-fried chips."

Mexican food in America of the hard taco/slushy margarita school is more American than Mexican. Like spaghetti with meatballs, pizza, chow mein, french fries and General Tso's chicken, commercialization and mass production have stripped Mexican food of its regional and ethnic roots such that it's really Mexican in name only. It's been Americanized and supersized.

Serve a traditional enchilada made without cheddar cheese and iceberg lettuce or omit the chips and salsa and most diners would think they had walked into the wrong restaurant. And that's not their fault. Unless people travel in Mexico off well-worn tourist routes, it's hard to get a taste of something different. It's all there is. Or was.

Regional Flavors

Now there's a growing number of regional Mexican restaurants in Silicon Valley that have joined a lonely group of pioneering Mexican restaurants that look to Mexico, not the United States, for inspiration.

The Oaxacan Kitchen has become a big hit. Co-owner Zaida Kent is from Oaxaca. She runs the restaurant with her husband, Ron Kent. Kent, a chef with three decades of cooking experience in Bay Area restaurants, recalled his first encounter with Oaxacan cuisine.

"I had never tasted Oaxacan food," he told me shortly after opening his restaurant last summer. "I was stunned by the food ... [Oaxaca] is like the Tuscany or Paris of Mexico."

He and his wife began to lead culinary tours to Oaxaca and later started to sell Oaxacan moles, chocolate and tamales at the Palo Alto farmers market and others. Last year, they took the plunge and opened a restaurant to further showcase their passion for the distinctive foods of Oaxaca.

Walking in the door of the narrow restaurant you know you're in the right place. The first thing you see is women manning the comal, a griddle on which the restaurant makes all its tortillas and various masa-based dishes. Using an ancient device called a molino, which consists of two stone wheels made of volcanic rock, the Kents grind their own corn to make the masa (cornmeal dough). They also use the molino to make their own chocolate from cacao beans imported from Mexico. It's safe to say this is not your typical sombrero-on-the-wall taqueria.

The restaurant serves tacos and tortas but also an array of Oaxacan street snacks seldom seen in these parts. My favorite is the molotes: tubes of masa filled with potatoes and chorizo and topped with a creamy—delicate, even—black bean purée and queso fresco, salsa and guacamole. The masa is lightly fried, and the interior is moist and flavorful. It quickly turns into a delicious mess.

Even though the tamales conjured up memories of my trips to Oaxaca, there's a missing ingredient: lard. In a concession to local tastes, the tamales are made with olive oil instead. Perhaps they could offer a few tamales made with the magic ingredient for those who want the full Mexican experience.

While most Silicon Valley Mexican restaurants fall into the Mexican-American or Cal-Mex category, there is a regional influence, albeit a limited one. Most of Silicon Valley's Mexican immigrants came from the states of Michoacán, Jalisco and Guanajuato.

These central-western states have a ranching and cowboy culture that dates back to pre-revolutionary times. As such, dishes like carne asada, birria (goat stew), chile colorado and carnitas have become signature—and omnipresent—dishes. They can be quite good, but they represent a thin slice of the foods from this region of Mexico.

Although it offers plenty of dishes familiar to American diners, Saratoga's new Casa de Cobre aims to dive deeper into the food of Michoacán, particularly the food of Santa Clara del Cobre, the hometown of chef Marcelino Hernandez Perez. (See full review on page 31.)

Casa de Cobre is co-owned by Andrew Welch, who also happens to co-own the Basin, a popular Mediterranean restaurant next door. Hernandez Perez has been the Basin's chef for seven years, and by opening Casa de Cobre, Welch has given him the chance to showcase lesser-known dishes from his hometown like the pork and dried fruit-filled chiles rellenos draped with pecan sauce, Michoacán-style enchiladas made with roasted carrots and potatoes, and the delicious chivo (braised goat with guajillo chiles).

"Casa de Cobre is definitely not your typical Mexican restaurant," says Welch.

In addition to the traditional menu, the comfortable dining room and outdoor seating place it in the contemporary Mexican category. There is a range of colorful art on the wall, some of it inspired by the restaurant's namesake copper.

Chef Arnulfo "Arnie" Hernandez was born in the coastal Mexican state of Nayarit, but the food at his 6-month-old Palo Alto restaurant Reposado trots all over Mexico.

Working with owner Rob Fischer, Hernandez has developed a crowd-pleasing menu served in an upscale, beautiful setting. The menu takes classics of Mexican cuisine and several lesser-known dishes and gives them a smart, urbane spin.

Like Mezcal's Gomez, Hernandez missed the tastes of home here in the United States.

"In the Bay Area, I haven't found the right place to bring me memories of home," he says, longingly. "But then I started cooking [at Reposado] and smelling all those aromas I always missed."

Although this new crop of regional Mexican restaurants represents a distinct break from Americanized Mexican food (or is it Mexicanized American food?), there are a few established restaurants like Consuelo Mexican Bistro, Mendoza Taqueria No. 2, Vive Sol and Estrellita that have been offering regional Mexican food all along.

Russell Clark Corlay, owner of Estrellita in Los Altos, figures many restaurants are reluctant to serve regional specialties because it's labor intensive and many ingredients are hard to find.

"You can't do any shortcuts. You can't just open a can."

Estrellita's mole, for example, has 38 ingredients that must be measured and added individually. Some ingredients aren't even available in the United States. "We have to go to Tijuana just to get some of the chiles."

When Clark Corlay's family took over Estrellita in 1978, they made sure to get the recipe for the restaurant's signature "gourmet" burrito: a big flour tortilla filled with beef or chicken that's doused in a mild red or spicy green sauce and then topped with a heap of cheddar and Monterey jack cheese. The dish epitomizes Mexican food in America: filling, satisfying and even delicious, but more American than Mexican.

But when Clark Corlay's mother joined his aunt at Estrellita, they started to introduce a few regional specialties, especially those from their native state of Chiapas in southern Mexico. Because many of the dishes were unfamiliar to many diners, they put special dishes on a display table near the front door to give diners a visual aid. Sauces are available for taste, too, and servers are trained to explain the food. The practice continues today.

While the "gourmet" burrito still accounts for nearly a third of all sales, Clark Corlay says the regional specials now account for 50 percent of business.

Some of the more popular specials include chicken pibil, a Yucatecan dish of citrus- and achiote-marinated chicken wrapped in banana leaves; chiles en nogada, a winter dish of stuffed chiles in a walnut sauce that evokes the red, green and white of the Mexican flag; and Chiapas tamales, a time-consuming dish made with mole, dried fruits and chicken.

"It's been increasing, definitely," he says. "It has amazed me how much people have become familiar with Mexican food in the past 10 to 15 years."

Whether it's diners' changing tastes and desire to go beyond the burrito or restaurateurs willingness to offer something different, a new era of Latino food may be on the rise in Silicon Valley.

Joya Restaurant and Lounge

339 University Ave., Palo Alto. 650.853.9800.

