

# A YET UNDISCOVERED CUISINE

## Innovation and Tradition in Mexican Cuisine Interview with Chef Ricardo Muñoz Zurita



Courtesy of Ricardo Muñoz Zurita

**R**icardo Muñoz Zurita was one of the pioneers in putting the best of traditional Mexican cuisine on the table. He has spent more than three decades researching our country's culinary traditions. Together with his great talent, this work has crystallized in a series of books and in his celebrated Azul y Oro (Blue and Gold) restaurants.

Ricardo Muñoz Zurita is the author of the books *Los chiles rellenos en México* (Stuffed Chili Peppers in Mexico) and *Salsas mexicanas: 100% México* (Mexican Salsas: 100% Mexico), among others. He is the chef and owner of Mexico City's Azul y Oro restaurants: one in University City; the Azul Condesa, in the the Condesa neighborhood; and the Azul Histórico, in downtown Mexico City's historic center.

**Voices of Mexico (VM):** How did you get interested in Mexican cuisine?

**Ricardo Muñoz Zurita (RMZ):** My childhood was full of food. I'm from a family originally from Tabasco that settled in Veracruz. This meant that we had the best of the two gastronomical universes: sometimes we ate food from Veracruz and sometimes from Tabasco. This meant that at a very early age, I could distinguish the big differences between the two culinary traditions, without really even knowing that they were part of a regional Mexican cuisine; I learned that later on. When I started studying gastronomy, I was very surprised that the school only taught European cuisine, as though Mexican cuisine had no value. That unfortunate omission led me to become interested in Mexican cooking from the very beginning of my career.



**VM:** Did you see a need for placing renewed value on Mexican gastronomy?

**RMZ:** Focusing on Mexican cuisine is no novelty nowadays. But you have to take into account that I had that idea more than 30 years ago. For a start, in the 1980s, there were no cooking schools; secondly, the only thing that was taught was European. At that time, Mexican gastronomy was relegated to homes, little neighborhood restaurants, taverns, and diners, but it wasn't considered part of great world cuisine. In culinary terms, 30 years ago, we were living in the Middle Ages. And then, at the end of the 1980s, something I really didn't like began to emerge: so-called *nouvelle cuisine*

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*mexicaine*, which was nothing but Mexican cooking using French techniques, or French cooking using Mexican products. This whole trend was very insipid; the proof is that nobody remembers that fad.

I would like to emphasize one point: it now seems commonplace to talk about places serving traditional cuisine, like my restaurants. But 30-some years ago, that was unthinkable. I shouldn't toot my own horn, but, to be fair, I think I was the first one to serve large-format classical cuisine, sticking to tradition. But I wouldn't want to underestimate the work of many other chefs who came before me and did great work, like Patricia Quintana or Alicia Gironella, among others. They made very good Mexican cuisine that still exists today; however, it's not classical cuisine since their creations include a little fusion, great Mexican cuisine with contemporary touches. In contrast with theirs, my cooking is absolutely classical. Perhaps this doesn't sound novel anymore, but thanks to my work and what we've done in recent years, people have awakened; our traditional gastronomy has taken on new value.



**MM:** What you did that was so important was to also situate Mexican cuisine in its proper place on an international level. But, what's next? Where does the tradition run its course? Or does it? Does it evolve?

**RMZ:** No, it doesn't run its course because, despite the fact that we're experiencing a good period in Mexican cuisine, we could say, a resurgence, what we are really seeing is only the tip of the iceberg. There is still much left to do and find out. To put it in numerical terms, of the whole, we have only explored five percent of what's possible: that's how powerful I think it is. For example, in the case of mescal, which is daily positioning itself more and more, we only know of very few kinds. Almost nobody talks about *raicilla*, *bacanora*, *lechuguilla*: all these other varieties of mescal from different regions. It's not that our advances have been poor; the thing is that our land and our culture are infinitely rich.



Much is left to be done, like recover corn, recover certain varieties of chili peppers that are already almost extinct, reutilize many kinds of vegetables and herbs, especially all the ones from the *quelite* family, and much, much more. In addition to these concrete tasks, another thing that is needed is for Mexicans to recognize our culture, identify with it, and feel that being Mexican is elegant. Fortunately, this mentality is seeping into many people's consciousness.

**MM:** How should we deal with certain snobbishness that has emerged around Mexican cuisine recently?

**RMZ:** Right now, snobbishness is in our interest (laughs). It's in our interest because it has contributed to making Mexican cuisine fashionable, not just in our country, but worldwide. And making our gastronomy known leads to new value being placed on it. And then, people in general are smart; what might begin with snobbishness in the end creates a process of natural selection: what's good remains and what's bad is left by the wayside. So, right now a little snobbishness is by no means a bad thing for us.





**MM:** What about innovation? How much? Up to what point? At what point do you stop? How can you innovate without corrupting the essence of Mexican gastronomy?

**RMZ:** After the beginning of this trend with me 10 or 15 years ago, a group of very talented young people came along whom I personally admire and respect very much. They have contributed new flavors, new techniques; they're doing very interesting things. There are new figures in Mexican cuisine who are doing very interesting work that is very worthwhile, and there's a great deal of terrain left to be covered. I think we have to watch these young chefs' new trends very closely. I'm an admirer of many of them; the only thing I think is that that shouldn't become our only possibility; I think what they're doing is wonderful, but not everything can be contemporary. The classical has to have its place. I think that in the not-too-distant future, the tendency will be the harmonious co-existence of classical places with others that are very modern. Because no matter how much I love and defend tradition, the younger generation also has to have its own space; besides, tastes change, too. I see this innovation as very positive, as long as we don't forget the traditional.



**MM:** What are new chefs putting the accent on? Ingredients? Techniques? The combination of flavors?

**RMZ:** I think that in addition to exploring and experimenting, to a large extent they're setting their sights on the ingredients and Mexican products, and, of course, they're using fewer salsas; they use much better quality meats, fish, and seafood; and they also use vegetables and other organic products. That's great; I love what Édgard Núñez, Enrique Olvera, Daniel Ovadía, and Jorge Trejo are doing, and not just them, here in Mexico City; outside the capital are Roberto Solís, Aquiles Chávez, Alejandro Ruíz, José Manuel Baños, Óscar Carrizoza, Pilar Cabrera, and Antonio Delivier, just to name a few. The list is enormous.

**MM:** Is there still a lot left to discover?

**RMZ:** Yes, an enormous amount. I was one of the first to start serious research. Before, lots of cookbooks were written, but very superficially. For example, the recipes weren't substantiated. . . .Doing serious research means going to the place, doing fieldwork, being with people, talking to them, observing, understanding how they eat the food, in what context. In my books, all the recipes have an introduction, because I'm not interested in just giving a recipe without an introduction that testifies to my experience, how I lived it, how important the recipe is for the people who eat this or that dish, when they make it, for a wedding, to celebrate a birth, for a wake; Mexican food is intimately tied to the nation's day-to-day culture.

As I said before, there is much left to be done in Mexican cuisine, but we can continue with the tranquility born of knowing that we have started off on the right road. We're moving ahead just fine. **MM**

