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# NUEVO LATINO COMES OF AGE

CALL IT FUSION OR CALL IT FREESTYLE, JUST DON'T CALL IT A FLASH IN THE PAN. ELEVATED LATINO-INSPIRED CUISINE IS HERE TO STAY.

BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER

PHOTOS JON VAN GORDER

**G**iven what we now eat, it is hard to imagine that just 20 years ago few Americans had tasted ceviche or tamales. And that's saying nothing about our prior knowledge of plantains, *epazote* or passion fruit.

But today these and other Pan-Latino dishes and ingredients are almost as commonplace as bratwursts, pasta and parsley. And for those of us who are fond of the palate-probing flavors of the Caribbean, Mexico and South and Central America, a debt of thanks goes out to a coterie of chefs who have stuck with the so-called Nuevo Latino movement since it first emerged in the 1980s and early '90s.

"When we first got this thing going, which for us was 1990, using yuca instead of potatoes was unheard of. Tamarind and even cilantro were not mainstream ingredients," recalls Wilo Benet, chef/owner of Pikayo and Payá, two critically acclaimed Nuevo Latino restaurants in San Juan, Puerto Rico. "Now you have Cheesecake Factory serving tamales, and they're not bad, while ceviche seems on its way to becoming the next Caesar salad."

Ignore the fact that the Caesar salad, despite sounding and tasting oh-so-Italian, was invented in the 1920s in San Diego (purportedly by a Mexican named Caesar Cardini). Benet's point must still be taken seriously when you consider that since 1993 one of the fastest-growing restaurant chains in the country has been Chipotle Mexican Grill and, conceptually speaking, the ceviche bar is becoming almost as popular as the sushi bar.

But does Chipotle Mexican Grill, which is based in Denver and is fast approaching 1,000 outlets nationwide, qualify as Nuevo Latino? Does a chef pickling some yellowtail snapper in lime juice and calling it ceviche propel the craft?

Not in the influential book of Douglas Rodriguez, the Miami-born chef of Cuban heritage and the man who most observers consider to be the once and present king of Nuevo Latino. "I describe my style as tortilla-free Latin cooking. I can be inspired by an ingredient, a dish, a taste of something. Then I give it a twist; I put it through

my head and see what I can do with it," says Rodriguez from the kitchen of Alma de Cuba, his popular Nuevo Latino restaurant in Philadelphia. "My big complaint with Nuevo Latino is there's too much cookbook copying going on. Show me more originality."

Getting to the heart of what constitutes Nuevo Latino cooking, Benet sees it as Pan-Latino fusion cooking, but adapted to modern tastes and times. "It's borrowing from other cultures and cuisines, and then rejuvenating traditional recipes. Sweet and salty are the key flavor components. Occasionally a little sour may enter the picture, as with ceviche." Fundamentally, Benet says he strives to keep all creations to five elements or less, often including a protein, starch, sauce and garnish.

If Nuevo Latino is now the accepted term describing dishes that incorporate ingredients and cooking techniques from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Mexico, Central America and several South American countries, *Estilo Libre Latino*, or Freestyle Latin, cooking is more about "giving the chef freedom to express what he feels," says Hector Sanz, a co-owner of Rayuela in New York.

In Spanish, *rayuela* is the child's game of hopscotch. And that's what chef Máximo Tejada feels like he's playing when he mixes and matches ingredients from all over the world, but primarily Latin countries. "I'm Dominican, but I've spent the past 24 years in New York cooking at places like Patria, Chacama and OLA [all under Rodriguez before the notorious chef left New York a few years ago to concentrate on other cities]. There's a rich history of people from Colombia, the Caribbean and elsewhere pulling up roots and settling in New York. In essence, we're just Latinos of different backgrounds showing no fear of expressing ourselves."

Expressive and fearless: that pretty much describes Nuevo/Freestyle Latino. Following are four easy-to-follow recipes from Benet, Rodriguez and Tejada, including a snack/appetizer, a ceviche, a main course and a dessert.



**Chef Wilo Benet; right, the texture and oak of California Zinfandel matches the sweet-savory flavors of Carbonada Criolla.**

## SCALLOPS WITH PASSION (CEVICHE)

Hailing from Ecuador and Peru, ceviche has become one of the 21st century's "it" dishes, with modern restaurants from Moscow, Russia to Moscow, Idaho serving it. Simple to make but not so easy to master, ceviche is made by "cooking" seafood—fish as well as shellfish—with the highly acidic juice(s) of citrus fruits instead of heat. Spices, chilis, onions, peppers and fresh fruit are then added to finish things off. Due to its clean, light feel, ceviche is usually served as an appetizer or first course, but from Mexico down to Tierra del Fuego, Chile, ceviche has

## PAIRINGS



Tangy, citric wines like Sauvignon Blanc mirror the freshness of Máximo Tejada's Ceviche.

6 parsley sprigs

**To prepare:** In a saucepan, mix the passion fruit and mango juices and reduce to half over medium-high heat. Cool the reduction over ice. Meanwhile, slice scallops in half and marinate in lemon and lime juice for 10 minutes. Mix all ingredients in preparation of serving.

**To serve:** Add salt to taste and serve in martini glasses with parsley as a garnish. Serves 6.

**Wine recommendations:** Ceviche is tangy and acidic by nature, so an equally crisp and acid-propelled white wine is almost mandatory. Txakoli, Albariño and Verdejo from Spain are all good options, as is a citric, slightly tropical Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand or Chile. A couple of our favorites are Itsas Mendi Txakolina and Terrunyo Sauvignon Blanc from Chile.

### CARBONADA CRIOLLA

Part soup, part stew and 100-percent rib-sticking is how Douglas Rodriguez, chef/owner of Nuevo Latino restaurants in Miami (OLA), Philadelphia (Alma de Cuba), Scottsdale (Deseo), Chicago (DeLaCosta) and coming soon Las Vegas (Libido), describes this savory dish of Mexican origin. With calabaza forming the frame, beef at its foundation, and spices galore, there is no shortage of flavor or wine-pairing potential in this carbonada.

been a staple for centuries.

Chef Máximo Tejada of Rayuela in New York uses scallops for this jazzy ceviche, which gets its key flavors from passion fruit and mango. Additions like lemongrass, jalapeños, red onions and cilantro round out this ethereal, surprisingly wine-friendly appetizer.

1½ cups mango juice  
3 cups passion fruit juice  
12 small-to-medium-size scallops  
3 small jalapeños, diced  
6 tablespoons lemongrass, chopped  
3 ounces fresh-squeezed lime juice  
1½ ounces fresh-squeezed lemon juice  
3 ounces orange juice  
3 tablespoons cilantro, chopped  
6 tablespoons red onion, sliced thin  
3 tablespoons scallions, sliced  
Salt to taste

1 large, 5-pound calabaza squash  
¾ cup flour  
1 tablespoon paprika  
1 teaspoon chili powder  
1 teaspoon ground pepper  
1 tablespoon salt  
1 tablespoon dried oregano  
1½ pounds boneless beef short ribs, cut into 1-inch wide strips  
4 tablespoons olive oil, divided  
2 fresh peaches, peeled and sliced  
1 tablespoon sugar  
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar  
½ cup white onion, diced  
3 cloves garlic, minced  
2 stalks celery, diced  
2 quarts beef stock  
1 bay leaf

