



# THE WHOLE ENCHILADA

Flying ants in coffee mayonnaise? A £2m tequila? If anywhere could make the Paris and New York food scenes look stagnant, it's Mexico City. The nation's cuisine has even been awarded Unesco World Heritage status – a global first. Novelist **DBC Pierre** gets a mouthful

A waiter explains each dish as it's served; not patronising, but like a surgeon to a foreign colleague. Antonio and Oscar, the cronies who conjured our table, savour his words like appetisers, but I have him stop. Because what he serves next is a cob of corn. I may have been gone a while, but I grew up in Mexico City – I should be able to pick the flavours in corn.

Granted this is a baby ear of maize, as fine as jewellery, and though the aromas are familiar – something else is going on. The cohorts watch me taste it. They smile and nod. We used to wander city streets hunting tell-tale naked lightbulbs on corners, or over gutters, signalling a taco or tamale or corn stand, they were beacons of the juiciest Mexican food – but across this elegant table we seem to have come of age. And behold, after thousands of years, without a word of notice – so has the food.

Well: three bites in, I take this corn as notice.

We're in a discreet low-rise building in Polanco, a

behind Pujol, steps out to greet us. I learn that my corn was roasted, coated in coffee mayonnaise, sprinkled with chilli and ground Oaxacan flying ants, then smoked in the gourd it was served in. A parade of perfect artworks follows on plates and slabs, in cups and glasses, a rolling banquet of toys we can eat, which soften, crunch, melt or run to receptors we didn't know we had. They're not molecular gags, there's no hint of liquid nitrogen. It's all good solid food. But extremely old food, conceived from a very new place. Olvera grins: 'They're just the ingredients we've always had.'

And there's the key: these restaurants, this whole approach to food, is just a detonator for something bigger – and it's from there the real bang is being felt across the world. To explore it we need to look past all the things that make this city buzz, past centuries of conquest and settlement – and look past them by thousands of years. We need to look at the people who first settled this lake

leafy neighbourhood near the heart of Mexico City. It's residential enough to harbour dentists, doggy grooming salons, and even a doggy-grooming-salon school; but we sit behind blinds in a simple, spotlit dining room as ten courses of new Mexican food teem across 14 tables. The restaurant is Pujol. Already named one of the 50 best in the world, it recalls chef Ferran Adrià's late el Bulli for its microscopic focus, not only on food, but on the experience of food. It may be no accident: enough Mexican chefs passed through el Bulli's 35-strong kitchen, or became Adrià's disciples, to bring the blue sky tools back home.

Still, it's the tip of a volcano. A few streets away, another of the 50 best restaurants, Biko, perfects Basque-Mexican fusion, while Azul y Oro, Izote, Paxia, Turtux, Casa Mexico, Limosneros, and a raft of new kitchens lead an eruption that's changing the face of whole neighbourhoods, ripping through the Condesa, Roma, Centro districts, surging across 1,500sq km of city and out into the world.

But I have this question: what's new? Mexico City always had good food. Always had haute cuisine and, of course, always had the best Mexican fare. It's tripled in size since I was a kid, but Mexico was always a megalopolis, four times bigger than London even in Aztec times – and food was always the *lingua franca*, the place always sizzled like a pan, swirling in fumes of sweet fat, meat smoke and unheard-of spices.

So what's new? My colleagues look on knowingly.

'What are we doing that we haven't done before?' I ask. 'The corn's amazing, but not a million miles from *elotes* we used to eat on the street.'

'Try matching *elotes* to a £2,500 bottle of wine,' says Antonio. 'In the old days we ate Mexican – or high cuisine.'

'True,' adds Oscar, 'tacos or valet parking. Never both.'

Chef Enrique Olvera, the force



Artwork you can eat Mushrooms with verdolaga leaf and cheese at top restaurant Pujol in the Polanco district of Mexico City; its acclaimed chef, Enrique Olvera (opposite)





# TOP 10 MEXICO CITY HOTELS

(CHOSEN BY TRIPADVISOR\*)



**A toast to Mexican food**  
La Botica, a mezcalería in Condesa; the Monument of the Revolution (below left)



**LAS ALCOBAS MEXICO DF**

A boutique hotel on Polanco's chic Presidente Masaryk Avenue, one of the most exclusive neighbourhoods. *British Airways offers three nights from £1,069pp\**. [ba.com/mexico](http://ba.com/mexico)

**ST REGIS MEXICO CITY**

Sweeping views of the city in the sleek, 31-storey Torre Libertad. *British Airways offers three nights from £929pp\**. [ba.com/mexico](http://ba.com/mexico)

**THE WESTIN SANTA FE MEXICO CITY**

It's steps away from Centro Santa Fe, one of the largest malls in Latin America. *British Airways offers three nights from £879pp\**. [ba.com/mexico](http://ba.com/mexico)

**JW MARRIOTT MEXICO CITY**

Soaring 26 storeys above the exclusive Polanco District, there's a heated outdoor pool, health club and spa. *British Airways offers three nights from £899pp\**. [ba.com/mexico](http://ba.com/mexico)

**FOUR SEASONS MEXICO CITY**

A luxurious colonial-style building in the historic Paseo de la Reforma. Doubles from £276.

**AMBERES SUITES MEXICO CITY**

Well situated for the museums. The homely 100m sq suites have one or two bedrooms. Doubles from £58.

**HAMPTON INN SUITE MEXICO CITY**

The highlight is a six-storey atrium with stained-glass ceiling and rooftop terrace, as well as floor-to-ceiling windows in rooms. Doubles from £63.

**COURTYARD MEXICO CITY AIRPORT**

Ideal for anyone flying in or out, this hotel has direct walkway access to terminal one at Benito Juarez International Airport. Doubles from £91.

**GRAN HOTEL CIUDAD DE MEXICO**

A historic hotel in the heart of town with Art Nouveau Louis XV style and Tiffany stained-glass ceiling by French artisan Jacques Gruber. Doubles from £161.

**HILTON MEXICO CITY**

Reforma Central hotel with a 25m rooftop pool and fitness centre. Doubles from £85. *\*Selected according to the TripAdvisor Popularity Index on 23 April. To book visit [tripadvisor.co.uk](http://tripadvisor.co.uk)*

valley at least 12,000 years ago, and see what they had. Because that's what we have.

Since I lived here there's been a movement of regional cuisines into the city, but I feel the real secret lies in this Valley of Mexico. Scrape the urban sprawl off it and you have a Shangri-La, between 7,000 and 16,000ft above sea level, cradled by 11 volcanos. There's only one escape route, a gap to the north, uphill into the high Mesa – which means there's nowhere for water to run. What came here stayed here, and flourished. These volcanos still host a species of rabbit called the volcano rabbit. It's even possible that early settlers shared the land with mammoths and camels trapped here till late in their history – Line 4 of the Metro uses the mammoth logo, for the amount of bones discovered during construction.

Beside these lakes the first taco, thought to be of shrimp or fish with avocado, was eaten long before Christ – and by taco I don't mean anything loaded with cream and grated cheese, but simple, pure and delicious, as it is today. For settlers this valley's plants, insects and game became food – and much of it, a true pharmacopoeia of medicines, flavours, textures and nutrients, was unknown outside until Spaniards arrived in the 1500s. What they found then revolutionised the kitchens of the world, such as one highly active member of the deadly nightshade family, for which we still use the Aztec name: *tomatl* (tomato). Likewise *xocolatl* (or chocolate), maize, chilli, papaya, vanilla and avocado. Judging by the number of chefs and food laboratories turning their attention to Mexico – even triple-Michelin starred Christopher Kostow was seen probing the

\*Based on two people sharing, for travel in September. Includes return British Airways flights from Heathrow and room only accommodation. Photographs: Acam Wiseman; Martin Adolissom/Gallery Stock



city's produce markets last year – the excitement seems no less than Conquistadors felt, as if tomatoes and chocolate were the flash of a vein. Which only begs this question: if everything's been here all along – how did we miss it? A glimpse of modern Mexico City might hold the key. Many are surprised by how European it is. Spain ruled as a conquering power, and to some extent that glow of Europe over the conquered lived on. Late 19th-century president Porfirio Díaz even rebuilt parts of the city to rival Paris; and so the notion of quality was set. It's hardly polite to bring up flying ants. When I was resident, the highest cuisine was still French.

A chauffeur waits as we leave. I tell him I've just tasted the finest tacos of my life. 'Strange,' he says, 'because so have I. Around the corner for 20 pesos.'

We laugh, but at under £66 for ten courses I feel I've done well. Though I remark on one of the tequilas we tasted, at £26 a glass. 'Peanuts,' says Antonio. 'The most expensive liquor ever sold is now tequila – one bottle for £145,000.' And it's true – a Ley 925 tequila entered the Guinness Book of Records; now there's one listed for £2.2 million.

My head spins. Compared to the three rot-guts we could find as youngsters, there are currently over 900 brands of tequila by more than 100 distilleries. Suddenly as precise as fine wine, with altitude, climate, barrel wood, and other myriad factors coming to bear. Now it's known as a ladies' drink, served in the finest districts – a Danish dessert was recently perfected at one of the

world's best restaurants, Noma in Copenhagen, using tequila and cactus juice. Just as I prepare to get excited, I'm told that mezcal, the earthier cousin that used to have the worm, is now the Next Big Thing. London opened its first mezcal bar, Lupita East, this April. It's as if everything this country ever ate or drank is coming of age together, today – which explains why the nation's menu has been granted Unesco World Heritage status, ahead of France, in fact ahead of everywhere, as it's the only place to achieve it for a cuisine.

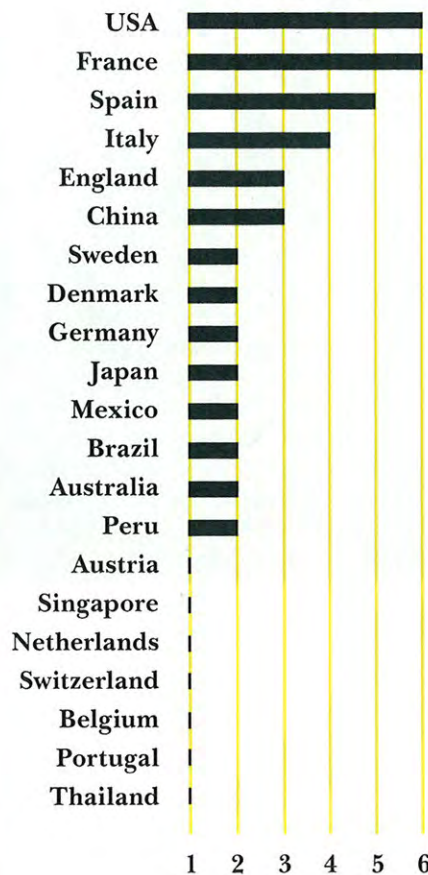
If anywhere could make New York, London and Paris look stagnant it's here. I can't even say it's a passing



In the red Radishes straight from market; Pujol's bookshelf (above) includes tomes from el Bulli, which has attracted many Mexican chefs



THE WORLD'S  
**50**  
BEST  
RESTAURANTS  
BY  
LOCATION\*



\*Source: S Pellegrino & Acqua Panna (theworlds50best.com). Photographs: Cedric Angelis, Adam Wiseman





craze, they've been doing it for thousands of years.

Before leaving town, I visit a colleague's grandmother. How racy can that be? But Maria Concepción Moreno turns out to be the elegant living testament to the spirit of the place, and the benefits of its kitchen. With bright, soulful eyes, at 93, Doña Concha, as she is respectfully known, easily passes for decades younger. She is the perfect hostess – and hails from the state of Jalisco, where tequila is from. A five-litre bottle appears, with pork rinds and guacamole snacks – and I settle in. 'This is a fine welcome,' I say.

'Where I'm from,' she says, 'tequila's a part of life. Surrounded by agave, it's natural. I've been drinking it all my life. It's very pure – just a couple of glasses does you good. The thing is not to go crazy.'

'Indeed.' I try not to look rueful. 'Did you start as a child?' 'No, not so young,' she says. 'I was 11.'

A good mezcal appears, and as we toast each other's health, a flash of Mexican spirit comes to her eye.

'Be careful,' she says. I look at all the menacing liquor. 'I'm single you know.' Ah, Mexico.

A revolution is underway. Shots are being fired at our senses, and at the heart. I say let's surrender now. ■



**High spirits**

Local Maria Concepción Moreno swears by tequila; adobo chicken over a blue tortilla at Azul Histórico (top)



GO ON THEN...  
DESTINATION: MEXICO CITY

**FIND IT AT BA.COM**

British Airways flies to Mexico City from London Heathrow. As an Executive Club member you can collect up to 33,258 Avios when you fly First to Mexico City return. Or redeem your Avios: just 50,000 will get you there and back\*.

**THERE'S MORE TO SAVOUR...**

... from DBC Pierre's trip at [bahighlife.com](http://bahighlife.com).

**FIND THE FEASTS**

DBC Pierre knows exactly where to go for a taste of the real Mexico (being mindful of travel and safety at night)

**1. PUJOL**

The cream of new cuisine. Try the degustation menu and taste Mexico distilled to its essences. *Francisco Petrarca 254, Polanco* ([pujol.com.mx](http://pujol.com.mx))

**2. CAFE AZUL Y ORO**

Chef Ricardo Muñoz Zurita is like the curator of the nation's cuisine. Taste academically authentic Mexican food. This is also where to grab the last word in genuine Mexican cookery books. *Four locations in the city, with two at the campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico* ([cafeazulyoro.com](http://cafeazulyoro.com))

**3. SAN ANGEL INN**

This original colonial coaching inn is the place for chilled margaritas and

escamoles (ant's eggs, known as Mexican caviar). Take a seat in the courtyard garden. *Diego Rivera 50 y Altavista, San Angel Inn* ([sanangelinn.com](http://sanangelinn.com))

**4. COVADONGA**

An old stomping ground. Working cantina and restaurant complete with loud domino matches and great drinks. Try the snails. *Puebla 121, Colonia Roma*

**5. CASA MEXICO**

If you end up in the Zona Rosa and feel too much like a tourist, this new haute Mexican restaurant will reset your spirits. Genuine gastronomy. *Genova 70, Colonia Juarez*

**6. CAFE TACUBA**

This inexpensive central eatery is an old Mexico City institution. Go for the buzz. *Tacuba 28, Centro*, ([cafedetacuba.com.mx](http://cafedetacuba.com.mx))

**7. BAR LA OPERA**

Stop to drink and eat at this gem – it's on the street the Mexican revolution marched into town on. *5 de Mayo 10, Alameda* ([Centralbarlaopera.com](http://Centralbarlaopera.com))

**8. LIMOSNEROS**

A new and impeccable home of contemporary Mexican cuisine in the historic centre. Go for the *mixiotes de carnero* and the boutique mezcals. *Allende 3, Centro Histórico* ([limosneros.com.mx](http://limosneros.com.mx))

**9. EL CARDENAL**

A must for its Mexican breakfast with hot chocolate. Everyone knows this so book or arrive early. *Avenida Paseo de Las Palmas 215, Lomas de Chapultepec* ([restauranteelcardenal.com](http://restauranteelcardenal.com))

**10. LA SANTA DIABLA**

As night falls, use this as a beacon. It turns into a karaoke bar, but it's at the epicentre of a booming, safe, central neighbourhood for food and drink and entertainment. *Tamaulipas 60, Colonia Condesa*

\*Avios earn amount estimated is based on the maximum earning of a gold member, minimum earn is 22,172 as a blue member. Redemption amount is based on economy journeys with 25,000 avios and may include taxes, fees and charges at the time of booking. Photographs: Cedric Angelles; Gregory Allen