

LOCAL FACES

BY JULIA CELESTE

Tex-Mex is as inherently San Antonio as cheese is to a quesadilla, but lately, local chefs across the city have explored merging the traditional with the trendy, updating classic sources of pride into something wholly modern.

**David Gilbert**

Chef David Gilbert moved to the city from Dallas to open Sustenio at Eilan Hotel Resort & Spa, where he continues in the tradition of Chef Stephan Pyles—a legendary pioneer of Southwestern cuisine—while infusing it with his own love of Asian flavors and molecular gastronomy techniques.

How does travel influence cuisine?

"Chef Pyles' extensive travels in Central and South America were instrumental in creating our wildly popular ceviche bar. I've spent a lot of time in Asia, and added some of those spices and influences to some of the ceviches. I think travel inspires and encourages collaboration."

You grew up in Dallas, so San Antonio is new territory. What stands out?

"You won't find friendlier people anywhere. The established community of chefs has been welcoming, sharing their local resources with me. The quality of the farmers' markets is outstanding too, with plenty of farmers willing to build bridges with local chefs. The chefs have turned me on to some great family-run restaurants. I go to El Bucanero for authentic coastal Mexican ceviche and to Sichuan Cuisine when I'm craving real-deal Asian food."

When the stresses of the kitchen become too much, how do you unwind?

"Driving into the beautiful Hill Country and experiencing the unique communities and small towns. There's a lot of culture behind those hills; I find something new and undiscovered on every trip. I've found wines I never knew about, like Becker Vineyards, and small butchers that still make their own sausage."

Diana Barrios Treviño

Diana Barrios Treviño learned the restaurant business at her mother's side, helping the family transform a tiny Tex-Mex café into two sprawling restaurants. Los Barrios retains a traditional neighborhood vibe while the newer La Hacienda de Los Barrios provides spectacular patio dining. In 2007, Barrios Treviño won a puffy taco challenge from Chef Bobby Flay on his Food Network show, *Throwdown! with Bobby Flay*.

What are you doing differently from your mom's original menu?

"We still serve dishes made the way mothers like mine cook at home: real handmade tortillas, slow-cooked meat stews like carne guisada and salsas made fresh every day. But we also blend some traditional dishes together like in our quesa-taco. It's a classic quesadilla stuffed with carne asada and bacon, and served with guacamole and pico de gallo—a party in your mouth."

Mexican food has a rep for spiciness. Is that based in truth?

"No—but it has actually gotten spicier! People are asking for chipotle peppers in just about everything and sides of sliced jalapeños, serrano chiles and adobo to crank up the heat even more. We just added a chicken dish with a creamy chipotle sauce that's a big hit."

And when you're not working?

"I work on weekends, but during the week I love sneaking off to Frederick's Bistro. We also like to take the kids to Longhorn Cafe for juicy burgers. If I'm on the south side of town, I get a quick fruit cup at Fruteria Los Valles."

**Johnny Hernandez**

Chef Johnny Hernandez juggles a busy catering business and even busier restaurant, La Gloria, where colorful art complements a vibrant Mexican menu. Both businesses' popularity have exploded since he was featured as a guest judge in *Top Chef: Texas*. In September, he opened a neighborhood "tortas, tostadas and tequilas" café in an effort to make street food chic.

How do you introduce traditional Mexican foods to modern palates?

"Street food has been around for centuries but isn't mainstream 'Mexican food.' We set out to present those established cooking techniques and flavors in a contemporary environment. We're not changing the dishes, we're modernizing the experience of eating them by bringing them indoors and offering full table service, not to mention air conditioning!"

What did your *Top Chef* experience teach you about Mexican cuisine's place in America?

"Highly trained, experienced chefs struggled with this complex cuisine. Yet they created thoughtful cultural meshes. I think that's where it's going over the next 10 years: master chefs will explore Mexican ingredients and infuse them into their own cuisines."

As a San Antonio native, what's on your essentials list for first-time visitors?

"I send people north of the central River Walk along the mellow, art-filled Museum Reach and to the food-centric Pearl complex—and La Gloria, of course—or the new Culinary Institute of America restaurant, NAO. Rent a bike; you can see a lot from the bike paths."