

Hispanic, Mexican operators heat up the marketplace

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Increasingly sophisticated consumers looking for more flavorful and adventurous dining out occasions are helping to alter the culinary landscape of the Mexican and Hispanic restaurant marketplace.

New generations of Mexican and Hispanic chain operators, led by the game-changing Chipotle Mexican Grill, are successfully catering to customers who are in search of a bolder, fresher and sometimes more authentic ethnic culinary experience.

At the same time, Taco Bell, the segment's long-established quick-service leader, is expanding its reach by staking out a position in the burgeoning breakfast market, introducing its new cast of spicy menu items to a day-part previously known for having a less zesty flavor profile.

The growing fascination with spicy flavors and fresh, distinctive ingredients — like the now-ubiquitous chile pepper and its numerous variations — is helping to fuel the rise of Hispanic cooking here. Among the most popular cuisines are Mexican and Tex-Mex, both of which claim deep roots in the U.S. dining-out experience and which still represent the largest slice of the Hispanic culinary marketplace in this country.



“If you want to create an identity, you have to know what you stand for and celebrate the country’s culture through its cuisine. You need to understand the nuance and indigenous ingredients.”
— *Arlene Spiegel*

In the meantime, restaurants occupying the higher end of the Hispanic marketplace are emphasizing more ethnically authentic flavors and dining experiences, says Arlene Spiegel of New York restaurant consultancy Arlene Spiegel & Co. “It’s an important at the [high end] that authenticity hit the mark,” she says. “Sit-down high-end restaurants must offer much more made-from-scratch cooking.”

Since founder Josefina Howard opened the first Rosa Mexicano in New York in 1984, the now-16-unit chain has specialized in authentic Mexican preparations. In fact, the menu calls for 10 to 12 different chiles, including jalapeño, serrano, ancho, poblano, guajillo, pasilla, habanero and chipotle. The chain also is famous for its signature guacamole, freshly prepared at table side.

Another New York-based Hispanic chain, 3-unit Havana Central, is building a reputation by serving authentic Cuban and Caribbean dishes. The high-volume restaurants focus on the flavor and presentation of classic Cuban preparations including picadillo, or savory Cuban ground beef; ropa vieja, braised beef with peppers and onions; and rabbi encendido, or oxtail stew. ●