

Mexican wave

Mexican cuisine continues to ride the heights of new popularity, but while fajitas may be the dish de jour, industry veterans warn that diving into Mexican cuisine is not a licence to print money. By John Burfitt

It was *The Sydney Morning Herald* that announced the blatantly obvious back in December. Under a headline, 'Sydney goes mad for Mexican', the story that followed declared, "Mexican is ... the new black." In the same month, the Weber Shandwick annual food trend report 'Food Forward 2013' declared, "Mexican foods and flavours will also continue to boom, becoming an essential part in any Aussie kitchen." It was like the official endorsement of Australia's embrace of all that Mexican cuisine is putting on the plate, possibly in a way that has not been seen since the outbreak of Thai cuisine almost three decades ago. But as even the tastiest stir-fry and noodle dishes have settled in to now become just a regular part of the national palate, the time for new flavours in our dining experience has been coming for a while.

While Korean became very popular very fast in recent years, it did not have the same impact Mexican has. The evidence of the Mexican embrace has been seen with Taco Bill winning the 2010 I Love FOOD Awards popular vote, and franchises like Zambrero and Guzman y Gomez going from strength to strength.

A telling sign has been in King Street, Newtown, one of Sydney's most dynamic eating strips. In the past 12 months, established Thai places have shut their doors and four Mexican restaurants opened, with lines to get in most weeks.

"I see a lot of parallels between Thai cuisine and Mexican, which I think helps explain its ready acceptance," says *The Australian's* restaurant critic John Lethlean.

"At one level, there are many crossover ingredients with Mexican like chilli lime and coriander, and the complex process of blending spices. But Mexican is also a great sharing food and, labour aside, can be produced reasonably cheaply with big flavoured results. It doesn't surprise me that it has become so successful here."

While Dan Hong is a recognised master of Asian cuisine, he turned his talents to Mexican for Sydney's El Loco in 2011, and diners have been flooding in ever since. "Dining has changed and the way we eat has changed," Hong says.

"People are wanting a simpler food that is unfussy and at a good price.

They want fresher food as well, and Mexican is perfect for all of that.

"I think there is a freshness with Mexican, and it was recognised at a time when the dining scene had been missing that," he continues. "The good thing about Australians is they are down for anything and if it has a good taste, they will give it a go."

The battlefield that has been the economy of recent years, *The Sunday Telegraph's* restaurant critic Elizabeth Meryment believes, has also played in Mexican's favour.

"Mexican food is a shared dining experience; it is not pretentious and it is filling," Meryment says. "They have captured a fun spirit when the economy has been doing it tough. It is about enjoying something fun, and not too complex."

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John Lethlean, *The Australian's* restaurant critic



SOUNDS LIKE MEXICO,
UNPUNCHED MEH-HI

LIKE A RESTAURANT,
A MARKET.

Dr Sam Prince, creator of the Zambreno Fresh Mex Grill franchise, says there's room for growth in the Mexican food scene.



“Australian diners are dominated by price concerns. They have money for dining out but they want value. Recently, I had a great night at a Mexican restaurant and my bill for three people was \$70. My bills very often come to \$370 for the same number of people!”

It is not just new businesses that are enjoying the Mexican boom as the curious venture forth to try exploring the latest tastes of burritos, enchiladas and fajitas. Norm Frohnert has owned Zapata’s, Adelaide’s oldest Mexican restaurant, since 1982. He says recent trade through the door has never been better.

“It is good to see that Mexican food has come of age,” Frohnert says. “It is also good that we are being seen as a genuine alternative cuisine.”

“We have been here so long and are always pretty busy, but with all the other Mexican restaurants that have opened in Adelaide in recent times, it has helped raise our profile as well. Who knows if Mexican is actually on a wave right now, but we have seen these waves in the restaurant business crash in the past and you then have to be able to cope with that. Let’s just hope this continues as it is a good time for Mexican food.”

It is certainly a good—and busy—time for Dr Sam Prince, creator of the Zambrero Fresh Mex Grill franchise, which counts 25 stores among its Australian empire. The business is reported to turn over almost \$14 million a year, and in 2011, *BRW* magazine named it among the fast-growing franchises in Australia.

While Zambrero has taken a large stake of over-the-counter Mexican fast dining market, Prince now has the finer end of the market in his sights with the late February opening of Mejico restaurant in the business district of Sydney’s Pitt Street.

“Mexican food may well be the new black, but I think there will be an evolution within that wave as well,” Prince says. “I know Mexican food is doing well in Australia, but I also know that Mexican can work at something a little more up-market. Mejico will let me run with a more fine-dining

style of Mexican, and that is harder to do at Zambrero. It is just another dimension to Mexican food than many know. A lot of people tell me that the street-food taco vendors they have encountered in Mexico is the best Mexican food they have ever tasted. But I tend to disagree with that.

“I think what they are trying to say is they have been to Mexico and they now know what real Mexican food tastes like. The best Mexican I have ever tasted is where the produce is closest to the table, and that is what we want to achieve at Mejico.”

The balance sheets of both Zambrero and Mejico are aimed towards the best of philanthropic intentions. A portion

of profits from Zambreros funds the E-magine charity, which builds schools in the developing world. Mejico’s charity is the One Disease at a Time Foundation, which works in Australia’s indigenous communities.

Prince’s fascination with Mexican food came from his time while studying medicine in Melbourne, and landing a job in a Mexican restaurant across the road from the university. He worked his way from front of house into the kitchen. “I fell in love with the cuisine,” he adds.

Nine years ago, he tested the Mexican waters with the launch of the first Zambrero. While Zambrero continues to open new stores, Prince’s focus is very much on making Mejico a success, with plans to open others in the future. In doing

so, he hopes to have both ends of the Mexican market covered in Australia. “We spent 12 months in our study for this place,” he says. “We flew in people from all over Mexico, LA and New York to taste what had been claimed to be the best Mexican in the world, and so I knew the standard we had to pitch at—and we wanted to pitch above that. We are going to have a good go in Pitt Street, and expansion is part of the bigger scheme. It is all about having a larger imagination.”

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Dr Sam Prince of Mejico restaurant and Zambrero Fresh Mex Grill franchise



Opposite page, from left: Merivale's Dan Hong says the Mexican trend will only get better; a sign of the Mexican wave from Guzman y Gomez. This page, top to bottom: I Love FOOD winners Stan Teschke and Tom Kartel of Taco Bill; inside Guzman y Gomez; Zambrero buzzing with customers.



With Australian diners continuing to tap into all that Mexican menus have to offer, the success of the trend is of interest to entrepreneurs. While some might consider getting involved with the 'new black' in dining will lead to easy dollars, Zapata's Norm Frohnert warns that the cuisine is not a licence to print money.

"We are sure to see a lot of people trying to open Mexican food places as this is all on the way up, but whether it will survive is another matter," he says.

"I have in my career opened three Mexican restaurants, and I can assure you that does not mean three times the profit. It is the same as any cuisine—you have to have the business plan right. With Mexican, a lot of the ingredients are imported and so you have to rely on a range of importers, and then that comes down to logistics, and it is not cheaper in those terms.

"It is no cheaper to run a good Mexican restaurant than any other. You can't just rush in and open a Mexican place willy-nilly, as I do know people who have opened some trendy places in Melbourne and they have already closed their doors. You might enjoy an initial surge, but whether that lasts—you have to wait it out."

Dan Hong's employer, the Merivale Group, is currently preparing to expand beyond the success of El Loco with a Latin American-themed restaurant to open in Sydney later in the year.

"I have seen the menu and it looks amazing," Hong says. "Mexican is the new one on the dining bandwagon and is the trend that is hot right now, and soon I am sure it will be another cuisine that gets our tastes going.

"But I do think Mexican is here to stay, and it can only get better. There are also restaurants like El Topo which are doing more refined and more authentic Mexican, and they are taking it to the next level. It will only go further from here." ○

