



Enrique Olvera Talks Cosme

By Fabiana Santana – October 14, 2014



Fiamma Placentini

Being considered one of the world's best chefs has its perks. When Dan Barber wanted to ditch a traditional restaurant for a farm, the masses, and his backers, followed. And when Anthony Bourdain wanted to travel to Yemen and Iran to taste the street food, CNN backed him up. **Enrique Olvera**, one of Mexico's most celebrated chefs, isn't going to Iran, but the route to opening night of his newest restaurant could be just as dangerous.

"New York is the culinary capital of the world," Olvera said. "For me, at this point, opening a restaurant here will be a challenge. It's a hard city to come into and we wanted to be a part of it."

Olvera started his career in New York. He's a graduate of Hyde Park's Culinary Institute of America and won the gold medal from the New York Société Culinare Philanthropique and the Jacob Rosenthal Leadership Award. And while in the city, he would spend school breaks in Manhattan splurging on decadent meals at Jean Georges and Le Bernardin.

After graduation he found himself in Chicago working at Everest with Jean Joho.

He then returned to Mexico to create Pujol and the reimagined Mexican food that put him on the culinary map. He had set out to open a restaurant, but what he did was change the landscape of dining in Mexico City.

He was just 24 years old.

The 2011 Restaurant Magazine's World's Top 50 list placed Pujol at number 49. The next year, it leapt to 36. Chefs world wide, including Rene Redzepi from Copenhagen's Noma restaurant, started to praise Olvera's creativity and the *Wall Street Journal* called Olvera a "culinary genius."

Currently, Pujol is **ranked one of the top 20 restaurants in the world** and Olvera is continuing to expand his culinary empire. He owns a beachside spot, **Maiz de Mar**, in Playa del Carmen; the high end **Moxi** in Hotel Matilda in San Miguel de Allende; and a chain of coffee shops, Eno, around Mexico City. Still, something drew him back to New York.

"I've always felt close to New York and wanted to come back and cook where it all started for me," Olvera said. And so this fall, he'll be opening the highly anticipated **Cosme**.

Even though the location is different, his approach will not be. "I think the approach at Cosme will be similar to Pujol in that we will work with local purveyors," Olvera said. "They will deliver the produce and we will be creative about it."

There will be some obvious differences, though. At Pujol, Olvera takes simple ingredients like beans and *huitlacoche* and elevates them to couture kitchen status. "It's gotten fancier and fancier, more complex," over time, Olvera admitted.

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The restaurant, he says, is something people experience on occasion. "It's very special." At Cosme, things will be more casual. "I feel like I am not here to prove anything," he said. "I am here to enjoy and be part of the team."

There will be no tasting menus or long, drawn out food descriptions. "We want to focus on something that is more casual," Olvera said. "Something you can do every Friday instead of once every year. We want to be part of the community."

Olvera knows that none of this would have been possible without Pujol's popularity. New York is notorious for sending chefs packing. "Like anything in life, it is great that we can get some attention," Olvera said. "We probably would not get it if we didn't have Pujol. So, it might be better for the business."

Cosme is named in honor of the Mercado San Cosme in Mexico City. The market is not just a source of ingredients, but a place of memories as well. Olvera used

to visit the market with his grandmother - a professional baker - looking for super-sweet bananas to mix in with their meals. And just as Olvera takes inspiration from what is local and seasonal, the menu at Cosme will be locally sourced except for two ingredients, beans and corn will come from Mexico.

Olvera spent months researching and visiting area restaurants in an attempt to learn the landscape. He's not just opening Cosme; he's setting up shop here. His family will stay for a while and he doesn't have a return ticket home. He will go back and forth between New York and Mexico City as needed.

"I am a bit worried that we will get more people than we can handle," Olvera said. "We want to Cosme to be a social place and to have people enjoy it, to feel like you are at home. Sometimes, when you have too many people at home, you can't enjoy it. It's like having too many kids over running around. I'd like to open as quietly as possible, but that may not happen."

No, chances are it won't. Cosme has been on the watch list of area blogs and papers for almost a year. Everyone is on pins and needles to see what Mexico's best chef is planning for the Big Apple.

"I am obviously very satisfied and grateful for the things I have had happen in my life," Olvera said. "I never thought I could be back and opening a restaurant here and enjoying the process."

That process has included design help from architect Alonso de Garay, the creation of a room for a Celorio tortilla machine (with the hopes of creating a tortilla shop in Brooklyn soon), and visits back to restaurants like Le Bernardin and newer spots including Maialino and Del Posto for inspiration. But that is all part of the plan, he says. Working to get it right in every way.

"The idea of food is completely united with being a great host in Mexico," Olvera said. "That is what I am planning to do."