

**MEAT AND
GREET**

"Enrique gets it," says Alice Waters of Olvera, pictured here at Cosme. "He's a celebrity chef, and he knows he has ways, through food, of saving his culture." Grooming, Losi. Set design, Mary Howard. Sitings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.



North

of the

Border

With Cosme, his buzzy New York debut, superstar chef Enrique Olvera is poised to change the way Americans think about Mexican food. Tamar Adler reports.

Photographed by Steven Klein.

Meet one of the best chefs in the world, and the person who least wants me to call him that.” The praise is from the Basque chef Andoni Luis Aduriz, with whom I am drinking espresso in Mexico City on a chilly morning last winter. We’re in the meeting room of Pujol, the city’s most lauded restaurant, and Pujol’s handsome owner and chef, Enrique Olvera, has just entered. Enrique kisses me closely on the cheek, as per Mexican protocol. Flustered, all I can think to say—apropos of his olive-green Roberta’s T-shirt—is that I live in Brooklyn.

“Have you eaten at Cosme?” he asks me. I tell him that I haven’t. Cosme is Olvera’s New York debut, his first restaurant outside Mexico. Its arrival in Manhattan’s Flatiron district two weeks before was so anticipated that every reservation for months instantly vanished.

What I do not tell him is that I haven’t tried. The fact is I’ve never considered myself a lover of Mexican food. I have certainly eaten it happily. One day, seven years ago, on a dreamlike walk through the zócalo of Puebla, I loved griddled masa stuffed with black beans and squash blossoms that a high-voiced woman had sold me in something that sounded like song. I have been stunned by thick, chocolatey turkey mole in Oaxaca. But those were regional dishes tasted in situ.

In Mexico City to keep my husband company on a work trip—and at Pujol only for coffee with Andoni—I hadn’t even thought to book a

table here. But meeting Enrique, then watching his cooks filleting gleaming cod and poaching octopus in his immaculate steel kitchen, I badly want to rectify my mistake.

This is startlingly difficult. Pujol, even at fifteen years old, is as hard to get into as Rapunzel's high tower. Its café sibling, Eno, a couple of doors down, doesn't take reservations and is so popular that a porter outside guards a black chalkboard full of names of patient diners who wait in idling chauffeur-driven SUVs for their turns at bistro tables for espresso and poached eggs.

I call Pujol and deploy charm and diplomacy and every trick I can summon until an iron-willed hostess finally offers me a lunch table for one—only one—at 1:30 P.M. (the equivalent of an 11:00 A.M. lunch in New York). The meal begins with a tiny ear of smoky corn; then there is chilled octopus so alive with flavor it seems to have been pulled from the ocean on its squid-ink tostada. Next is a burnt-umber pool of mole madre, almost two years old, encircling a second pool of new mole, bright orange and fresh. The dishes erase everything I thought I knew about Mexican cuisine. I experience what diners fifteen years ago, with tolerant but not passionate feelings toward what they'd thought of as "Italian food," may have felt the first time they tasted the cooking of Mario Batali or Michael White. I taste the precise meaning of chef Ferran Adrià's statement at a conference two years ago: "There was Mexican food before Enrique Olvera, and Mexican food after Enrique Olvera."

 week later I am back home. After another telephone summit, I secure a reservation at Cosme and cling to it like a falcon to a field mouse. New York is full of restaurants with elusive tables and velvet ropes; unique to Cosme, besides being the first of its ranks headed by a Mexican chef, is that it has immediately become a chefs' clubhouse, a collaborators' atelier. René Redzepi, David Chang, and Danny Bowien ate there—together—its opening month. So, separately, did Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Daniel Boulud, Daniel Humm, Batali. They have swarmed because the word on Enrique, even in the inner sanctums of philosopher chefs, is that he's poised to transform the cultural and gastronomic meaning of Mexican cuisine.

It is, in fact, already in flux. Over the last five years, Mexican food has begun to acquire cachet—with small, pretty taquerías full of Edison lightbulbs and reclaimed wood opening in Chicago and San Francisco and New York. Over the last three, it has seized the interest of innovating chefs like Alex Stupak and Sean Brock and Bowien, who've opened their own naïf versions of Mexican street-food stands.

What distinguishes Cosme from all—and from Rosa Mexicano and Dos Caminos in New York, or Frontera Grill and Topolobampo in Chicago, which lean toward fusion cuisine served by waiters obliged to make guacamole tableside—is Enrique's culinary credibility. Enrique isn't "inspired by" Mexican food. It is his soil and his roots. At Cosme, he makes

2,500 tortillas a day from masa made by nixtamalization, a process dating from Mexican antiquity. He exclusively uses imported single-source landrace corn, which has struggled against extinction in Mexico in the face of a flood of the subsidized American variety. Of all the polyglot chefs captivated by Mexico's old and mystical foodways and techniques, its unknown flavors, its seductive botanical diversity, Enrique Olvera is the only one to whom they are a native tongue.

"Enrique gets it," says Alice Waters, who is collaborating with him on schoolyard gardens in Mexico City. "He's a celebrity chef, and he knows he has ways, through food, of saving his culture." He is also subtly raising the status of cooking in Mexico. "You want to know a huge impact Enrique Ol-

vera's having?" Dan Barber asked me. "Ask chefs how many Mexican cooks are coming to stage at their restaurants in New York. It's totally new. I have two coming next week."

A few nights after I sit at Cosme and taste a strange and wonderful barbacoa of squash and mushroom; enfrijoladas with ricotta; and perhaps the only dessert I've ever loved, a jolie-laide broken meringue filled with corn cream, I meet with Enrique—who, only hours back from Mexico, looks unfairly fresh in a gray T-shirt, a striped apron, and bright white Adidas Stan Smiths. I am more prepared for the Mexican kiss this time.

I'm struck by strong and subtle novelties in his kitchen, a subterranean hall that was once the basement of a strip club. First is the smell—a strong, fresh corn smell rather than the potent aroma of butter, garlic, gas burners, and raw meat I associate with European kitchens. The busiest station is a large iron plancha, being continually refilled with deep purple tortillas. I notice that both of the chefs de cuisine are women, and that orders are called in Spanish. I remark on the absence of a sous vide machine. "Fuck sous vide," Enrique says as he opens the freezer where they store deep purple—and cornflower blue-colored corn kernels. "I hate plastic."

Back upstairs, the dining room and bar are dimly and alluringly lit. The slate-gray walls echo Pujol's; the only art is a series of sketches and paintings by the late Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. The room has a distinctly Japanese feel, as do Enrique's restaurants in Mexico City. "I'm obsessed with Japanese culture," he tells me. "It's all over my restaurants." Every few moments someone with the air of a character in a James Bond casino scene stops by our corner table. "He lives in Spain," Enrique tells me. "He's a very good friend of Andoni's, actually." About another: "I used to give cooking lessons at Pujol. He was one of my first students." Nodding to a tall, Hervé Léger-clad girlfriend of one of his business partners: "She's a model. There are always a lot of models here. I don't know who any of them are."

In many ways Enrique Olvera precisely fits the mold of Redzepi, Chang, Brock—chefs who see their restaurant kitchens as instruments of culture and ecology as much as cuisine. His focus on disappearing breeds of corn brings to mind Brock's preservation of heirloom seeds. Enrique's mole, one of the things for which Pujol is most famous, recalls Redzepi's recasting of the Nordic wild.

"Food is a way of communicating. I think a lot of modern chefs don't realize that. They think that cooking is more an art form and about ideas. I don't"

Like the rest of the clique, he is intellectually serious. As we sip wine, I happen to pull a copy of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* from my bag. He's so interested in it that I give it to him. His speech is peppered with literary references. When our conversation turns to the anxiety of influence, he asks, "Have you read *Report from the Interior*, by Paul Auster?" I haven't. When I wonder out loud whether cooking today means innovating, he brings up *La Civilización del Espectáculo*, by Mario Vargas Llosa. He describes his plating in terms of architecture. "Do you know the architect Luis Barragán? He uses simple forms, but the color palette is rich. That's what I think plating should be like."

Enrique also has endemic rebelliousness. He expresses disdain for tomato concassé, one of the bases of classic European cooking ("It is the worst fucking invention in the world"); symmetrical knife work ("There are no squares in nature. It's fucking stupid"), and sugar. "They say sugar is worse for you than cocaine. I'm going to take dessert off the menu at Pujol." I ask him what he'll do instead. "Nothing." He sometimes spins records at culinary conferences. "I'm a frustrated DJ," he tells me. Recently a woman tried to hire him for her wedding. "I was like, 'I can't. I'm a chef.'"

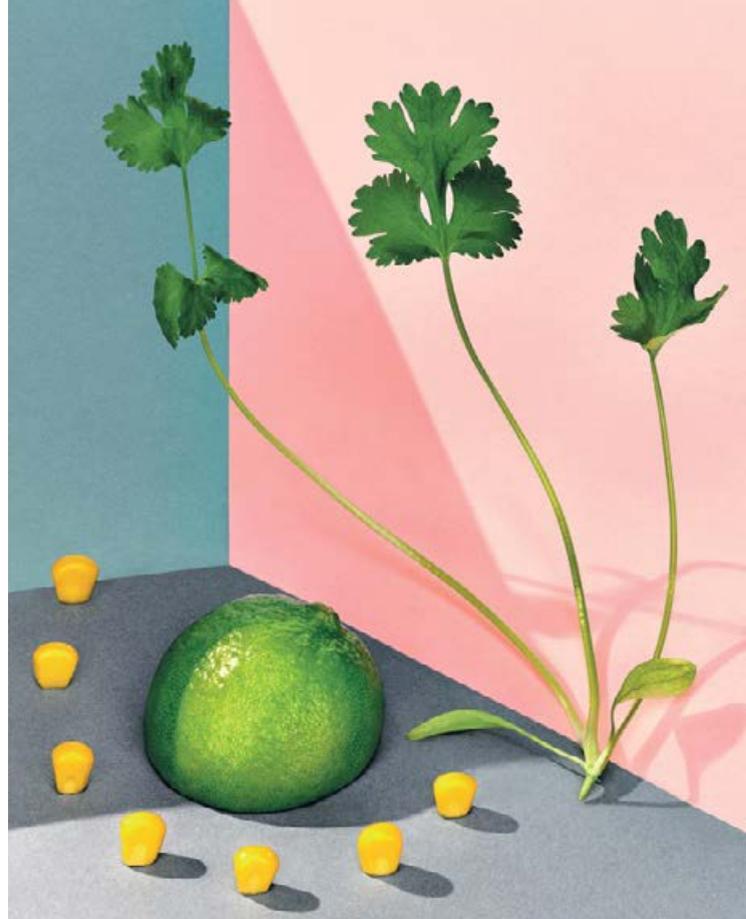
And he possesses the celebrity chef's hyperproductivity. In addition to Cosme and Pujol, Enrique has five other restaurants in Mexico. He founded and runs Mesamérica, one of the world's largest culinary conferences. He has traveled to and cooked in 20 countries, and published two cookbooks—a third is on the way, out from Phaidon in October. "My friends think I'm crazy," he says. "Basically I sleep and I work."

Where Enrique breaks the mold is his ambivalence toward—even lack of identification with—his messianic stature. In various contexts, he tells me repeatedly that none of this was planned. He didn't set out to transform Mexican food. Or to rescue traditional agriculture. He says he's chosen to keep Cosme "simple"—which it doesn't seem to me. But he and I define "simple" differently. He and Alice Waters have bonded over this. "Our approach is very similar," he says. "Food is a way of communicating. I think a lot of modern chefs think that cooking is more an art form and about ideas. I don't."

Enrique grew up in Querétaro, to the northwest of Mexico City, and loved cooking from "the day I made my first mud pie." At nineteen he attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, and met the woman who would become his wife, a SUNY Purchase anthropology major named Allegra Piacentini—who bears startling resemblance to a young Giovanna Mezzogiorno. They moved briefly to Chicago, then returned to Mexico City. At 24, he opened Pujol, and Allegra rapidly had three children.

Enrique relays all of this with cheerful calm, over drinks at a terrible sports bar, chosen for its proximity to his apartment. He's never been scared—during the opening of the restaurant, fatherhood, Pujol's quick success, now Cosme—because he resists what he calls "overthinking." This trained detachment is the closest Enrique has to a religion.

He is, however, disquieted about his family life. "That's the only thing that I don't like," he says. "Being apart from them." Allegra, who is now in charge of the school-garden project in Mexico, and the three children spent last summer here in New York. But when the school year started, she returned to Mexico City. He shows me pictures of each child, as well as of the family's two cats and Maya the dog. "You want to hear something sad? My youngest son, Aldo, went to



DIRECT ADDRESS

At Cosme, Olvera aspires to a kind of bold simplicity in his cooking, relying on common Mexican ingredients like lime, corn, and cilantro.

a friend's house and asked the father where he lived, and the father said, "Here; why?" And Aldo said, "Because my father lives in a restaurant." He pauses. "I really enjoy all of this. But sometimes I wonder if it's worth not being with them."

The cloud passes quickly. As we order another round, he says, merrily, "We should play music." We face the jukebox. He inserts \$5. "I want to go to Oaxaca," he tells me, "and live a nice and quiet life with cows. Nobody makes great quesilla"—Oaxacan cheese. "My family and I will go, and I'll make perfect quesilla." When? "In seven years."

Two months go by before I eat at Cosme again. When I arrive, Enrique has just added razor clams with celery salsa, purple asparagus with fresh almond and white eggplant salsa, and crispy octopus with mole and watercress to the menu. I taste all three and wonder how his dishes can be so bold and clean. There is little fat on any plate—no rustic drizzles of olive oil over the clams; the octopus, precisely covered in lemon zest, then fried for an instant, leaves not even the barest hint of oil on the tongue. Nothing is lean or austere. It just lacks melodrama.

Enrique emerges, lightly unshaven, tousled, smiling. I ask about the success of the restaurant, the ecstatic three-star review in *The New York Times*, whether the pace kept up with opening months. He nods. "This table we're sitting at is Jean-Georges's. We may have to move." The chef de cuisine, Daniela, brings us a dish for him to try: a yellow corn tostada with fatty tuna belly and sea urchin. We taste it. "No," Enrique says. "It's an example of two great things being too many. Either on its own will be great, but they cancel each other out." This is exactly true. "We'll get it right," he says. He's not worried. □