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The Matriarchs of Mexican Flavor



Photograph by Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

DIFFERING APPROACHES Carmen Ramirez Degollado, left, at El Bajio. Patricia Quintana, right, at her restaurant, Izote. Both are in Mexico City.

By **MARK BITTMAN**
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Mexico City

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TO the casual observer, and even to a slightly more diligent one, the two women have more in common than not. They are roughly the same age (let's say over 50), their roots are in Veracruz — their food shows it — and they learned to cook at home from their mothers and grandmothers. After leaving home, they were essentially self-taught, came to the restaurant business more or less by accident and became symbols of strong, independent women in an industry long dominated by men.

Most important, they run two of the best and most distinctive restaurants in Mexico City. Which is another way of saying they run two of the best and most distinctive Mexican restaurants in the world.

They are Carmen (Titita) Ramirez Degollado and Patricia Quintana, and after three visits to each of their restaurants over the last few years I was surprised to find

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Carmen Ramírez Degollado's banana-stuffed empanadas.

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Patricia Quintana's ceviche.

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Patricia Quintana's fish on banana leaf at her restaurant, Izote.



Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

CLASSICIST Carmen Ramírez Degollado owns and runs El Bajío in Mexico City.

myself concluding that despite their similarities, the food they cook is as different as food from the same region and genre can be.

Ms. Quintana's, as served at Izote, her restaurant in the swank Polanco neighborhood, is refined, sometimes bordering on experimental. She remains true to the origins of Mexican cooking, but this allegiance includes bringing in the Spanish influences that launched it as one of the world's original fusion cuisines. She argues quite persuasively, for example, that olive oil is an integral, or at least sensible, part of the Mexican larder.

Ms. Ramírez's more rustic, almost devotional cooking is equally celebrated. Her career began about 35 years ago, at a restaurant called El Bajío, founded by her husband, Raúl, in the industrial neighborhood Azcapotzalco. When he died of cancer 29 years ago, Ms. Ramírez stepped in. She has been running the place ever since.

"El Bajío, without any doubt, is the best restaurant of Mexican cuisine that I have been in in my life," Ferran Adrià of El Bulli in Spain, one of the world's most influential chefs, wrote in an e-mail message translated from Spanish.

The restaurant is colorful, brilliant in its deep blue and bright orange scheme, and accented by first-rate folk art. The family now runs four restaurants, each in a different neighborhood, and does not appear to be stopping there. The spinoffs are exquisitely, stunningly designed.

Nevertheless, when you are served a basket of fried chicharrones, pork skins, in place of bread, you know that the food comes first at El Bajío. Carnitas, essentially pork confit, are another specialty, and the men who currently make them — they are called carniteros, for this is a real craft — are the sons of those who were in place when El Bajío first opened. (They live on the premises, rising at 3 a.m. to have the meat ready for the late-morning crowd.)

Besides the carniteros, Ms. Ramírez's kitchen is filled with women, each of whom has a specialty or two. While she, her daughter María-Teresa and I were working on empanadas with a dough of plantains and a stuffing of black beans — simply cooked black beans but with

magnificent flavor — the women bustled around us.

One was assembling tamales, some with black beans, others with chicken and achiote, and a special morning version with brown sugar and anise. Another woman was making bread. Others were preparing moles, from the supremely complex black mole to a fairly straightforward green to an almost unbelievably simple white, which is often served at weddings.

Each of these dishes was as well executed as you could imagine. (It is said that the best

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Mexican food doesn't travel, and I believe it. The reason, I suspect, is that the cooks themselves do not travel; this is labor-intensive food, and that labor can be prohibitively expensive, at least in the northern United States.)

Perhaps even more impressive were classics like the chicharrones and the manitas — a vinegary escabeche of pigs' feet with vegetables, garlic, onion and salt — and the astonishing chipotle broth with bone marrow, which would shine brightly at one of New York's four-star restaurants.

Most of these dishes are so sublimely traditional, so unalterable, that they are tricky for the home cook to prepare. The mole blanco, a lovely sauce for chicken or fish, is an exception, and the plantain empanadas, while time-consuming, are straightforward.

Ms. Quintana's recipes are equally appealing, but in a streamlined, more contemporary and perhaps even more accessible way. (Not everyone, after all, thrills to the sight of fried pork skin.) Perhaps this is not so surprising. As the author of 20 books in Spanish and English she is used to catering to home cooks. Like Ms. Ramírez, she learned to market and to cook from her mother. In fact, she said, "The basis of my cooking is right there: she taught me how to go to the market, see what was good and plan for the week."

Evidently she learned well. By the time she was 18, Ms. Quintana had moved to Mexico City and begun teaching cooking. This was followed by a round of traveling in Mexico, which led to her first book, published more than 30 years ago. *Izote* opened to rave reviews about seven years ago.

Do not let me imply that there is a lack of authenticity here. On the contrary, the first item to appear on most tables is a basket of whole-grain corn tortillas, freshly made and incomparable. But there is also an emphasis on unusual ingredients, new-ish preparations, creativity for the sake of modernity and elegance. Ms. Quintana isn't afraid to play around. "Basically," she said, "I'm looking for the best way to do simple and traditional things."

Thus the first dish Ms. Quintana demonstrated for me was a New Age ceviche finished with tangerine juice. It was simple, delicious and quite pretty. She went on to show me a machaca of fish, used as a filling for tortillas, in which the fish is steamed and broiled on top of a banana leaf, whose burning fragrance adds a hint of smoke. A complicated stuffed poblano featured a sauce of several kinds of chilies and an expert, even hand with spices. After that, though, we went back to fish with canned jalapeños, a dish she learned from her grandmother.

Her most impressive dish — to me, at least — was a perfectly seasoned bowl of black beans. They had been made ahead of time, so I asked for the recipe on the spot. They were so much like the black beans in Ms. Ramírez's empanadas that I began to think that perhaps the cooking of these two matriarchs of Mexican cuisine isn't that different after all.

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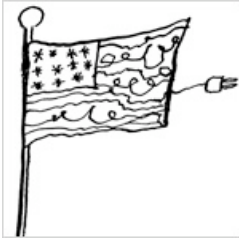


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