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ENRIQUE OLVERA: THE POWER OF FOOD



The international Mexican chef talks about his food, being among the best cooks in the world and his quest to dispel the stereotypes of south of the border cuisine.

Story by Mariana G. Briones
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ENRIQUE OLVERA is unconventional to say the least.

Incredibly talented, yet disarmingly humble. Hugely serious about his work, yet there is always a streak of humor in his gaze.

The discipline with which he has established himself as one of the top figures in the culinary world, a career that was launched when he opened the doors to his first restaurant in México City at only 24, is evident in each of his decisions—yet his life and work are built around a very simple concept: To have fun, no matter what you do.

His philosophy seems to work—*Pujol* is now ranked 16th in the *San Pellegrino First 50 Restaurants in the World* list. He has a third cooking book in the works, is the founder of *Mesamerica*, an annual international food conference attended by the world's leading chefs, and has a total of five restaurants under his helm, an empire that is scheduled to grow even more this year. His latest one, *Cosme*, located in Manhattan Flatiron was so awaited reservations were not available for months. And this hype was validated with an ecstatic three-star review in *The New York Times* from revered food critic Pete Wells.

For Olvera cooking is a means of communication, first and foremost. It is the medium through which he expresses his ideals, his way of life. That is why he is focusing on endangered breeds of corn in an effort to preserve them, along with the history and values of Mexican Gastronomy. Positioning Mexican cuisine at the center of the gastronomic world stage and transforming its stereotypes into one of the

most sought after fine dining experiences in the world is no small feat, but as he explains, it is about changing perceptions, one dish at a time:

You opened the doors to *Pujol* when you were 24 years old, how did you find the audacity to pull this off?

At 24 you are very unprepared for life, much less for opening a restaurant. But at that time I felt comfortable with the idea and secure enough that I could operate a business. *Pujol* has a very small dining room with only 44 seats and at the beginning it was a very casual *Fonda Bistro*, just a neighborhood place where people came to have a nice meal. Things started escalating over the years, we were trying to get better and better at what we did, which is part of the philosophy of who we are, and in trying to get better we just got pretty good at it. And today it is on the best restaurants in the world list... which I never thought would be possible when we began this journey.

How did that beginning stage evolve?

I think we started finding ourselves, cooking wise. Our foundation was Mexican cuisine, because these are our roots and the ingredients that we work with, but at the same time I was influenced by the *New American Cuisine* movement. So after finishing my studies at the *New York Culinary Institute of America* it was very natural for me to go back to México and try to work on a new flavor profile that was based on Mexican gastronomy, but reinterpreted in a more contemporary way. I started looking at street food as an inspiration for a new kind of cuisine and created dishes that are still very important in *Pujol* such as the *Mole de Olla* or the *Robalo al Pastor*, which are based on popular gastronomy but done in a completely different way. That set the tone for what came later.

What is it that makes you so passionate about what you do?

I have always liked to make people happy; this is something that I find very rewarding. I like to see people having fun in a restaurant, discovering new flavors and eating things that are not only flavorful but also good for them and good for the planet. For me cooking is a way of sharing my lifestyle and what I believe in. The recognition helps us to feel motivated and proud of what we are doing, but it is not the reason why we do

what we do—we are trying to give customers a good experience and to perform as best as we can and to get better every day. We are not here to earn stars or to be on any list, but because we love what we do and we are proud of our work.

Why did you choose New York as the location for your first restaurant outside of México?

New York is everything. It is a city that represents a huge challenge for cooks; it is one of the most difficult places to open a restaurant in the planet, not only because the competition, but because also there are a lot of factors that need to align in order for you to be successful. I did a lot of research before deciding on our concept. New Yorkers like authenticity, they embrace concepts that are honest and straightforward, they don't like the fuss; they like to eat well, period. They are also very fond of seasonality and menus that change constantly and that showcase the products of the area. We took all of this into account for *Cosme*. I think in general there is a movement of a more simple cuisine. Chefs are now cooking in a more humble way that is more easy-going and relaxed. Most of the restaurants that have succeeded in the last few years are concepts that are very casual, with a great quality of ingredients, but where you feel relaxed and comfortable, and this is what we were after.

How do you fuel your creative process?

Inspiration comes and goes all the time, but it is not a formal process. I don't sit down for hours trying to come up with menus—it is much more organic. We go to the markets and we see which products are there and then we think how we would like to cook them and about the flavor combinations that usually work. But once you have that you try to forget everything, because you don't want to reproduce the exact same recipe. So we analyze and reflect on the principles we want to apply and then think about a different flavor profile, and this usually works because our new concept has structure and a foundation, but at the same time it is breaking from tradition. I also get inspired from art forms like painting and music, but not in a literary way that I want to interpret a painting into a dish, it is more about the philosophy and the ideas behind the freedom in music for example, the feeling that it transmits and that you want to transmit in your dish.

What is one thing people would be surprised to learn about you?

I am a pretty straight-forward person. People who know me know that I like to have fun and that is very important to me, especially now. Not that I feel like I don't have anything else to prove but I don't feel that necessity of recognition. I am at a very nice stage in my life where I want to share what we are doing. Otherwise I am very focused in my business and I don't have time for anything else. There are no mysteries with me. I like to spend as much time with my family as I can in México City and I also like to meet my friends for a beer wherever I am. That is basically my life.

What is next for Enrique Olvera?

I made a conscious effort to consolidate the businesses. We have been growing a lot in terms of locations in the past few years and I want to simplify to be able to spend more time in the restaurant and also spend more time with my family. So I am trying to balance things out. I am not closed to new projects but I also need to slow down. And eventually I see myself living in Oaxaca. There is something about this place that I am very drawn to, I find myself very connected and balanced there. Maybe it was to do with the town or the typography and definitely the people and the food. It makes me feel welcome and rooted in the earth. It is a quiet town and a good place to get away, which is probably one of the reasons that I dream about living in Oaxaca. ●

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