

OUT *to*
LUNCH
with
Richard Sandoval

By BRITTANNY HAVARD



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Tempura asparagus tacos with won bok slaw and chipotle miso-glazed black cod may sound like culinary specialties that grace the menus of New York or San Francisco’s finest concept-focused eateries, but they are in fact the food stuffs of Denver.

Today I am speaking with celebrity chef and restaurateur, Richard Sandoval, owner of popular Colorado foodie favorites: Tamayo, Zengo and La Biblioteca in Denver; La Sandia in Stapleton and the Park Meadows Mall; Venga Venga in Snowmass; and MAYA in Beaver Creek, Vail. To this culinary master of pan-Latin/mixed-concept cuisine, lunch means business.

Sandoval’s culinary vision stems from his roots growing up in Mexico City, a metropolis of sizzling, flavorful, and ingredient-rich specialties. His technique was learned table-side, watching his grandmother prepare traditional Mexican dishes, and his business prowess was inherited from his brass tacks, no-nonsense restaurateur father, who was known to portion out every morsel in his kitchen and keep count of each napkin under his restaurant’s roof.

After a brief stint as a professional tennis player, Sandoval enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America, where he transitioned more quickly than most from student to master chef.

Known as a pioneer of modern Mexican cuisine in America, Sandoval was approached by Larimer Associates, a venture investment and management company that was looking to invigorate Larimer Square by attracting chef-driven

restaurants to the block. He was just the type of chef they were looking for, with his proven success in the New York dining scene. In 2001, he opened Denver’s eyes to his new take on the hot stuff with the opening of Tamayo on Larimer Square. Opening a high-end modern Mexican restaurant in Denver, however, didn’t come without its challenges.

“We opened MAYA in New York City 20 plus years ago, and it was an instant success. When we opened Tamayo in Denver, it was a different story,” said Sandoval. “Everyone thought of Mexican food as fast-causal, tacos. It was challenging opening a restaurant at a higher price point—until I asked people to make a comparison. Don’t compare us to small mom and pop Mexican restaurants; compare us to the French and Italian restaurants you are used to going to.”

To Sandoval, more important than ingredients themselves, are what you

do with them. “You are seeing a lot of Colorado-based chefs that are French-trained, but are using cilantro. You are seeing more acceptance of global cuisine,” said Sandoval.

With over 35 restaurants, spanning the world from Denver to Dubai, to his latest venture—opening two new restaurants in Saudi Arabia, Sandoval has seen a shift in global food trends over the past 20 years. “I think globally you are seeing the farm to table concept—using local ingredients, organic. People are conscience about what they eat, where it’s coming from. I see this across the country—it’s what I call the ‘American diner’, a combination of all foods under one restaurant.”

Some of Colorado’s most famed chefs are taking notice of the trend, and implementing it in their own eateries. “Take for example, Frank Bonanno (Mizuna, Luca, Osteria Marco, Bones, Lou’s Food Bar, Russell’s Smokehouse, Wednesday’s Pie, and Salt & Grinder), or Jennifer Jasinski (Rioja, Bistro Vendome, Euclid Hall, and Stoic & Genuine),” said Sandoval. “A lot of cool chefs are traveling, researching and bringing their culinary discoveries home.”

In 2010, Sandoval moved his corporate headquarters from New York City to Denver, and recently, in May 2015, made Denver his home base.

“Denver is very central for me, since we have restaurants from California to New York; it makes sense for me to be centrally located. The heart of the company is in Denver, but I also really love Colorado. People here like what I do, and I like to be in places where I’m liked.”

Sandoval enjoys spending time on the mountains in Colorado skiing with his son, who will enter Colorado State University in the fall, and has not shied away from introducing his restaurant concepts to even the most fickle of dining destinations, the Colorado ski town.

"I think Mexican food goes very well with après skiing. Margaritas, the heat. After hitting the slopes, people flock to Mexican food," said Sandoval, on the reason why he cracked into Colorado's resort market. "Every year MAYA and Venga Venga are up about 15%. The only problem is that the mountains are very challenging in that you go from 10 miles-per-hour to 300 miles-per-hour overnight. With urban restaurants you know what to expect. But in the mountains it's like re-opening a new restaurant with every season."

Another opportunity Sandoval has grasped is introducing the trend of mixed concept cuisine to the Denver restaurant scene.

"Zengo is Latin Asian, Tamayo is modern Mexican, and La Sandia is more traditional Mexican. We are more Mexican than we are Latin Asian. But Zengo is one of my favorites because you are combining ingredients from such different cultures. The acids, the chillies, it's combining ingredients that are truly unique."

Sandoval crosses ingredients just about as often as he does continents as he tends to his different culinary ventures.

Having just returned from cheffing the US Open in New York, Sandoval has just four days home at his Riverfront Park residence in Denver, nearby to Zengo, before duty calls at the Fairmont Mayakoba in Mexico, where he is opening a restaurant.

Book signings, television appearances and celebrity status among high-ranking foodies sound glamorous, but the 47-year-old considers himself a regular Colorado guy.

"When I wake up I try and go for a bike ride, or get in a good tennis match. I'll hit my corporate office for meetings, and then I'll start to visit the restaurants. Two nights I'll usually go out to the restaurants, but the rest of the time I'll just stay at my house. I'll go to the Highland farmers market, buy some nice vegetables, fruit, eat something light, and just relax."

As the award-winning chef settles into life in Denver, aside from just being hub to his culinary mainstays, he reflects on the early dining scene in Denver, and like the seasons, how it's changed.

"The dining scene is very evolved over what it was when I opened Tamayo almost 20 years ago," said Sandoval. "When I opened Tamayo, we had white tablecloths. You would never see that today. In order to stay relevant, you have to keep evolving. You're seeing organic urban restaurants, no tablecloths, very comfortable, using ingredients from around the world."

And despite Sandoval's dynamic success, he'll never forget the simplicity of cuisine from his Latin roots. "It's crazy. Today, you go to any kind of restaurant and you'll find a taco on the menu. Whether it's Asian, French—you would have never seen that 20 years ago. Latin, specifically Mexican, is here to stay."



Brittany Havard is Editor of *LIV Magazine* and Public Relations Manager at LIV Sotheby's International Realty. Have a local innovator in mind for 'Out To Lunch?' Email brittany.havard@sothebysrealty.com.

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