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15 years after opening Tamayo, Richard Sandoval has grown an empire (Slideshow)

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Before chef Richard Sandoval pulled into Denver in 2001, he expected he'd find carriages in the streets. And when he did arrive, he found a city whose much-derided culinary scene was composed mostly of chain restaurants and had few chef-driven concepts.

But, after being asked to visit Colorado by Larimer Associates CEO Jeff Hermanson, he also saw a downtown bursting with life and a city coming into its own. And after opening two acclaimed Latin-fusion restaurants in New York and one in San Francisco, he made an unexpected diversion, choosing to plant his fourth effort in this out-of-the-way culinary stop.



MICHAEL PERINI

life with his high-end menu items and farm-to-table concepts, helping it to evolve into the nationally recognized market that it is today.

And second, the success in Denver — which became Sandoval's permanent home eight months ago — emboldened him to stake out on new paths, leading him to introduce out-of-the-box efforts like his Latin/Asian fusion Zengo concept and helping him to become the celebrity chef with 44 worldwide locations in his Richard Sandoval Restaurants portfolio today.

"I really like the people here. It's genuine. It's evolving culinarily. It's a city where we test a lot of the stuff we do," he said in an interview. "But at that time when I came here, Denver was about the third-worst food city in the country next to North Dakota."

The son of a restaurant owner from Acapulco, Sandoval moved to New York City's Upper East Side in 1990 and opened Savann, a small French-American restaurant with a Latin touch.

It was in 1997 when he made his name, however, by debuting Maya, a Mexican restaurant that shocked some reviewers by pricing entrées at a then-eye-popping \$25 but delivered food that made Sandoval a star.

Denver's Tamayo was like Maya, which by 2001 had a second location in San Francisco, but he chose a different name because he wanted to offer a lower price point. Settling on the corner of Larimer Square and 14th Street, he began to dish up enchiladas and mahi mahi and pork-belly dishes that drew in both crowds and fellow chefs to learn how he was doing it.

Miranda McFarlan-Garcia, who started as a hostess at Tamayo three months after it opened and now serves as the director of operations for Sandoval's three Denver restaurants, recalls that the restaurant was very different from the "melted-cheese Mexican" that the city knew at the time.

She thought the food was so beautiful that she didn't want to eat it; guests asked what the dishes and ingredients were because they were so unfamiliar with them.

“I felt like Tamayo opened the door for creativity in Denver,” she said.

It helped to open more doors for Sandoval, too. In the subsequent years, he appeared on television, grew to more cities and began contracting with luxury hotels to open restaurants there.

In 2006, he decided to open up Zengo in the then-deserted RiverFront Park neighborhood, offering a combination about which people hadn't heard — Asian-Latin experimental recipes — in a place where people never went.

It could have been considered crazy. But Zengo grew such a reputation that it became a destination restaurant. And when the nearby LoHi neighborhood grew up and Denver Union Station revitalized, Sandoval showed he was just a bit ahead of his time.

Zengo now has locations in New York, Washington and Dubai. And one is opening soon in Qatar.

The international forays for Sandoval have helped him to survive the Great Recession by diversifying his portfolio. Although he's only had to close a handful of the locations he's opened, including the Al Lado wine bar in Denver, the licensing agreements he's signed with hotels on multiple continents have spread out his risk — and his name — significantly.

John O'Sullivan, general manager for the Four Seasons Punta Mita in Mexico, said he was concerned when he learned he would be working with a big name on three restaurants at the facility that it would be an excruciating experience.

Instead, Sandoval has come down three to four times a year, made recommendations based on menu-item sales and helped to keep the eateries very profitable.

“The other key thing is just the guy's lack of ego,” O'Sullivan said. “When I was first told I would be working with a celebrity chef, my mind went to this person being a bully and always wanting to get his way. But he to me is the

definition of what a symbiotic partnership should be.”

New and hip

With its exposed pipes and vents and daring menu choices, Tamayo looks at 15 years just as new and hip as many of the restaurants popping up in former warehouses in the RiNo area. It made more revenue in 2015 than during any previous year, in fact.

Sandoval is taking this occasion to take a step back. Though he plans to open five more restaurants this year, he’s also hired a new president to come on and run his empire on a day-to-day basis, and he plans to take a few months off and think about where the company is headed, though he promises that no major upheavals are coming.

Challenges remain. The labor market in the restaurant industry is getting tighter, especially as more young chefs are choosing to branch into their own restaurants rather than rise up within kitchens for years at a time, he acknowledged.

But opportunities abound as well. People are more educated about food, especially ethnic foods, than ever, and that allows restaurateurs like Sandoval to continue trying new concepts, such as the [La Biblioteca tequila bar and restaurant](#) he opened a few years ago around the corner from Zengo.

He also has a 19-year-old son, Giancarlo, who is a freshman at Colorado State University and who he is trying to get into the family business, having him work weekends at Zengo.

Like in 2001, Sandoval could take a safe path forward. Or he could do something bolder. Whatever is to come, though, he knows how far he’s come already — and how much the 15 years in Denver has meant to that journey.

“It’s been 50 restaurants and 3 million miles and I don’t know how many bottles of tequila,” he said. “So, I’m taking a little time off to rethink what the next 10 years will be.”

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