

Author Roberto Santibañez, Chef, Rosa Mexicano



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# SPILLING ROSA MEXICANO'S SECRETS

## Where did you receive your culinary training?

For Mexican food there was no school, just life. But I did get formal culinary training in Europe. I went to Le Cordon Bleu in Paris [earning three diplomas with honors] and then Le Notre [for two additional kitchen experience certificates]. My professional kitchen experience includes stints at La Bourgogne in France, the Henbury Estate in Cheshire, England, and El Olivo in Mexico City. I opened El Sax, La Circunstancia and Restobar Salamandra in Mexico City. In 1997 I left Mexico and became the executive chef of Fonda San Miguel in Austin, Texas.

## How did you become affiliated with Rosa Mexicano?

Josefina Howard [one of the restaurant's founders] was a great cook, and we became friends. I had a restaurant in Mexico City, and she used to visit and critique me. I've always had a lot of respect for older people and so I used to listen to her and agree with her on many things. She loved me for that. Some people get very resentful when they're criticized, but, to me, the opinion of older people is very, very important. Maybe it's because I grew up with my grandparents and they always taught me so much and I always look at older people as a source of information and inspiration. When Josefina needed a chef for a restaurant, and she knew I was free, she brought me over. I joined Rosa Mexicano in May 2002. Unfortunately, soon thereafter she had a stroke.

## What inspired the book?

All the new things that have been happening at Rosa Mexicano over the past few years. Josefina wrote a book maybe 10 years ago, so it was time for a new one. There are so many nice, good, new things happening that we wanted to share.

## Is this your first cookbook?

Yes.

## How did you choose which recipes would be included?

I considered whether they would turn into easy recipes for our readers. And some others are there that aren't necessarily the restaurant's recipes, but are nice to have [within a Mexican culinary repertoire]. There's a great little section in the book called "Los Indispensables" [the indispensables]. It's a list of good, basic

Mexican recipes that you can use to actually tweak anything and make it very flavorful. [The list includes items like green salsa, quick pickled poblano strips, tortilla chips, tomatillo and chile de arbol salsa and more.]

## Does the book include some of the recipes most requested by guests?

Yes. People are always asking for the guacamole recipe and the tortilla soup, and everybody wanted to know how we do the pork—how we braise the short ribs like we do.

## Will it be difficult to find any of the required ingredients?

I don't think so. It's amazing that, today, you can walk into Publix and find three kinds of chilies, various peppers and tomatillos—it's great that there's so much availability. That didn't used to be the case.

## What might people not realize about Mexican cuisine?

Mexican food is incredibly healthful. If you think about it, all of our condiments are based on vegetables. We don't use butter and flour like Europeans. Our stocks are not based on animal stocks. A corn tortilla has no fat.

## The book includes some margarita recipes; what's your philosophy of pairing wines or cocktails with food?

I think cocktails are a good thing to start with [rather than drink] in the middle of the meal. I always recommend people switch to wine or beer with the meal. Mexican cocktails are very fruity and pretty rich. A margarita has a lot of lime juice, a lot of Cointreau, so [if you drink one with a meal] you're just adding heaviness to the food. If you have one at the beginning of the meal, it's a nice start, almost like an appetizer. Then you move on to beer or wine and it's lighter.

## Are you concerned at all that your cookbook is giving away the secrets of the restaurant?

Not really. People are still going to come. I don't think it's a concern. The restaurant has a little card with the recipe for guacamole that we've been giving out for the past 12 years—that has never stopped us from growing and getting guests back. **SP**

**"Rosa's New Mexican Table"**  
Artisan, May 2007, \$35  
The book is available at  
local book retailers and  
[www.rosamexicano.com](http://www.rosamexicano.com).

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

**A**ward-winning chef Roberto Santibañez, who serves as the culinary director of Rosa Mexicano, has just published a new cookbook that spills many of the restaurant's secrets: "Rosa's New Mexican Table" (Artisan/May 2007).

The cookbook features 125 dishes, some with nontraditional ingredients. "I often say that the food at Rosa Mexicano, and in this book, is authentic, but not orthodox," Santibañez notes in his introduction. The new culinary tome aims to make Mexican cuisine accessible and includes dishes like guacamole, poblanos stuffed with spinach and goat cheese, pumpkin seed- and crab-crusted halibut and sweet raspberry-guajillo-chocolate-chip "salsa." "Many of the dishes

can be executed in 30 to 60 minutes—or less," he says.

The Sunday Paper recently met with Santibañez to learn more about him and his new book.

## Q What sparked your interest in a culinary career?

**A**I was born and raised in Mexico City and, fortunately, was brought up by a family of great cooks. My life revolved around my grandmother's kitchen; we dined there most of the days of our lives—the way I grew up sounds a little bit cliché, but it's the way I grew up! I was always cooking with my grandma, then catering for friends in high school. During college, I worked at a bakery across the street and a restaurant down the block. I never had a dilemma like, "Am I going to be a lawyer?" I just followed the natural course of things.