

TRUE to FORM

Authenticity is everything for Mexican chef Enrique Olvera, owner of the 17th best restaurant in the world. Sarah Wall talks to him.

“I’ve never made nachos in my life,” says Mexican chef Enrique Olvera. “And I never use grated cheese.” Since opening his restaurant Pujol in Mexico City 13 years ago, Olvera’s food has become celebrated throughout the world. At the same time, he’s become an ambassador for Mexican cuisine, challenging those nacho and grated cheese perceptions.

For him, authenticity is paramount - while ingredients might not seem typically Mexican, if a dish uses traditional techniques, or has that signature balance of spice and acidity, Olvera says it can be deemed Mexican. Conversely though, presenting a Masterclass at this year’s Melbourne Food & Wine Festival, he also argued that Mexican cuisine does not exist.

“National cuisines do not exist - what exist are regional cuisines... In Mexico you would never have mole, tacos and ceviche in the same restaurant. Basically, cuisine is a reflection of culture, of things that we know. Not only ingredients, but how we think and approach the world.”

Olvera’s own approach was influenced by a childhood growing up in Mexico City. He recalls always being interested in food, enjoying cooking with his parents and spending time in the bake shops



Enrique Olvera

owned by both his maternal and paternal grandparents.

After finishing high school and looking around for something to do, he decided that he wanted to work with food. However, at that time in Mexico, “being a chef was not even an option”, so Olvera moved to New York to attend the renowned Culinary Institute of America, where he also honed his English. He recalls his education as being very classical. “It was all about discipline and mise en place and traditional techniques.”

These days, helped by people like Olvera popularising the notion that being a chef is a valid career path, thousands of young Mexicans enrol in cooking schools each year. “We have a really strong food culture, but no restaurant culture - we’re just starting to develop that,” he says. “And there are millions of Mexicans in the US working in three-star

“Like any other restaurant, the beginning’s really hard. On Saturdays sometimes I’d just go into work in shorts because no one would show up. The first year was really bad, then the second year started to pick up - we weren’t losing money any more, but we weren’t making any either. And in the third year things got better.”

Today, you’ll need to book well in advance to dine at Pujol and the menu has also changed a great deal since those early days, when Olvera served such dishes as foie gras or lobster soup with coriander. “Gradually we realised that people really enjoyed the Mexican food we were doing. I think as you grow you better understand the way you like to cook.”

Diners at Pujol recently would have begun their meal with a canape of skewered charred baby corn cobs, dipped in a mayonnaise flavoured with ground chichatana ants, coffee

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kitchens - I have the idea that these people need to come back.

For Olvera, that time away from home studying helped him to gain perspective on his cooking. “Seeing my country from the outside allowed me to broaden my vision. I think if I’d stayed in Mexico I’d probably be a lot more traditional.”

After graduating, Olvera worked in Chicago for six months, then moved back to Mexico City in order to cook in a restaurant a friend of his father’s was planning to open. However, the restaurant didn’t pan out and Olvera needed a job - in 2000, at the age of 24, he opened Pujol.

“I thought I was ready - I just wanted to have a good neighbourhood restaurant and I think that spirit is still there.”

From a vantage point of that “neighbourhood restaurant” being ranked 17th on the 2013 World’s 50 Best Restaurants List, Olvera can now look back philosophically on those early years of Pujol.

and lime - a dish Olvera demonstrated in Melbourne at his Langham Masterclass (though sadly the ants didn’t make it through customs).

“I’ve always thought that you cook with something because it’s really tasty, not because it’s new or weird. I tried these ants and they were delicious - they were so good that I wanted to put them on the menu.”

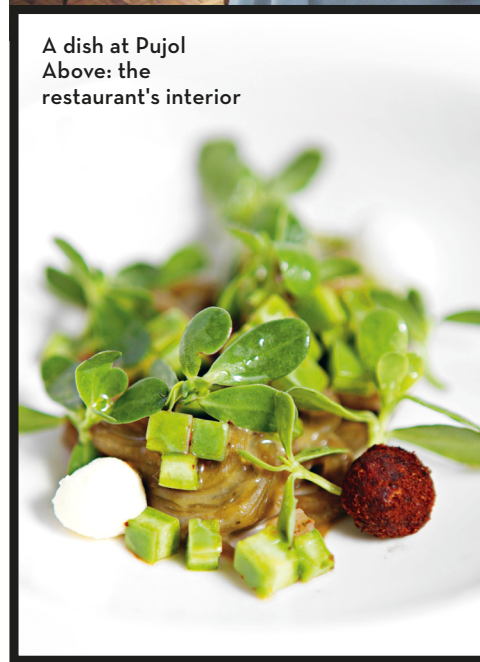
Insects have been eaten in Mexico for thousands of years - along with ants, fried grasshoppers are a traditional snack - and Olvera’s clearly a fan, pointing out that we’re doing the planet a favour by eating them. “They’re a gift from the gods.”

As far as other global food trends go, he’s dismissive of elaborate plating and cautions that foraging isn’t necessarily right for everyone.

“I don’t like chefs who think they’re artists when they’re plating - you should arrange things with care because the product is so good that you can’t just dump it on the plate, but the honesty is in the cooking, not in



A dish at Pujol
Above: the restaurant's interior



the plating. I think a lot of chefs misinterpret the trends - they oversimplify them. In certain regions of the world foraging makes a lot of sense, but if you’re in the city, maybe it doesn’t make that much sense. The most important thing is that you know that you’re doing what you want to do.”

It’s very clear that Enrique Olvera is doing exactly that. ☺

To learn more about Enrique Olvera and Pujol, go to pujol.com.mx
For information on next year’s Melbourne Food & Wine Festival, go to melbournefoodandwine.com.au