

September Feature Article

Meet Chef Gonzalo Martínez of Casa Sierra Nevada

By Linda Lowery



At age 33, Gonzalo Martínez has been around the block - the culinary butcher block, that is - learning his trade from some of the world's most renowned chefs. After fourteen years of apprenticing in first-class kitchens from The French Room in Dallas to Windsor Court in New Orleans, Martínez returned in May to his beloved San Miguel home as Executive Chef of the award-winning Casa Sierra Nevada kitchens.

Born in San Miguel to teacher parents (his dad is principal of Pípila) Martínez headed for Monterrey to earn a degree in mechanical engineering. But his life path took a savory turn when, at 19, he spent a summer in Dallas. Working in a friend's restaurant (not just *any* restaurant, but the famed Café Brazil) he did everything from washing dishes to prep cooking. "I loved it all," says Martínez, who decided right then and there to

stay in the States and study culinary arts. What was the hardest part about that decision? "Calling my mom and telling her I wasn't coming back to Mexico to finish school," he says, his hand clutching his heart.

Up The Kitchen Stepladder

After opening the second Café Brazil, Martínez moved to 1717, the upscale restaurant at the Dallas Museum of Art, where his education intensified as he apprenticed with Chef Ken Rathburn, perfecting sauces and presentations. Itching to work at Dallas' best-rated, five-star French Room, Martínez bought a suit and tie, removed his earring, and cut off his pony tail. It took a bit of youthful grovelling and a promise to quit on the spot after a week if the executive chef didn't like his work, but he was soon hired on as chef de partie. He filled in at every station - shucked fresh oysters at the fish station, cut whole sides of beef at the meat station, and worked appetizers, salads, pastries and vegetables. There, his commitment to food solidified.

"I learned to really feel textures, smell flavors, talk to the food as I cooked," he says. Plus he was surrounded by other young, competitive chefs wanting to make their marks, which fired his ambition. He moved on to the banquet chef position at Windsor Court in New Orleans where he worked under Jonathan Wright. "Stringent. The best," Martínez says of Wright. "I learned to create picture-perfect



plates."

A week after his arrival in New Orleans, the first pre-Katrina hurricane hit, and Martínez even accepts what lessons came from that. The chefs went into high gear packing freezers, filling water jugs, and preserving food (including a tiny stash of truffles worth \$15,000.) When the city cleared out after Katrina, Windsor Court was a haven for media and building contractors, and the under-staffed kitchen crew even managed to wrangle up a five-star buffet for President Bush and his entourage.

Have You Ever Heard of San Miguel?

In the aftermath of the storm, Martínez decided that since his wife Ana was pregnant, they could not remain in New Orleans to raise a family. They returned to Mexico - to Querétaro, which seemed a more likely place to find work - and soon after, Martínez received a call from Rafael Carpio, General Manager of Casa Sierra Nevada.

"Have you ever heard of San Miguel de Allende?" Carpio asked Martínez. The elegant and historical Casa Sierra Nevada had been purchased by Orient Express, and they would be hiring an executive chef to oversee three separate kitchens: Parque, Main, and Limón, a planned restaurant addition. By May, Martínez' family had moved back to his home town of San Miguel de Allende.

In his new position, Martínez could quite possibly have a serious impact on the international image of Mexican food. Orient Express is a high-visibility company, and Martínez is a passionate man about using Mexican products and staples as a basis for original gourmet cuisine. "Growing up here, I experienced all the seasonal ingredients," he says. "And in the States, I saw the use of Mexican produce that isn't so typical here, like beets, fennel, and yellow (rather than white) corn."

Organic Mexican Gourmet

Martínez buys fresh organic food from local rancheros and farmers, and makes special requests for them to grow items like baby carrots and unusual salad greens. He trains local cooks in preparation techniques and new equipment use, and oversees pastries and breads, all baked in-house. "We are changing our cava to include more Mexican wines," he adds.



The innovative menus he is developing include some traditional Mexican staples like squash, beans and chilies, but all with an exciting contemporary twist. It's a thoughtful, creative process. "I look at everything I have, everything that is in season," he says. "And I ask myself: What am I going to do with this?"

Tequila and mescal play a big part in his grilled innovations, like *Mescal-Marinated*

Quail and a mean Tequila Jumbo Shrimp Grill. September is the start of cuitlacoche season, and Chef Gonzalo has come up with gourmet Mexican specialties such as *Huitlacoche / Cappuchino Soup* and *Fresh Cuitlacoche Soufflé with Bleu Cheese.*

It's like Christmas everyday in Chef's kitchen, as deliveries of French copper cookware, food processors and made-to-order ovens arrive daily. Although the turn-around and upgrading planned by Orient Express will be a gradual process, samples from Chef Gonzalo's new dishes already began appearing on the menu the first week of September.

A Special Treat for Portal San Miguel Readers

Two autumn recipes from Chef Gonzalo's Casa Sierra Nevada kitchens

Chef Gonzalo's Fresh Cuitlacoche Soufflé

Prep. Time: 30 minutes
Cook Time: 30 minutes

Servings: 6

Ingredients:

½ lb. Fresh Cuitlacoche	1 Garlic Clove
2 Whole Shallots	2 Roma Tomatoes
1 tbsp. Olive Oil	½ qt. Heavy Cream
4 Baked Yukon Gold Potatoes	3 Eggs
1 cup Maytag Blue Cheese	Fresh Basil to taste
Salt and Pepper to taste	

(Note: *Maytag is a*

type blue cheese similar to Roquefort)

Method:

Drizzle the potatoes with oil and salt and bake at 350° for 15 min. Let cool. After the potatoes are cold enough, grate with a fine grater. In a separate bowl, mix eggs and cream together. In a sauté pan, heat the oil and fry the shallots, garlic and tomatoes. Cook for 4 min, add the cuitlacoche and cook for another 6 min. Let cool. Mix all ingredients in a mixing bowl. Line a Half Hotel pan (A baking pan measuring 16 ½ x 11 5/8 inches) with parchment paper and pour in soufflé mix. Cook for 30 min. at 250°
Serve hot or let cool overnight and cut to desired shape.

Chef Gonzalo's Organic Yellow Corn Soup with Fresh Squash Blossoms

Prep. Time: 15 min.
Cook Time: 15 min.
Servings: 6

Ingredients:

12 Organic Yellow Ears of Corn	2 Tbsp. Butter
1 Liter Vegetable Stock	1 Sprig Fresh Thyme
2 Shallots	1 Dried Bay Leaf
1 Garlic Clove	1 cup Heavy Cream
4 cups Squash Blossoms	Salt and Pepper to taste

(Note: Fried Ranchero cheese for garnish)

Method:

Cut the kernels from the corn (save the husks). In a stainless steel pot, melt the butter and add the corn kernels. Sauté for approx. 2 min., add the rest of the ingredients and cook for another 4 min. Pour vegetable stock in a separate pot, and add have the cornhusks and all the other ingredients. Cook until boiling. Add the squash blossoms. Remove from stove and blend. Strain through a fine mesh. Finish with heavy cream and season to taste. Garnish with fried ranchero cheese.

Linda Lowery Keep
www.portalsanmiguel.com

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