

Voices

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California

As El Cholo celebrates 100 years, its biggest celebrity fan spills the beans



Michelle Phillips of the Mamas & the Papas stands with owner Ron Salisbury at the entrance to El Cholo Original Restaurant in Los Angeles. Phillips has been going to El Cholo for 54 years. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)



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So many celebrity photos cover the inside of the original [El Cholo off Western Avenue](#) that they probably hold up the restaurant as much as the walls themselves.

There are the sports icons — Magic Johnson and Tommy Lasorda and Nolan Ryan. Late, local, legendary news anchors [Hal Fishman](#) and [Larry McCormick](#). Robert De Niro from film, George Lopez from television. Madonna, the Beach Boys. A portrait of Wings with autographs from Paul and Linda McCartney and the note, “Thanx for the great veggie food.”

But only one celeb gets to be the person behind El Cholo’s voicemail.

“Please join us for a taste of history,” says [Michelle Phillips](#), actress and co-founder of the Mamas & the Papas, in her unmistakable dulcet tone. “Wait for the tone. Leave your name and telephone number.”

It’s been El Cholo’s after-hours greeting for about a year now.

“I couldn’t think of another name” to do it, said El Cholo owner Ron Salisbury, as Phillips laughed. On Tuesday, the pals shared a booth toward the back of the restaurant, which is celebrating its 100th birthday this year, making it the fourth-oldest Mexican restaurant in the United States. The place was beginning to fill for happy hour. Next to us, Korean businessmen feasted on margaritas and combo plates.

“It’s a little hesitant,” Phillips said of her reading.

“True artist,” Salisbury cracked with a playful wave of his hand. “She wanted to redo it. It was perfect.”

In a city where celebrities have long proclaimed their allegiance to eateries [with an autographed photo](#) or a [TikTok reel](#), few restaurant romances eclipse that of Phillips and El Cholo. For over half a century, she has alternately served as customer, investor, ambassador, friend and wall decoration. They're roles she relishes as much as the nachos with olives she orders to begin every dinner and which she artfully gobbled up before Salisbury and me.

"The food is authentic," Phillips said, when I asked what makes her love El Cholo so much. "It never fails to be great. You know what you're getting, and [you know the waiters](#)."

She took a sip of her non-alcoholic Heineken and continued.

"I've had so many parties here. And I have pictures with all the kids from the time they were [little]. And Ron and I just became friends very early on."

She's now 79; he's 90, the grandson of El Cholo founders Alejandro and Rosa Borquez. Over the next hour, the two giggled and gushed as she spun a tale about El Cholo that also doubled as a tale of Los Angeles at its best: great food and good times, but also tradition and loyalty.



An autographed photo of Madonna inscribed to owner Ron Salisbury is one of many celebrity photos at the original El Cholo. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Phillips first visited El Cholo in 1969, at the invitation of Jack Nicholson.

“We had just started to date,” she remembered. “He said, ‘I’m going to take you to the best Mexican restaurant in L.A.’”

She paused, to emphasize her skepticism toward Nicholson’s claim. Phillips grew up in Long Beach, Boyle Heights and Watts, then lived in Mexico City while her father obtained a college degree, returning when she was 13. The family already had a local favorite: El Jarrito, on Olympic Boulevard just west of Vermont Avenue.

“It was a very good restaurant,” she said. “I don’t know if it still is, but in the ’50s — ”

“It’s gone,” Salisbury interrupted, drawing a surprised reaction from Phillips. “Not here.”

“Well, it was very good. Very traditional ... But they didn’t have nachos. Carmen brought them here.”

That would’ve been [Carmen Rocha](#), a San Antonio native who began working at El Cholo in 1959 and is credited with introducing nachos to Southern California. She befriended Nicholson early in his career.

FOOD

El Cholo Builds on Tradition

Aug. 17, 2000

“I remember Jack telling me that all the young, broke actors used to come here because they could order an order of beans *a la olla*. And then they get a stack of tortillas with it.”

“For free,” Salisbury said teasingly.

“And they could order coffee.”

“For a nickel.”

“And you could have, like, a full meal for thirty-five cents.”

“And stay all night.”

“I was an instant fan,” Phillips concluded.



Members of the Williams, Watson, Peterson and Taylor families enjoy a meal at El Cholo, where they've been dining for many years. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

In Salisbury's earliest memories, she was part of a group of late '60s Hollywood stalwarts and upstarts that included Nicholson, actor Will Hutchins, director [Monte Hellman](#) and "Chinatown" screenwriter Robert Towne.

"When you come here twice, you automatically become a regular," Salisbury said.

"When they were here," he added with a knowing smile, "you *knew* they were here."

As everyone's careers took off, only Nicholson and Phillips kept coming. She rattled off anecdotes that spanned decades: the many visits she made to El Cholo's Whittier location with her grandmother, who lived in a nearby assisted living facility. A date with John Kerry, whom she described as "too fast of a mover for me," romantically speaking. The time Cheech Marin, Warren Beatty, Joan and Jackie Collins, Timothy Leary, Ed

Begley Jr. and other stars showed up for her mariachi-filled 40th birthday party — “It was a little out of their hood, so they all brought limos.”

Phillips was a “glad” investor in [Sonora Café](#), a restaurant Salisbury opened near Hancock Park in the mid-1990s to capitalize on the era’s Southwestern cuisine trend. One night, she threw a fundraiser there for a youth music program in Boyle Heights. Among the attendees were L.A. philanthropic doyennes [Edie Wasserman](#) and [Betsy Bloomingdale](#).

“These gals loved to get *down* with the real people,” Phillips said. “They all gave a substantial amount of money.” She then turned to Salisbury.

“I remember there was such an uproar when Sonora Café closed,” Phillips said. “That was the only really great restaurant in the neighborhood.”

FOOD

It’s a Party at El Cholo

April 2, 1998

I asked Phillips and Salisbury how they had maintained a friendship for so many decades that could’ve easily remained transactional. The two shrugged.

“Over that long a period, it just evolves,” she said. “You don’t have a really specific time frame of it.”

“Some, immediately you hit it off,” he said. “Some, it goes slowly and adds and adds and, ‘Oh, we’re friends.’ We have a relationship connection here. We shared a life together.”

They have each other’s cellphones but don’t get together much, since Salisbury lives in Newport Beach and Phillips is on the Westside. “I’ve been invited to his birthday parties

several times, and I've never gone because I was either out of town, or I couldn't go, or it was just too far."

She then looked at Salisbury. "Do you have a boat?"

"Yeah, we have a boat at the Cannery" — another of his restaurants. "A duffy we rent out. Why, do you want to use it?"

"Yeah!"

"When?"

"Whenever you want."

"Whenever *you* want!"



Michelle Phillips of the Mamas & the Papas enjoys a light moment and a meal with El Cholo owner Ron Salisbury at El Cholo Original Restaurant (Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times)

Phillips nowadays frequents the El Cholo in Santa Monica, because it's closer to her friends and "the traffic to get to [the original] is horrendous."

"But I have a route. I don't take the 10 all the way down. Take the 10 to Fairfax. Fairfax to Venice. And I shoot down Venice. Venice is a great street. And the lights are pretty much timed for the traffic. So I can make it down here in bad traffic in 35 minutes."

Salisbury began to fill in Phillips about his efforts to raise \$1 million for pediatric cancer research by selling naming rights to booths at El Cholo's six locations. Suddenly, she looked toward the wall in front of her. There hung a photo of Phillips, Nicholson and Anjelica Huston in their younger days.

“I always love to come in and see my pictures,” she said, her powerful voice now softer. “No matter what anybody tells you, it does affect you.”

They had finished their meal. They walked through El Cholo’s main dining room. Diners turned their heads and whispered. Workers greeted Phillips by name. Saul Castro gave her a bear hug.

“I haven’t seen you in forever!” he proclaimed. He has regularly served her since he began working at El Cholo in 1984, describing her as an “amazing” tipper who “always takes care of us.”

We hadn’t even talked about Phillips’ career until El Cholo’s publicist, Daniel Harary, praised her work. She began to tell the story behind “[California Dreamin’](#),” the immortal paean to the Golden State — and specifically L.A. — that she co-wrote and performed for the Mamas & the Papas.

Salisbury overheard them chatting. “You wrote that?” he asked in genuine astonishment. Phillips flashed a bemused smile.

Her longtime friend extended his hand. “A pleasure to meet you!”