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How One Family Parlayed Mexican Food Into a Los Angeles Landmark

This year, El Cholo will mark a century as a mainstay for celebrities, students and a loyal staff. Its menu and history mix tradition and innovation.

By Kevin McKenna

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LOS ANGELES — You could call it a business founded on the enchilada and saved by the margarita. You could easily call it a Los Angeles institution. But more than anything, after 100 years, El Cholo is a family affair.

At 89, Ron Salisbury presides — as he has since 1954 — over the venerable Mexican restaurant opened by his immigrant grandparents. Lineage is evident among the staff, too. The head chef at the flagship Western Avenue location, Gerardo Ochoa, started as a dishwasher 27 years ago. His brother Sergio, a 40-year veteran, runs the kitchen at the downtown location; their father, Ignacio, was an El Cholo line cook in the 1970s and ’80s before going home to Michoacán.

And in an industry known for turnover, 54 employees — more than one in 10, across the restaurant’s several locations — have been with the place for 20 years or more.

Their collective memory has been essential to perpetuating the traditions and the tastes that have made El Cholo a destination for celebrities, college students and generations of Southern California families.

A converted bungalow on Western Avenue housed the restaurant beginning in the 1930s. El Cholo

"It's just passed on," Mr. Salisbury said of the restaurant's ethos as he surveyed the 280-seat dining room on a recent morning, the kitchen crew already hours into its sauce-making and other tasks. "They have a recipe book there, but they don't pay attention to the recipe book. They know the nuances."

In many ways, El Cholo mirrors the evolution of Americans' tastes in Mexican food, incorporating a wider range of dishes that have become familiar (or even originated) north of the border.

But the cooking is still based on his grandmother's recipes, Mr. Salisbury said, and there is one guiding principle for every dish, including those added or modified over the decades to reflect changing tastes: "Is it true to what she would have done, and up to her standards?"

The menu includes longtime offerings like a combination plate with a cheese enchilada and a beef taco, top, as well as latter-day additions like chicken chimichangas, foreground. Cody James for The New York

Mr. Salisbury is no cook. But he was practically raised in the restaurant.

Its roots were planted in 1923 by his grandparents, Alejandro and Rosa Borquez, at a small location — now long gone — near the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, which also opened that year. They called it Sonora Café after their native state, and then, in 1925, El Cholo.

Their daughter Aurelia and her husband, George Salisbury, whom she had met while waiting on his table, soon opened a five-booth, 12-stool Western Avenue branch — closer to the emerging Hollywood studios and the upscale Hancock Park neighborhood. It moved across the street into its current location, a converted two-bedroom bungalow, in 1931. The front bedroom became the cramped waiting room, familiar to legions of heel-cooling diners in the decades when the restaurant took no reservations.

Two years later, Ron Salisbury was born. “My mother taught me how to count by counting coins in the register,” he recalled.

Ron Salisbury in 1934, a year after his birth, with his parents, George and Aurelia, from whom he took over the business two decades later. El Cholo

He moved on to kitchen chores after school and during summers — taking seeds out of chiles, assembling tamales, sorting dishes to be washed. When he was 18, his father had him manage the place for a day. Three years later, just out of college, he was running it full time.

“My father was never really comfortable with the restaurant business,” he said. For himself, in contrast, “it seemed very natural.”

Even for a restaurant defined by family tradition, keeping a dining business thriving from 1954 to 2023 has been a labor not of preservation, but of innovation.

As El Cholo's menu has grown, its owner says, its guiding principle has been to keep its food up to the standards of his grandmother, the co-founder. Caleb Thal for The New York Times

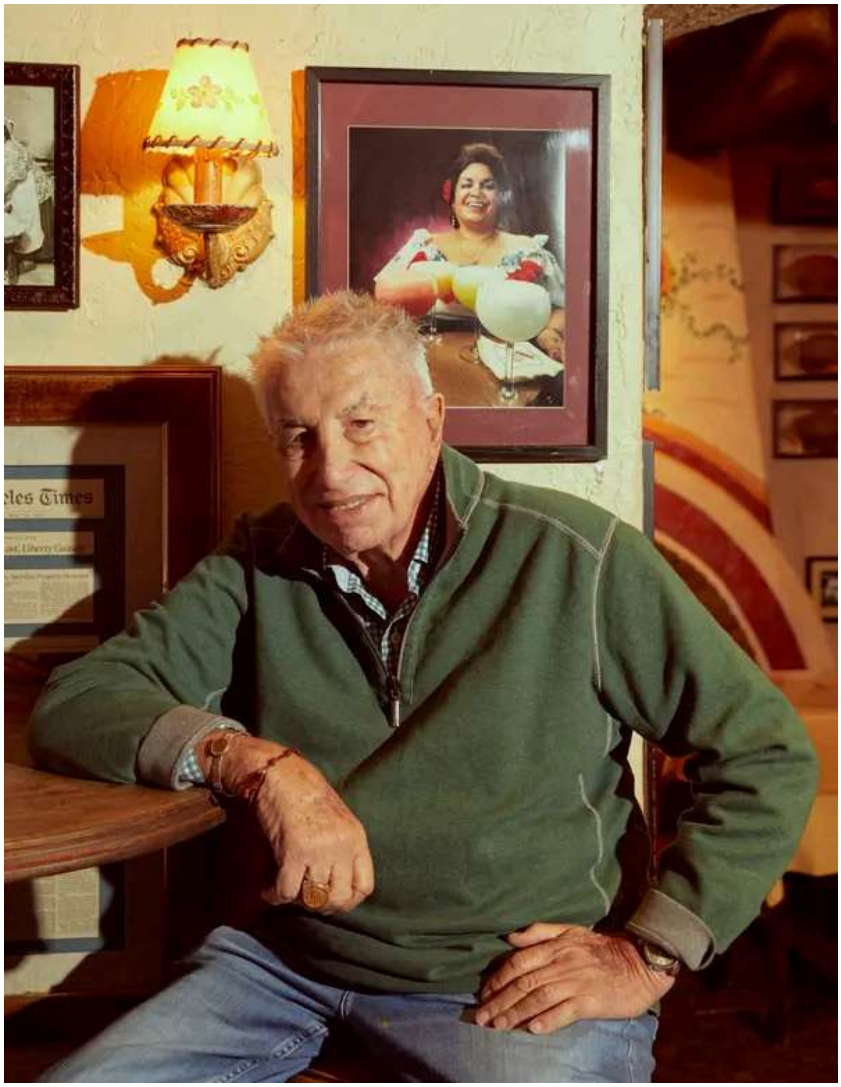
Take, for example, El Cholo's signature enchilada sauce. For Angelenos in 1923, "spicy foods were not the norm," Mr. Salisbury said, and the sauce was calibrated accordingly.

But over the last century, the American palate has become more adventurous. "So without endangering too much," he said, "we added a little more chile" — so little that "maybe you're not going to notice it, and I felt I was tampering with something

sacred.”

A menu that long featured just a few entrees — like enchiladas, chili con carne, tamales, a combination plate adding rice and beans — has gradually expanded, and now, in encyclopedic fashion, features the date when each dish was introduced (chimichangas, 1967; crab meat enchiladas, 1971).

Nachos were added by stealth, the initiative of a longtime waitress, Carmen Rocha, whose knowledge of the dish followed her from Texas when she joined El Cholo in 1959. She started preparing nachos for the diners in the room she served, and they shortly became a standard.



Ron Salisbury in the dining room at El Cholo, which may owe its longevity in part to his decision in the 1960s to introduce and then perfect the restaurant’s margarita. Cody James for The New York Times

A fraught decision came in the late 1960s, when the margarita was becoming a popular drink. George Salisbury had limited the alcohol offerings to beer and wine. “He felt serving hard alcohol was just asking for problems,” his son recalled.

Ron Salisbury added a margarita that he admits was not very good, until a fellow restaurant owner offered a few tips. The result — involving a blend of tequilas, the details a rare point on which a collection of El Cholo recipes and lore is coy — was a watershed moment.

“If we hadn’t had margaritas,” Mr. Salisbury said, “I doubt we’d still be here.”

In the decades since, El Cholo has flourished, and honed its image as a constant in a centrifugal city. Walls are adorned with photos recalling its heritage — the family origins, the longtime chefs and waitresses, the evolving menus and a cavalcade of celebrities and athletes.

Celebrity portraits adorn the walls, including one of Jack Nicholson, a longtime customer. Caleb Thal for The New York Times

Paul and Linda McCartney’s inscription reads “Thanx for the great veggie food.” Caleb Thal for The New York Times

In its early decades, the restaurant counted stars like Clark Gable, Loretta Young and Nat King Cole as customers. In 1969, Jack Nicholson brought in the singer Michelle Phillips, whose voice now provides the outgoing message on the

restaurant's voice mail. Tom Seaver discovered the restaurant as a college student and later introduced it to a rookie pitcher named Nolan Ryan, who became a Salisbury business partner in a different dining venture.

At the same time, the universe of Mexican dining has expanded in Los Angeles and beyond, drawing from Mexico's many regions, in waves of creativity and amid an evolving dialogue about what qualifies as authentic.

From one point of view, El Cholo is a throwback to a time when Mexican was a food that dared not speak its name. Its vintage neon sign proclaims it a "Spanish Cafe," evoking a 1920s California that retained the Spanish place names of its colonial era but whose largely Anglo population often disdained things Mexican.

"In those days, 'Mexican' had a bad connotation," associated with unsanitary conditions, Mr. Salisbury said. "So people called it Spanish food." (His father, he said, "kept the door open to the kitchen so you could see how clean it was.")

El Cholo waiters in the 1930s, when the nearby Hollywood studios were booming. El Cholo

Natalia Molina, a professor of American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California who has written about issues of immigration and race in the city's history, sees the sign as a curiosity — a "relic of early 20th-century Los Angeles" — but El Cholo itself as a mainstay in the local food landscape.

"There's so much that goes into a restaurant in terms of making it feel like home — and if we made a list, El Cholo could tick every box," said Dr. Molina, whose recent book "A Place at the Nayarit: How a Mexican Restaurant Nourished a Community" tells of the restaurant her immigrant grandmother established in the 1950s in the Echo Park district.

“It has food that is familiar and comfortable and accessible,” she said of El Cholo. “Much of its menu is that Americanized Mexican fare that we think of. But that doesn’t make it any less special.”

Its booths and spaciousness make it a favorite spot for families to gather, including her own, as well as a cultural crossroads with an Anglo, Latino, Black and Asian clientele. For many, it is a sort of “urban anchor,” she said, as her grandmother’s restaurant once was. “It’s that place you can return to over and over again — it’s *your* place.”

El Cholo’s booths and spaciousness have made it a popular gathering spot. Caleb Thal for The New York Times

Whether that will remain true 100 years from now is not something Mr. Salisbury is leaving to chance, or inertia.

“Business right now has never been better, really good,” he said. But there are plenty of challenges. The pandemic, which reduced operations for many months to takeout service, left a shortage of employees to handle the demand when diners returned in force. (Where the main location’s kitchen had 44 people before the pandemic, it now has 23. “We’re running faster,” said Gerardo Ochoa, the head chef.) Inflation has put pressure on costs, and in turn on menu prices. Fears of a recession loom.

All the same, Mr. Salisbury remains focused on the future. The youngest of his seven children, Brendon, 34, will eventually take over, he said. (Another son, Blair, owns and operates an El Cholo in Pasadena that is independent of the six other locations.)

After doubling to its current size in the 1970s, the Western Avenue dining room is set to incorporate an adjoining 3,300-square-foot warehouse as a roofless garden patio space for events. An El Cholo in Salt Lake City is in the works.

“It says something that after 100 years, we’re not limping to the finish line,” Mr. Salisbury said. “We’re doing even more aggressive things, positive things.”

Several of his adult grandchildren are gravitating toward the business. A great-granddaughter, now in college, may be as well. But Mr. Salisbury, unlike his father, is in no hurry to hand over the keys. They represent his life’s work.

“I don’t want it to end,” he said.