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# Mexican revolution

*Charlotte Metcalf* reports on the Dual Year between  
Britain and Mexico and on London's  
whole-hearted embrace of all things Mexican

Words *Charlotte Metcalf*



Right: Marion  
Friedman's  
gallery has  
popularised  
Mexican art and  
design

**T**en years ago, when 2005 Masterchef winner Thomasina Miers told fellow chefs at St. John and River Cafe that she was opening a restaurant to serve Mexican market and street food, they strongly advised her to reconsider. Knowing how much Mexican cuisine had to offer, Thomasina persevered and Wabaca was born. From the day Wabaca opened in Charlotte Street, Thomasina has not looked back and now there are numerous outposts in London and branches in Bristol, Cardiff and Manchester.

Anyone who has walked into Wabaca has been transported into sunnier climes by its bold contemporary architecture, vibrant heart-warming colours, rich textiles and an exotic, tropical atmosphere. Yet it's ultimately the food that has people returning again and again. For most, the delicate but complex, zingy flavours and wide choice of healthy and vegetarian tasting dishes have been a revelation. 'Ten years ago the only Mexican food you could eat in London was TexMex – heavy, starchy and greasy with cheese,' explains Thomasina. 'I wanted to show people that Mexico wasn't all that 1980's grungy hackneyed imagery of Speedy Gonzales, cactuses, sombreros and bandits. We're an island nation, we're backpackers and we have an Anglo-Indian love of spice. We're not afraid to try new things. People wanted to learn through us and today we even have people coming back and asking for grasshoppers when we put them on the menu.'

Now Mexican eateries have sprung up all over London with chains like Beato's Hat, Chilango, Chipotle, Chiquito, Poncho 8 and Tortilla opening new branches to meet demand for the kind of affordable but delicious food that Thomasina won over British tastebuds with. 'Mexican ingredients are so diverse with 200 types of chilli alone,' Thomasina enthuses. 'There are varieties of corn that are black, blue, red, white, tomatoes in every colour and size, avocados galore, squash, pumpkins, vanilla, chocolate, endless herbs. It's not surprising that so many chefs are obsessed with Mexico – we chefs are a very over-excitable bunch!' Indeed the legendary Albert Adria of El Bulli fame, in collaboration with chef Paco Mendez, opened Hoja Santa in Barcelona to pay 'homage to, and compliment' Mexican culture and René Redzepi, the Danish chef behind the internationally acclaimed Noma in Copenhagen, has been quoted as saying that Mexican food is without doubt the next big thing, claiming to have had an epiphany when he visited Nectar in the Yucatán peninsula in 2006.

Yet the Mexican revolution that's happening in our capital is not just about food. Mexico has become the de rigueur theme for London's party crowd. When Guy Pelly, best friend to Princes William and Harry, opened Tonteria on Sloane Square it became a celebrity magnet overnight. Arguably London's liveliest bar and nightclub, notorious for its wild 'Tontemama Mondays', Tonteria draws on all that is – mysterious and macabre about Mexican culture and its Day of the Dead festivals. The result is an indulgently kitsch and decadently ghoulish concoction conjuring up evilly toxic worms in bottles of Mescal, gigantic skulls, death masks and rattling skeletons in top hats and cloaks, crazy fall-down-drunk dancing and, above all, potentially intoxicating tequila – which can cost up to £5000 for a bottle of Reserva del Alma (according to Tonteria there are only two bottles left in the world). Explaining Mexico's attraction to young people, Guy says, 'Mexican culture is so colourful, bright and vibrant. The food is delicious so mix that with great tequila and it all creates a great night out.'

Indeed, tequila has already conquered the capital's smartest cocktail bars. Every London bartender worth his salt and lime is swotting up on his rare and celebrity añejo or reposado and bottles of George Clooney's Casavigos Tequila or Justin Timberlake's Sazza 901 are flying off the shelves in top liquor stores. Celebrity-backed or owned



Tequila is taking the capital by storm



The Book of Life, by Jorge R. Gutierrez and Guillermo del Toro, was released in time for Halloween last year



Since opening ten years ago, Wahaca now has branches all over London and in Bristol, Cardiff and Manchester.

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tequilas, like rapper P.Diddy's DeLeon Añejo have certainly galvanised interest in the product,' says Richard Ellis, Spirits Buyer at Mayfair's Hedonism Wines. 'But our customers have really started to embrace small batch, artisanal tequilas which tell a story of the true dedication and attention to detail that goes into making the very best tequila.'

Brits have always loved the great Mexican painter Frida Kahlo but galleries have increasingly been exhibiting a wider range of Mexican art and artefacts. London gallerist, Marion Friedmann, is convinced that future of design is rooted in Mexico. 'In 2010 I was in Mexico City researching the design scene for a private project and realised what potential and great talent there is there,' Marion says of her passion for Mexican art and design. During the 2011 London Design Festival, Marion was the first to showcase the work of 'upcycling' designer Thierry Jeannot in the show *Enlightened Waste*. 'There's also a huge trend now for craft in design,' Mariorn continues. 'People want the kind of individuality and small scale production that plays to Mexico's strengths. Mexico can develop prototypes in big quantities, fast and cheaply, giving them a competitive advantage.'

It's only a matter of time before we're wearing Mexican fashion and looking to Mexico for sartorial leadership. After all, why continue with sludgy British grunge and the trend for droopy draping when you could be wearing red hot couture in sizzling colours from designers Julia y Renata and Alejandra Quesada? Recently Brenda Diaz de la Vega, Editor in Chief at *Harper's Bazaar Mexico and Latin America*, ranked Mexico City as the 'number one fashion market in Latin America'. Now the Museum at FIT, which brands itself as 'the most fashionable museum in New York City', is celebrating Mexico in its *Global Fashion Capitals* exhibition through the creations of Mexican designers Ricardo Seco and Carla Fernandez. Curator, Arick Elia, said, 'Mexico City really caught our eye because it's going through a cultural revolution; new restaurants, museums, street art and designers.'

What Londoners are really enjoying about Mexican culture is the bright, upbeat, big-hearted friendliness of it. Thomasina Miers says, 'Mexican cuisine is all about sharing food with friends and family. A Mexican wouldn't dream of sealing a business deal unless breaking bread with someone. I wanted Wahaca to reflect that and not be stuffy and expensive. You can run in and spend £7 on two delicious, healthy plates of food in 25 minutes. It's about sheer pleasure. As Guy Pelly says, commenting on the runaway success of Tomtertia, 'The Mexican revolution is here to stay. I don't think it's a trend that will die down. It's too much fun and there's so much of it to explore and expand on.'