

STORIES

# Michelin-Starred Chef Paco Méndez Discusses Hoja Santa and Niño Viejo

By [David Jenison](#) on May 4, 2017



"I'm not just serving food, I'm serving culture as well," says Mexico City-born Paco Méndez, the head chef at [Niño Viejo](#) and the Michelin-starred [Hoja Santa](#) in Barcelona, Spain. The two adjacent concepts are part of [elBarri](#), a collection of restaurants launched by Albert and Ferran Adrià of [elBulli](#) fame. Méndez previously worked at [elBulli](#), and he now collaborates with Albert on dishes for the acclaimed restaurants. The gastronomy pays tribute to Mexico's [UNESCO](#)-honored culinary heritage, yet Méndez introduces brilliant twists that can include a pistachio mole-stuffed artichoke, avocado-wrapped crab on corn toast and a chicken-skin Caesar salad served on a parmesan cheese crisp. PRØHBTØ spoke with chef Méndez to learn more about the stories he hopes to tell through food.

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make, and you will not have the proper final result if you skip any of the steps. The dual concept involves more chefs, more involvement, more pressure and more hard work, but we can more fully represent Mexican gastronomy.



**Mexican gastronomy differs by region, such as Oaxaca in the south, Mexico City, Baja. Do you focus on specific regions, or do you cover all the culinary cultures?**

Mexico has seven main regions, as well as 11 biodiverse ecosystems, and I want to represent all of them. A lot of difference exists between the Yucatán and Baja, which are both Mexico, but completely different in so many ways: how the soil works, how the produce grows, different traditions. I'm trying to reflect those differences. Hoja Santa maybe takes a more contemporary vision, whereas Niño Viejo provides a street-food approach that's more easygoing.

**What are the challenges in opening a Mexican restaurant in Spain?**

The main challenge has been produce. The seasons are very marked here in Europe, so the produce that's available differs widely in each season. In Mexico, you have a region with one produce, and when it finishes for the season, you can find it somewhere else in Mexico. In Europe, what you have in the winter is generally hard to find in the spring. At this very moment [in late March], it's the hardest season to find produce because we're moving from a cold winter to spring. We're actually thinking in advance of what we're going to do in two weeks time. *(Interview continues below.)*

**What motivated you to create two concepts under one roof?**

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### **What about Mexican herbs and spices?**

We have a garden where we grow Mexican leaves, but we have the same challenge. Specific herbs grow in certain seasons that, in Mexico, you can find all year round. For instance, you can find cilantro, the coriander flower, all year in Mexico, but we're just starting to grow it now because of the season change.

### **What is an example of a dish you have on the menu now that might change in two months time?**

White asparagus is important here, but it lasts only two months. We have a dish with white asparagus now that we know will not last long. In two months time, we're going to have mushrooms with a similar palate of flavors, so we'll switch the white asparagus for the mushrooms, and then rearrange the garnish.

### **From the point that chef Adrià first talked about doing a Mexican concept, how did it evolve into what you have today?**

Talking about a concept is easy, but actually doing it is hard. When we started the conversation, we had this idea that included both Niño Viejo and Hoja Santa. We opened Niño Viejo in August 2014 and Hoja Santa in November, so it was a short time between one project and the



other. Thinking back, the first menu at Hoja Santa is closer to what Niño Viejo is now. We had a short menu at first knowing it would have to evolve in a very short time. It was the first time [the Adriàs] opened a Mexican restaurant, and they had to consider the difficulties like finding produce and the public acceptance of what we were offering. You have to try it first, see the response, adapt and then continue the evolution.

**What difference did earning a Michelin star make in terms of what you could do? (Note: *Hoja Santa was the second Mexican restaurant in Europe to earn such an honor, and no Mexican restaurant in the world received a star before 2015.*)**

From the beginning, we knew it would be hard for people to see a Mexican restaurant as fine dining. I have a relative with restaurants in Los Angeles, and they do things properly, but this is not how people in Spain envision Mexican cuisine. The food that traveled to Spain –Tex Mex, for example – typically does not involve a nice restaurant. The Michelin star motivated people to look back and see what we were doing. We worked very hard that first year. We opened in November 2014 and the Michelin Star came a year later in November 2015, and not a lot of people remained from the first team because it was a lot of hours and pushing forward. Once [the guide] considered us a Michelin-star restaurant, a lot of people wanted to know what was happening. For two months or so, we were fully booked. There are no Michelin stars in Mexico [because the company doesn't publish the restaurant guide there], so it's only Mexican restaurants elsewhere in the world that have stars, so it's a big deal.



**What is the name of your relative's Mexican restaurant in Los Angeles?**

Socorro's.

**I read that your grandmother was an amazing cook who inspired you.**



I realized later with time how skilled my grandmother was. Of course, I have these fond memories of her cooking at home, but I was just 12, so I didn't grasp the hours and effort behind these elaborations. As I got older, I tried the same dishes elsewhere, and I realized how good a cook she actually was. I remember her making mole for six hours and not realizing what it actually meant to do the same thing for that long. I remember how she would take the time to separate the beans to make sure we only had the best ones. In the restaurant, I'm doing these same things, and I understand how hard it is to cook in a proper way.

In Mexico and Latin America in general, the cuisine is very rich, very intense, but maybe not as delicate as it could be in other cuisines or cooking styles. That doesn't mean it's better or worse, only different, but now people are looking for these intense flavors and the complexity. These things take time and work, and it's something I learned from my grandmother.

**What stories does Mexican cuisine tell, and how do you retell those stories through the dishes here?**

We try to represent the traditions and rituals that you can find in Mexican cuisine, both in Niño Viejo and Hoja Santa, and the server plays an important role in explaining all these dishes. At Hoja Santa, you start with botanas, or small appetizers. We serve pickled vegetables, a small dish that comes at the beginning, and it's good because it makes you salivate. At the same time, it's something you find in the *casa de comidas* in Mexico that you can add to your food. Likewise, a shot of tequila is very typical as well, but rather than give you a proper shot, we serve a cubed shot, like a tequila marshmallow.

The staff also helps people understand the effort that goes into something like a mole. It's not just a sauce, like a marinara. It's actually something very important in Mexican families. We have to think about the economy. The protein in the dish is not the important part because not all of them could afford a huge piece of steak or beef. It's actually the sauce, and you would only have it at special occasions. So you start with the botanas, follow with the tequila shot and then you finish with a big celebration, which is the moles of different regions. You have different approaches as well for the mole, but it's always made with the same respect.

**Do you give the mole any creative twists?**

There is a mole called *mole de fiesta* that you would traditionally cook the day before a big wedding, but because not everybody can make it for the wedding day, the mole would cook for seven days after the wedding. If I cannot make the wedding, maybe I arrive three days later, and I can still try this mole, which is a special occasion. We serve this version here, but we added black garlic, which is a fermentation from Japan. This is not Mexican, but it's adapting, and it's a way of connecting ingredients from different cultures that might work together. It's creating synergies. We start with the base—which is always tomatoes, chilies, corn, herbs—and then adapt to whatever is in season. For instance, a tomato that's in season in January is not the same tomato in May, so the same mole is going to evolve according to the soil and ingredients and seasonal changes.

**Tell me about the unique twists you give the margaritas.**

Instead of simply lining the rim with salt, we created a salt foam [i.e., *aire de sal*] that we put on top. The margarita is something that started at elBulli. We also have El Pastor Margarita with pineapple that's like a taco pastor. As with the food, seasons rule the cocktail menu, and there's a chef's approach to make sure we always take advantage of the best seasonal fruits and ingredients. So if someone asks for a margarita it's no going to be the standard margarita, but there's going to be a twist that reflects the specific season. The same with the aguas frescas, a

wáter and juice drink without alcohol that is typical in Mexico. We make it fresh with juice that constantly changes during the season.

**What is the most important element of Mexican cuisine that you want to communicate to European diners?**

I'm not just serving food, I'm serving culture as well. I understand how bad Mexican cuisine has been treated [in Spain] for the past decade, and I want to make it right. I want to explain to them that this is the real Mexican cuisine. It can be hard to explain why a person should pay four euros for a taco when they can buy one somewhere else for one euro, but it costs more because there could be 18 people involved in making the taco and making sure you have the proper experience. There's a lot of work behind it. I want people to know there's more to Mexican cuisine than nachos, burritos and guacamole. It's a very rich cuisine and culture, and that is what we want to communicate through the restaurants.

