

At Guelaguetza, Fernando López Mateos sells Mexican imports and serves *garra de tigre* (below) and *mole verde*.



¡Viva Oaxaca!

¿Mole? ¡Olé! But that's not all you'll enjoy at L.A.'s newest wave of Mexican restaurants

By Ellen Melinkoff
Photographs by David Zaitz

Mole. One word, two syllables: *mo-lay*. The essence of Oaxacan food, mole is the ultimate sauce—the slow, perfect blending of complex flavorings. It's what establishes a Oaxacan cook's or restaurant's reputation.

These days, the reputation and quality of food from the Mexican state of Oaxaca (pronounced *wa-ha-ca*) is riding higher than ever, thanks to an influx of Oaxacans—including more than a few great cooks—to Los Angeles. *Los Angeles Times* figures put the Oaxacan population of the city as high as 250,000 people. Thankfully, that translates into a lot of mole for all of us.



Glorious food from a close community

Most of Los Angeles' Oaxacan immigrants arrived in the last 20 years, settling mainly in the Pico Union area and on the Westside around the Mar Vista neighborhood and Santa Monica. The community is tight-knit and distinctive. Many residents speak Zapotec and Mixtec as well as Spanish. Community groups sponsor annual fiestas and weekly basketball games—yes, basketball, which is more popular than soccer in the Sierra Juárez region of Oaxaca.

"We are one family, one circle," Fernando López Mateos says of the Oaxacan community in Los Angeles. And good food is an important part of that

circle: along with owning *El Oaxaqueño*, a local community newspaper, López Mateos owns two downtown restaurants, both named **Guelaguetza**. Here the moles are made three times a week and served *recalentado*—made one day then served the next, so the flavors have the chance to mature to perfection.

Puebla, Mexico, may be known as the birthplace of mole, and chocolate may be the ingredient it's known for. But Oaxacans in L.A. have taken mole to new heights. López Mateos's restaurants serve six different moles, including *mole negro*, the best known, made from chocolate, chilies, raisins, and cinnamon; *mole amarillo*, yellow and spicy, made from guajillo chilies, cumin, and cloves; and *mole estofado*, made without chilies and instead employing almonds, olives, garlic, and tomatillos.

But Oaxacan cuisine does not involve mole alone. Handmade *clayudas*, the Oaxacan tortilla, are crisp, thin, platter-size corncakes cooked on a clay griddle. They resemble tostadas when ordered with toppings. At either Guelaguetza, you'll also want to try the *memelas*—thick corn tortillas spread with beans and cheese—and *costilla de puerco*