

**FOOD**NEW YORK POST
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TAKING A BITE OUT OF L.A.

With a string of high-profile new openings, NYC's Mexican-restaurant scene claims the title of best coast**Dishes at Black Ant include diver scallops over toasted corn and oxtail tinga.**

BY CLAUDINE KO

WHEN Otto Cedeno first moved from Southern California to attend NYU in 2003, he recalls there being no decent Mexican food around. "I remember asking a roommate where there was good Mexican, and he responded [jokingly], 'What's Mexican food?'"

As far as East Coast vs. West Coast rivalries go, the West has long been the clear winner in this cuisine category, as New York restaurants have tended to veer toward Tex-Mex. But that's been changing, with new Mexican restaurants opening in the city, serving both authentic and highly creative, more South-of-the-border fare.

Last year, Cedeno opened his Tacos with fellow City chef Joseph LoNigro as exact replicas of what LoNigro spent three years developing in the tortillas, made in-house and filled with recipes of meat, onion, and fresh salsas, just like the California street tacos they grew up eating.

"[Within] what New York has to do with Mexican food, we're finding our own voice," Cedeno says, "whether it's by raising the bar, or simply focusing on the details and doing things that are really simple, real."

This city's Mexican-food scene is getting another big boost — and it's not just from the new arrivals. Last week, the city's City chef Enrique Olvera of the Flatiron restaurant Cosme in the Flatiron District was named one of the S. Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants for the year since 2010, and Cedeno was named one of the first time cooking in New York City, graduating from the Culinary Institute of America in 1999.

"I always wanted to come to New York because I was here before," says Olvera, who has built up a small restaurant empire back in Mexico — but nothing in Los Angeles.

Naturally, his new menu doesn't entail a single cheesy enchilada or a burrito combo. Instead, diners are

being offered a modest selection of different scenes.

This past May, chef Mario Hernandez opened Black Ant in the East Village, serving elevated Mexican entrees like cod-cheek tacos with garlic aioli. He remembers moving to New York City from Cuernavaca, Mexico, in the mid-'90s, when it was quite a different scene.

"The city was full of Tex-Mex restaurants," recalls Hernandez, whose father, Ramon, was one of the first chefs at the 30-year-old Rosa Mexicano, once the city's fanciest place to get South-of-the-border fare. "A couple years ago, the real revolution started happening in New York City, with young chefs experimenting with Mexican cuisine."

Crowds pack the vibrantly painted Empellon al Pastor (above) for buzzy dishes such as the namesake shredded-pork taco, served on house-made tortillas.

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Bobby Zau/NYP Post

Cosme chef Enrique Olvera serves a starter of burrata topped with wild "weeds."

Better tortillas are key, Stupak says. New York's Mexican food has often been lacking "because the missing ingredient is freshness." But no longer.

"The rule here is, the tortillas still have to have heat from the original cooking with it [when they're served]," he says. "It's the most important and fundamental cooking technique in Mexico. Imagine going [for] Italian food and the travesty of them reheating their pasta."

So, has NYC caught up with LA when it comes to Mexican food?

"It's way too early to call, and frankly, I think it's going to be an ongoing battle between California's traditional Mexican and New York's up-and-comers that are trying to do things with Mexican cuisine," Cedeno says.

Olvera, who will be opening a new Tacos location in the city by the end of the year, says conversation is changing, and the city is no longer suffering from a self-inflicted inferiority complex. "I think it's a back and forth between LA and New York," Cedeno says. "How do we eat California?" Cedeno says. "It's, 'How do we do amazing Mexican food in our neighborhood?'"

Cristina Ferrer (3)