

case study

High-End Mexican Food By Chef Enrique Olvera: An Entrepreneurial Examination

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Introduction

It is a common stereotype that when people think about Mexican food, most likely the first thing that comes to mind is tacos, spicy food, or even bottomless chips and salsa. Although Mexican food is consistently on the list of favorite ethnic foods in the United States, very few Mexicans eat stereotypical Mexican food served in America (Pilcher, 2017). In reality, over the last 10 years, authentic Mexican food has become more a representation of high end cuisine not only in Mexico itself, but all around the world. One man has helped this evolution of Mexican food to an elevated prestigious cuisine, a chef raised in Mexico born into humble origins: Chef Enrique Olvera. Chef Olvera is an alumnus from the Culinary Institute of America in New York, and has become the most successful chef from Mexico. Chef Olvera has received numerous accolades and his restaurant consistently retains a top 25 ranking on the S. Pellegrino World's 50 best restaurants since 2013 (Adler, 2015). This case explores Mexican cuisine and Chef Olvera's path to entrepreneurship.

Background

Enrique Olvera was born in Mexico City in 1976. Eventually, he moved to New York to enroll at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), where he would get his bachelor's degree in 1999. He earned various awards during the process like the Jacob Rosenthal Leadership Award and a gold medal from the New York Société Culinare Philanthropique (Culinary Institute of America, 2018). Upon graduation, Chicago was his next destination to work at Everest, one of the most exclusive restaurants in the area. After spending only six months working there, he took the knowledge he had gained in his formal CIA training and work in the American restaurant industry back to Mexico to start his next endeavor: opening his own restaurant. Christened after his nickname back in culinary school, Pujol was opened under the goal to re-imagine traditional and regional Mexican food, represented in a contemporary setting applying modern culinary preparation techniques (Starchefs, 2014).

Pujol moved steadily from a restaurant with a humble budget, to be the top restaurant in Mexico. In 2011, Pujol entered the S. Pellegrino World's 50 best restaurant list in the 49th position. Although the restaurant has seen fluctuation in its ranking on the list, Enrique

Olvera has led his restaurant to maintain a spot on the list since its first appearance, with its highest position reaching number 16 in 2015 (The World's 50 Best, 2015). Ferran Adria, one of the greatest chefs of all time and founder of the world famous El Bulli, stated that there was Mexican food before Enrique Olvera, and Mexican food after Enrique Olvera (Culinary Institute of America, 2018).

Beyond Pujol, Enrique Olvera is an established entrepreneur, which eventually led him to create Grupo Enrique Olvera. Together with Grupo Enrique Olvera, in 2008 he opened his second restaurant called La Purificadora. Later on, more projects would be established like a workshop focused on research and education called the gastro-deli Eno and Teo, and has contributed to Mexicana de Aviación (Starchefs, 2014). The next success from Olvera was his return to the city that saw him become a Chef, New York. By 2014 he opened Cosme in New York, retaining the same essence as in Pujol, serving high-end Mexican food. But how does Chef Olvera continue to be successful in a segment not known in the United States for its innovation and high quality?

Literature Review

Mexican Food

As mentioned, in the US, Mexican food is often considered a style of cuisine featuring a bowl of chips and salsa, with an additional order of a bowl of queso (melted cheese) for dipping. Certain aspects of Mexican food have been so commercialized in America that some cuisine served is not even food found in Mexico; namely, the pre-fried, hard taco shell served by restaurant giant Taco Bell (Pilcher, 2008). As a whole the Mexican restaurant industry continues to grow as immigration patterns favor Mexican restaurant openings across the US. In particular, the top three states for share of Mexican restaurants are Texas (16.7%), New Mexico (14.1%), and California (13.8%) (statistica, 2014). Moreover, in 2017 the number of Mexican restaurants overtook the number of dedicated pizzerias and are now 9% of all restaurants in the US (CHD Expert, 2017). Broken down by full service or limited service (quick service, fast casual and other options excluding table side service), 58% of Mexican restaurants are full-service while 42% were limited service. Within the limited service area, approximately 2/5 were Taco Bell restaurants, and overall more than 1/2 were chain restaurants. The full-service segment was on the opposite end of the spectrum with only 3% of full-service Mexican restaurants being a chain. The full-service segment included 85% casual dining, 3% upscale dining, and less than 1% were considered

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fine dining Mexican full-service restaurants (CHD Expert, 2017).

The menu costs of Mexican cuisine can vary based on restaurant style and geographic location. Guacamole, for example, a dish of spices, onions, tomatoes and mashed avocados will cost the most in New Jersey with an average cost of \$17 per bowl, whereas in Texas the average cost is just over \$5. This is likely due to the growing number of upscale Mexican restaurants in the northeast and faster, more economical options in the south (Mobayeni, 2017). While this price difference seems large, Mexican food is evolving in its outlets, innovation, price, and accessibility. The original food trucks, dubbed taco trucks, were ahead of the current street food trend when taco trucks would park outside mines and other worksites to feed predominantly Mexican workers (Brown, 2017). Today, food served from a taco truck does not necessarily mean that authentic Mexican food is being served as taco trucks are infusing innovative ingredients within classic handhelds like burritos and tacos. Chef Olvera is also infusing innovation in his cuisine like these taco trucks, but from the lens of fine dining Mexican food. His entrepreneurial endeavors highlight his commitment to innovation while remaining true to Mexican food traditions.

The entrepreneurial chef

Definitions for an entrepreneur or entrepreneurship may be unclear sometimes. A basic definition of an entrepreneur is a person who starts his or her own, new, and small business (Drucker, 2014). However, not every small business may be considered an entrepreneurial venture. The business itself might be similar to others under the same category. A better question may be who is an entrepreneur, and seminal studies have examined a trait based approach to forming a new organization. But in Chef Olvera's case, a behavioral approach, as suggested by Gartner (1988) provides a perspective that would provide the most insights into the celebrated Mexican chef.

Chefs becoming entrepreneurs is common in the restaurant industry. The most successful example of this transition from chef to entrepreneur is the aforementioned Spanish chef Ferran Adrià, and his world famous restaurant El Bulli. As the former first position of the S. Pellegrino World's 50 best restaurant list for multiple years, El Bulli was a successful business under the entrepreneurial guidance of Ferran Adrià, who focused on bringing new food preparation and presentation techniques to his restaurant (Drucker, 2014). Svejenova, Mazza, and Planellas (2007) revealed in their study four mechanisms which entrepreneur chefs implements change to bring uniqueness to their restaurants like El Bulli accomplished: creativity, theorization, reputation, and dissemination.

Creativity is key to a successful chef and innovative restaurant. Chef Enrique Olvera's creative thought process is inseparable from his aforementioned background, childhood, and memories. It is his innate desire to create that enables him to transform his personal history into signature dishes (Lee, 2018). A few items from his menus resemble

dishes that his mom used to cook for him when he was a child. Chef Enrique Olvera says that for every birthday or special occasion, his mom would make "pulpos en su tinta" for him, which is octopus that has been cooked into a stew with octopus's ink. To honor those memories from his childhood, he created a fried octopus dish with cashews' mole that is served at Cosme in New York. (Jeter, 2016). Other times, when Chef Enrique Olvera is creating dishes to develop his menu, he thinks about what he likes to eat. If towards the end of his menu he is planning to serve a dish that is high on carbs, he follows it by a lighter dish that may have anise. This spice is known for being a natural digestive, which helps to provide a feeling of relaxation. More importantly, when Chef Enrique Olvera is creating his menus, a crucial factor he considers is the challenge to represent traditional Mexican food, as authentic as possible, yet with a twist of modernization (Jeter, 2016).

Theorization is utilized to organize the chef's cuisine through record-keeping, sense-making and categorization. Followed by reputation, or the level of awareness of critics and colleagues by the chef's projections to important audiences through his food. Finally, dissemination, relies on public participations and spread of the own ideas, generating paradoxes and influencing change and future trends (Svejenova et al., 2007). To parallel Svejenova et al. (2007)'s work focusing on implementing entrepreneurial change, a theoretical framework of entrepreneurial restaurant performance should also be considered (Table 1). Lee, Hallak, and Sardeshmukh (2016) theorize that innovation and entrepreneurial self-efficacy are significantly related to restaurant performance. In their study human capital elements such as education and prior experience predict innovation as a function of product, service, process, management and marketing as well as entrepreneurial self-efficacy which is the belief in his or her owns entrepreneurial abilities.

The entrepreneurial path Chef Enrique Olvera took to accomplish his achievements, falls into the mechanisms previously mentioned to bring innovation to his restaurants. Mexican food eaten in Mexico has

Table 1
Variables of entrepreneurial theories related to restaurant change and performance

Svejenova, Mazza, and Planellas (2007) model of entrepreneurial change in restaurants	Lee, Hallak, and Sardeshmukh (2016) model of entrepreneurial restaurant performance
Creativity	Human Capital
Theorization	Innovation
Reputation	Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy
Dissemination	Restaurant Performance

Figure 1

Chef Olvera’s 1,000 day Mole Madre



looked the same for years; although the flavor remains consistent and extraordinary, the way to present the dishes typically lacks diversity staying in its traditional plating form. As Chef Olvera says, architects do not make buildings the same way they used to do it years ago, why would he keep making and plating food the same way it’s been done for years? An example of utilizing both change and entrepreneurial underpinnings to highlight Olvera’s processes is through examining his signature dish Mole Madre (Kamer, 2015). The dish is simple and complex at the same time, it is a perfect circle of fresh Mole, a sauce elaborated with multiple spices, chilies, and even chocolate, served on top of the Mole Madre. Chef Olvera’s Mole Madres took him 1,000 days to reach its peak perfection before serving to guests.

Svejenova et al. (2007) mentioned that theorization “is manifested in the restaurant’s guiding philosophy and its evolutionary map, used to order the developments in the chef’s cuisine. It takes place through record-keeping, sense-making, and categorization” (p.544). Organization is key to run a restaurant, and the more exclusive the restaurant is, the more regulations and special care to details must be addressed. One of the big changes Olvera brought to enhance Mexican food,

was to have a Mexican kitchen: eliminating the French-style layouts full of burners and sauté pans. At Pujol, the food is seared on a wood grill and then finalized in the oven. With tortillas serving as one of the signature components on Pujol’s menu, a comal for tortillas, which is a modified version of a flat-top grill, was installed in the kitchen (Pett, 2017). Chef Enrique Olvera ensures every person on his staff, especially cooks, have a specific job, certifying quality and consistence. As an example, one more addition Olvera installed for Pujol, was a smoker and a brick oven pit outside the restaurant. Worked by specific cooks, these employees are responsible for long preparation food like Barbacoa, a Mexican dish made with beef or lamb, slowly cooked with seasonings, in a similar manner to pulled pork. This provides the employees empowerment and ownership of the cuisine they are charged to create.

Moreover, part of being an entrepreneur is being involved in every aspect of the business as the reputation of the business will eventually flourish with hard work and consistency. Chef Olvera’s restaurant concepts while related with innovative flavor combinations, from a business perspective are not identical. Pujol for example, utilizes a tasting menu that will cost the guest approximately \$100 for six courses (Table 2). Cosme has an a la carte menu that has prices that range from \$20 to \$50 per plate. Olvera’s reputation by global critics and chefs gained him esteem and investors would approach to him to be executive chef of a restaurants they wanted to open, a deal that Olvera would always decline. With Cosme, however, one night he was at New York having dinner at the restaurant of a friend, when he met two investors with a different business model than the ones he usually would receive (Price, 2015). Chef Enrique Olvera understood the concept of investing money into a profitable business, which in turn will create more pride in the business, a reason why instead of being just the Chef of the restaurant, he accepted into an investment venture.

Svejenova et al. (2007) stated that for an entrepreneurial chef to succeed, dissemination was necessary. Dissemination in this context, means public participation and the spread of ideas, generating paradoxes and influencing change and future trends. The way Chef Enrique Olvera addressed this piece of the puzzle made a significant impact on his career

Table 2

Sample menu items from Chef Olvera’s restaurants Pujol and Cosme

Sample Items Summer 2018 – Pujol	Sample Items from February 2018- Cosme
Street Snacks	Uni tostada, avocado, bone marrow salsa, cucumber
Sea bass, cacahuatzintle juice, celery	Kampachi, sea buckthorn aguachile, turmeric, cucumber
Octopus, habanero ink, ayocote, veracruzana sauce	Manouri tatemado, nopal, cascabel, avocado
Mole madre, mole Nuevo	Grilled octopus, salsa veracruzana, blue eye potatoes
Roasted pineapple, molasses, cilantro	Flat iron steak, nixtamalized celery root, herb mojo
Chocolate, pennyroyal, pinole, caramelized banana	Broccolini, pistachio pipián

and in turn established him as a worldwide representative of modern Mexican cuisine. Olvera's used his connections with several international chefs from around the world to give presentations to young Mexican culinary students; providing a memorable experience and encouraging the students to pursue their dreams. By 2012, Enrique Olvera founded and organized an annual international food symposium called Mesamerica. One of the reasons why Chef Olvera wanted to create this conference was to support young talent in Mexico. Culinary students in college may not have enough resources to experience global cuisine by visiting restaurants or attending symposiums where famous chefs present, so he used his resources to provide a more affordable experience to the students. Moreover, this is also considered a strategy to bring business and tourism to Mexico (Fine Dining Lovers, 2014). International chefs visiting Mexico would also be able to experience traditional and authentic Mexican food, increasing awareness of what real Mexican food is, helping to spread the message of quality and authenticity of this Latin cuisine.

Conclusions and the Future

The growing success of Chef Olvera presents an interesting challenge, can becoming too famous be detrimental to the success of the chef? When chefs serve as a judge on a television cooking show, or host their own program on a television network, expectations are generated by the guests and could be higher than when visiting a typical restaurant. Chef Olvera has been featured on Chef's Table, has had featured segments on Good Morning America, and has starred on the hit YouTube series Munchies.

While the publicity is certain to create a larger consumer base, the microscopic focus can help or hinder a chef's long-term reputation. Bollyut (2018) presented a list of the 15 worst celebrity chef owned restaurants which included personalities like Guy Fieri, Gordon Ramsay, Bobby Flay, Wolfgang Puck, and Mario Batali. While Olvera is still growing in popularity, these chefs have developed personas which are now attached to their celebrity and restaurant status. For example, Gordon Ramsey is the foul-mouthed, short tempered chef who expects excellence from his students and clients on his television programs (Buford, 2007) and now through his twitter account. With the growth and presence of Enrique Olvera, is he poised to develop a persona and celebrity chef status?

With yet another new concept focusing on tacos set to open in the Los Angeles Arts District across from a multi-region Italian eatery (Elliott, 2018), Chef Enrique Olvera is certain to expand his creative culinary ventures and share his innovations with the world.

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