



At Javelina in New York, Chef Matt Post upscales chili con carne, the mother sauce of Tex-Mex, with chopped beef.

# THE POT THICKENS

Tex-Mex's  
revival  
uncovered

BY NOVID PARSİ



## SAY “TEX-MEX,”

and most people conjure up images of greasy, low-quality food that’s Mexican-ish at best.

“A lot of people have this idea of Tex-Mex as gut bombs on a plate—it’s heavy, it’s not good for you,” says José Ralat, the Dallas-based author of the upcoming book *“American Tacos,”* (University of Texas Press). “That’s not true anymore.”

If anything, Tex-Mex has become more refined in recent years. A rise in scratch sauces, infusions of higher-end ingredients and an openness to subverting tradition has elevated Tex-Mex from a “been-there, ate that” standby into a cuisine capable of tapping into diners’ growing love for Latin American spices, chilies and queso.

According to 2018 study by Datassential, Tex-Mex appears on 39 percent of menus but 54 percent of diners say they “love” or “like” the cuisine. Thus opportunities abound to slip Tex-Mex into all kinds of concepts, from breakfast spots and brunch menus to barbecue joints or chef-driven small plates.

### Make a Better Chili Sauce

Traditional Mexican chili sauce made with boiled peppers evolved into chili con carne, which generally consists of beef, tomato paste, garlic, onion and celery (see photo on page 12). Consider it the Tex-Mex version of marinara—apply it to anything.

At Javelina in New York, Chef Matt Post loads his chili with chopped beef and enough spices—Spanish paprika, Mexican oregano, cumin, cloves, all-spice and more—to rival an old-school mole. “You can also use the chili con carne in a Fritos pie—which is very Texan,” Post says. Just top Fritos chips with the chili, diced onion and shredded cheese.

### Tortilla Power

Here’s the perennial query: “Do you want corn or flour tortillas?” The answer, when it comes to Tex-Mex, is both. The tortillas for enchiladas are made with corn, while flour tortillas come on the side. “The flour tortillas are like the bread component—you use them to sop up the beans and rice,” says Nancy Nichols, a Dallas-based author who has written about Texas food for over two decades.

The flour tortilla speaks to Texas’ proximity to northern Mexico, where flour is more common than in the rest of the country. A sign of the new and improved, fresher Tex-Mex, Ralat says, is a restaurant that makes its own tortillas—“with corn sourced from Mexico,” he says.



### Fajita Burger

Executive Chef Alex Padilla  
The Original Ninja's on  
Navigation, Houston

10 ounces ground fajita skirt steak  
1 teaspoon flour  
1 medium egg  
1 tablespoon breadcrumbs  
Kosher salt, as needed  
Freshly ground black pepper, as needed  
2 ounces Oaxaca cheese  
½ ounce garlic butter  
1 whole poblano pepper, grilled, sliced into strips  
2 to 3 slices red onion, grilled  
1 challah bun  
1 tablespoon chipotle mayonnaise  
½ avocado, sliced

**Combine** ground beef, flour, egg and breadcrumbs. Season with salt and pepper and form 2 patties.

**Cook** on flat grill at 375 F until medium-rare or medium, about 5 minutes each side. Place cheese on patty to melt; remove and let rest.

**Melt** the garlic butter and add peppers and onions. Saute until tender.

**Toast** challah bun; spread mayo on bottom slice.

**Place** grilled patties on bottom slice; top with onions, peppers and avocado. Makes 1 burger.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EVA KOLENKO





A thing of legend—corn tortillas puffed in the fryer and paired with queso—can be found in Ford Fry's new cookbook, "Tex-Mex Traditions, Innovations, and Comfort Foods South of the Border," (Clarkson Potter).

Get the recipe and more on the new cookbook at [USFoods.com/foodfanatics](http://USFoods.com/foodfanatics).



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\*Datassential MenuTrends, U.S. menu penetration growth 2014-2018.



Get the word on Ford Fry's new cookbook, "Tex-Mex: Traditions, Innovations, and Comfort Foods South of the Border," (Clarkson Potter) at [USFoods.com/foodfanatics](http://USFoods.com/foodfanatics).



PHOTOGRAPH BY EVA KOLEMO

## Queso Fundido with Bacon Fat Tortilla

Chef-owner Ford Fry  
Superica, Atlanta, Charlotte, Houston

**2 tablespoons unsalted butter**  
**6 ounces chanterelle, hen-of-the-woods or black trumpet mushrooms, cut into large pieces**  
**2 sprigs thyme**  
**Kosher salt**  
**8 ounces Chihuahua cheese, shredded**  
**1 serrano chili, thinly sliced**  
**¼ cup cilantro leaves**  
**Bacon-fat tortillas, recipe follows**

In a medium skillet, melt butter. Add mushrooms and thyme and cook over moderately high heat, undisturbed, until lightly browned, about 2 minutes. Season mushrooms with salt and cook, tossing occasionally, until browned and crisp, about 6 minutes. Transfer to paper towel-lined plate; discard thyme sprigs.

In a small cast-iron skillet, broil the cheese 8 inches from a preheated broiler until just melted, about 1 minute. Top cheese with the mushrooms, chili and cilantro and serve immediately with the warm tortillas.

**To make bacon-fat tortillas:** Combine 1 cup of flour and ¾ teaspoon of kosher salt. Rub 2 tablespoons cold rendered bacon fat and 2 tablespoons vegetable shortening into flour until mixture is crumbly. Slowly add ½ cup warm water at medium speed until ball forms, adding more flour if necessary; the dough will be moist but should pull away from side of bowl. Knead until dough is smooth, shiny and elastic, about 10 minutes. Cover with plastic wrap and rest for 45 minutes. Press out large rounded tablespoons of dough with tortilla press. Cook tortillas in batches over moderately high heat in a cast-iron skillet, turning once, until lightly browned. Makes 6 tortillas.

At Superica, Chef Ford Fry goes one step further by making bacon-fat tortillas, which are paired with a queso fundido made with chanterelle mushrooms. Fry heaps on the serrano chili, thyme and melted Chihuahua cheese, which gives the dish a spicy-garden-sweet twang to offset the funkiness of the mushrooms. It's proof that everything—even a Tex-Mex staple—can benefit from a little extra earthiness and an undercurrent of bacon.

### Create a Combo

The standard bearer of the Tex-Mex table—as well as the dish often used to judge the worth of any Tex-Mex restaurant—is the house's combo platter.

The standard template includes a cheese enchilada covered in chili con carne, a crispy beef taco or tamale, refried beans, yellow rice and guacamole on top of shredded iceberg lettuce (a "guacamole salad"). For a combo that delivers more, look to Garcia's in San Antonio, which serves two cheese enchiladas and a pork tamale, all under chili con carne and even more cheese, plus a crispy beef taco, rice, and beans cooked in lard and bacon fat.

### All Day Tacos

Anyone can pile an egg scramble and sausage into a tortilla and call it a breakfast taco. With tacos reaching a saturation point, you need to get more creative. At Thunderbird in Los Angeles, cage-free local eggs become a French omelet filled with housemade chorizo and cheese.

The eggs and chorizo are topped with queso Oaxaca, salsa ranchera, cilantro and shoestring potatoes, and served with country potatoes and a mixed green salad.

It's a hulking dish—some of breakfast's greatest hits on one plate—that has value and novelty, but it also underscores Thunderbird's from-scratch ethos and its commitment to using humanely raised products—two qualities Angelenos prize.

"I feel that cooking the eggs and chorizo in this style really elevates the dish and takes away from your standard egg scramble," says Chef-owner Justin Farmer. "Customers love the contrast of the rich, fluffy eggs and the crunchy shoestring potato fries on top."



Breakfast tacos from Thunderbird in Los Angeles.

# TEX-MEX GETS MORE MEX

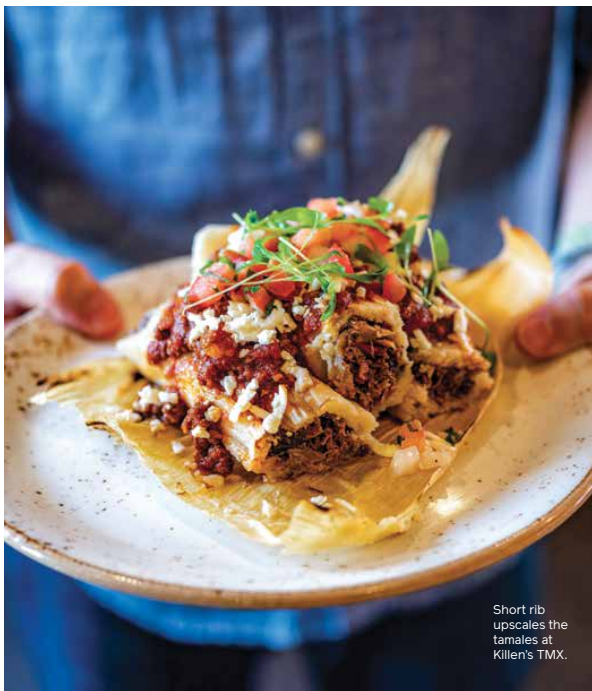
In Texas, Tex-Mex is increasingly drawing more inspiration from south-of-the-border flavors.

Here are three easy ways to ensure you properly capture Tex-Mex's mixed heritage.

» Use Mexican black beans rather than traditional Texan pinto.

» Instead of the ubiquitous processed American queso, swap in Oaxaca and Chihuahua cheeses.

» Skip the common Mediterranean oregano, in favor of the more floral Mexican oregano.



Short rib upscales the tamales at Killen's TMX.

#### Burgers Cross Borders

In 2012, while on a flight from Los Angeles to Houston, Ninfa's Executive Chef Alex Padilla fell asleep craving a burger. "I had a dream I was eating a fajita burger," he says. So when Padilla landed, he created his own. Padilla uses eggs and breading to hold the meat together since skirt steak, which typically is used for fajitas, doesn't have as much fat as regular beef. "The poblano and Oaxaca cheese add that extra little bit of Tex-Mex flavor," Padilla says. "Burgers are Americans' fast-food choice, but this adds the rich flavors of fajitas. It's like sharing both cultures."

#### Bring on the Tex-Mex Q

When barbecue legend Ronnie Killen opened his first Tex-Mex restaurant, Killen's TMX in Pearland, Texas, last fall, he insisted on making everything from scratch—eschewing chili powders for fire-roasted peppers and housemade chili sauces. Killen's TMX also makes the masa for its corn tortillas.

But the real evolution began at his sister restaurant, Killen's Barbecue, where he conjured up everything from short-rib tamales to brisket enchiladas. No one had tried that before, says Killen, but when they hit the menu they sold phenomenally. If you're going to smoke things, go with post oak and pecan wood. "Tex-Mex is changing, and it's huge right now, especially in the barbecue scene," Killen says, noting chef-driven trends like wagyu brisket tacos. "You didn't used to have classically trained chefs making Tex-Mex. Now you do." ■



## YES, LARD

It's not true Tex-Mex cooking if you're not using lard, says Nancy Nichols, a Dallas-based author who studies Texas food trends and history.

For authentic refried beans, boil them first, then fry them in lard. Then make sure to look for a bit of a Tex-Mex sheen, says Ford Fry, owner of Superica in Atlanta. "The beans should be on the looser side and packed with housemade lard so it shines a little bit," he says.

#### Ronnie Killen's Short-rib Tamales

*Chef-owner Ronnie Killen  
Killen's TMX, Pearland, Texas*

**6 dozen dried corn husks**  
**10 pounds masa**  
**1 teaspoon baking powder**  
**½ cup salt**  
**2 pounds lard**  
**2 cups chicken broth**  
**14 pounds short rib, cooked and**  
**String or corn husk strips for tying tamales**

**Soak** corn husks in hot water until pliable, about 30 minutes; drain.

**Combine** masa, baking powder and salt in large bowl. Add masa to lard, alternating with chicken broth. Mix well until masa is consistency of playdough; set aside.

**To assemble** tamales, spread ¼-inch thickness of masa to cover a 4x4-inch square, about 3 ounces, in center of husk. Spoon about 3 ounces meat on the masa. Tightly fold sides, vertically, so masa encloses meat filling. Fold husk on the bottom edge over and tie with string or corn husk strips. Repeat with remaining corn husks. Cover steamer and steam tamales, bottom side down, for about 1 hour. Makes about 75 tamales.

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