

My Mexico

Chasing dreams

Irish Chef Darren Walsh talks about the burgeoning food scene in Guadalajara today, and how he creates dishes from scratch in his restaurant Lula Bistro. By **Jake Kilroy**

Darren Walsh stands before a table of guests in Lula Bistro, the acclaimed restaurant he opened in 2011. Addressing a small sea of fascinated faces, the Irish chef explains the eye-catching dish that sits before the table's lone vegan. It has replaced a cut of fish with a parsnip in a loaf of organic blue corn dough with strong earthy aromas, conceived to complement the vegetable's naturally sweet and creamy texture. It's not the final presentation, Walsh clarifies, only a step in the cooking process.

This is Walsh in his element.

"When creating new dishes, there are many factors to consider," he tells his rapt audience. "There are the obvious aspects, such as seasonality, taste, texture, and balance of each dish, but no matter the cooking technique, the food should, above all, taste great."

Great expectations

The philosophy radiates within Walsh, following a long and illustrious history in the kitchens of everyone from Marco Pierre White to Gordon Ramsay.

"My grandfather had a bakery," Walsh recalls. "I would spend weekends with him, and I would love the smells, watching my grandfather making bread. I was hooked! I wanted to be him."

This eventually led a 14-year-old Walsh to a summer job washing dishes at an upscale French restaurant near his home in Donegal, Ireland. Over the years, he rose through the ranks, expanding his résumé

and furthering his education. Sadly, his grandfather passed away shortly before Walsh graduated from culinary school. But memories of him continue to guide the chef.

"I'm lucky because I make bread every day in my restaurant, and the smells bring me back. It's like he never left," Walsh says.

While working as a private chef for business magnates who hosted the likes of Tom Cruise and U.S. presidents, Walsh made regular trips to Mexico over the course of seven years.

In 2011, he decided it was time to visit on a more permanent basis. "Back then, I really didn't expect to fall in love with Mexico. But I did – and I fell hard," he remembers. "Everywhere you look, there is something exotically beautiful, intriguing, and colorful, and I felt at home here. The people are amazing, and of course the food is outstanding. Mexico opened her arms and accepted me like one of her own, and I love her and respect her for that.

"[Guadalajara] reminds me of Ireland in the early 1990s: free and full of life – a city growing so fast that we cannot keep up with it. I love that feeling."

Within five months of opening Lula Bistro, Walsh was awarded the Distinción Bohemia, a recognition of Mexico's best chefs.

"I wanted to give the city the first new restaurant with a chef who puts his name on his menu and is not afraid to express himself," by way of a mission statement.

A decade ago, the gourmet world in Guadalajara was nothing like it is now – and nothing

like it has historically been in Mexico City, observes Walsh.

Today's locals are spoiled for choice with many celebrated eateries to choose from.

"The food scene in Guadalajara is amazing right now! There is something for everyone," says Walsh, who adores spending time in the markets of Mercado Libertad as well as in the restaurants of his rivals.

Keeping it in the family

By his own admission, Walsh has learned a great deal from fellow chefs around town and even his own cooks, intrigued with products and ingredients only available to him in recent years. According to the chef, every dish he's created in Mexico is brand new and developed completely from scratch.

"People often ask me, 'What is your style of cooking?' I find this difficult to answer," muses Walsh, known for his innovative and experimental cooking. "Rather than creating a style, cooking is about creating an experience.

"Trends change all the time," he says, and he crafts each new dish to be better than the one it's

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replacing on the menu. This goes for both Lula Bistro and Casa de Piedra, the eatery Walsh recently opened with his wife Fernanda Covarrubias, owner of local dessert restaurant La Postrería.

Covarrubias is "one of the best and most respected pastry chefs in Mexico right now," raves Walsh. "I'm blessed. I love what I do and to be able to share that with the person whom you love most of all in the world, it's magical. I have adapted really well to life in Mexico."

Even after decades in a fast-paced, ever-changing industry, Walsh is at home in the kitchen, "still learning every day and smelling fresh bread," the memory of his grandfather kneading dough often with him.

"I think I have been lucky with all the wonderful things that have happened to me in my career – the amazing and wonderful people who helped me be who I am today," Walsh says. "I'm humbled, and I have a profound respect for what I do every day in my kitchen."

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