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[Arch/Design: Rivera Restaurant & Museum Tamal](#)

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words by Jason Dean

John Sedlar is on a mission. The renowned chef has

long been an advocate of Latin cuisine. Soon, he will have two outlets—one gastronomic and one cultural—with which to champion that cause.

Rivera, his new fine dining eatery, is scheduled to open in late November. Sedlar says his chief objective is to break stereotypes that people have about Latin dishes: Namely, that they're simple and unimaginative.

The second element of Sedlar's culinary endeavor is Museum Tamal, an interactive museum that will

showcase the rich history, innovations, and ingredients of Mexican, Central American, Spanish, and Southwestern U.S. fare.

It's been an uphill battle, he says, but the public is beginning to warm up to the styles of the Latin kitchen, which favors roasting and charring foods with natural, bright colors and seasonings. "For a long time, Latin American cuisine was perceived as second-class," Sedlar says. "There was a general resistance. Even if a dish had lobster, people thought, 'if it's Mexican, it must be \$6.95.' Now, it's starting to take its place alongside other emerging cuisine such as Chinese."

Sedlar says the search is still underway for a permanent home for Museum Tamal, but he knows it will be somewhere in downtown L.A., close to the South Park area, which he calls the "ground zero" of the area's indigenous culture. "We've started to assemble exhibits. There's a collection of exhibitions on ingredients, techniques of the cooking processes, flavor profiles, and food origins," he explains. "In the convents, the nuns cooked extensively with various kind of flowers, including marigolds, rose petals, pansies.... The floral flavors were infused into the sauces and the petals were also used as garnishes."



To create the look and feel he envisioned for his restaurant, Sedlar turned to architect Eddie Sotto. The two had previously worked together on the Encounter Restaurant at LAX. Sotto wanted to create a modern Mayan feel and accentuate the long, rectangular shape of the space, which occupies the ground floor of the Met Lofts on Flower Street.

The restaurant is divided into three rooms, each with its own character. The more formal Spanish room emphasizes the vibrant culture right down to the lamps, which are fashioned as conquistador helmets. The Samba Room, done up in oranges, mustard yellows and leather, also includes a cocktail bar. The ceiling, ascending like layers on the inside of a pyramid, is Mayan inspired, says Sotto. Finally, the Playa Bar is a nod toward how people are eating today, with tapas, sushi, and artistically presented toppings like cilantro, chiles (jalapeño, guajillo, serrano), charred pasilla, and candied and roasted garlic.

A visual centerpiece of Rivera integrates bottles of tequila (custom-bottled for the restaurant) that can be removed for customers. Blocks of stone house the bottles, which form an exterior of glass

“ribbons” complemented by walnut carved in repeating patterns. The tasting chairs adhere to a similar design. Even the cap on each tequila bottle is solid walnut etched with the same pattern. The bronze exterior introduces the theme before patrons even enter the restaurant. “We wanted a different color scheme for the flooring,” says Sotto. “We used a Brazilian bamboo marbled with stripes of bright green.”

The menu will feature selections that incorporate “molecular gastronomy” which utilizes light, savory foams that vary in consistency from shaving cream to cappuccino foam, according to Sedlar. “There’s a big interest in lightening food,” he says. “Even the French are reducing their creams and butter.”

Sedlar says Rivera will be the premier Latin restaurant on the West Coast. In spring 2009, the restaurant will give a preview showing of three to five exhibits that will be permanent installations at Museum Tamal. Stay tuned: with financial backing expected to be in the \$25–35 million range, the museum, when completed, will give downtown L.A. the cultural clout to match the rich history and flavors of Latin cuisine. *For more information, go to: www.museumtamal.org*

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