

## THE FIND

## Moles and much more

La Huasteca chef Rocio Camacho focuses on pre-Columbian cuisine in Lynwood.

MILES CLEMENTS

Cars cruise through the roundabout under the waning afternoon sun, leisurely circling a reconstruction of Mexico City's Angel of Independence. First-timers marvel at the faux-colonial facade seemingly imported block by block from Guadalajara. Lynwood's Plaza Mexico is Latin America the L.A. way, an elaborate set onto which visitors can graft memories and forge new ones.

La Huasteca is the shopping center's grandest stage: sylvan murals that appear to recede into forested infinity, wrought-iron chandeliers that could light up a whole town. For six years, the restaurant has been a reliable outpost of high-end *alta cocina*, a study mostly of Mexico's Huasteca region. Six months ago, however, the kitchen came under the command of chef Rocio Camacho.

Camacho earned the attention of an entire city at Moles La Tía in East Los Angeles. The César Chávez Avenue restaurant is where she transformed the very notion of mole, where vague ideas of chocolaty sauces exploded into a prismatic array of cheery yellows, herbaceous greens and brilliant magentas. Camacho's move arrived by word of blogger Javier Cabral, who was also instrumental in raising the profile of Moles La Tía. Now at La Huasteca, Camacho has unveiled a refined new menu.

Many of those moles came with Camacho, but her focus here is on a wider exploration of pre-Columbian cuisine. It's a passion for the native ingredients and techniques of Mexico owed to her Mixtec ancestry and the in-



GLENN KOENIG Los Angeles Times

**GRAND:** With its elaborate décor, La Huasteca is the jewel of Plaza Mexico.

## La Huasteca

## LOCATION

3150 E. Imperial Highway, Suite 100, Lynwood, (310) 537-8800, [www.lahuasteca.com](http://www.lahuasteca.com).

## PRICE

Appetizers, \$3 to \$13.95; soups and salads, \$5 to \$9.95; entrees, \$10.95 to \$18.95; *aguas frescas* and desserts, \$4 to \$6.95.

## DETAILS

Open 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Lot parking. Credit cards accepted. Full bar.

heritance of four generations of Oaxacan culinary tradition.

Few bites are as blissful as the squash blossom empanadas. These aren't leaden turnovers forgotten at the bottom of the fryer — they're glorious half-moons of fresh masa bursting with braised squash blossoms, each streaked with *crema* and served alongside a mound of guacamole.

The cactus salad — slack spears of *nopales* tossed with tomatoes and onions and dressed with a tart cactus



GLENN KOENIG L.A. Times

**SALAD:** *Nopalitos y chapulines*.

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## Want more?

Go online to see more pictures of La Huasteca and some of the dishes on its menu.

fruit vinaigrette — can convert even those wary of the slimy succulent. So can the verdant pineapple-cactus *agua fresca*.

*Puchero vaquero* nearly makes a meal. It's a cowboy's stew of jerky-like *cecina*, hunks of plantain, sweet potato, carrot and *chaya* leaves, spinach-like greens of a shrub from the Yucatán. Less crowded is the seafood-rich *caldo de piedra*, a "stone soup" into which a white-hot rock is set to speed cooking.

There's Camacho's coffee mole over shrimp and pis-

tachio mole over salmon, both as vibrant as ever. Yet neither stains your memory quite like the brick-red *pescado tikin-rik*, a bass filet bathed in achiote, sour orange juice and *xcatic* chiles that's wrapped in banana leaves and grilled. The fish is as finely cooked as cuts twice its price, the faint perfume of banana leaf punctured by the citric sting of the sauce. Daydreams will be spent reimagining those flavors.

*Barbacoa* is ingeniously roasted with *mezcal* to replicate the smokiness of an earthen oven. Chicken breasts are split open, stuffed with refried beans and baby shrimp and drenched in *hoja santa* sauce, which mimics the herbal subtleties of anise and mint.

Camacho's *manchamanteles* still shines a burnished mahogany; the *vela de novia* still radiates wedding-dress white. But the chosen dish here is the mole *de los dioses*, a primordial mole that might well have been extracted from the center of the Earth. It's seemingly ancient and staggeringly complex, a first-rate mole *negro* fortified with *huillacoche*. Destiny united chef and recipe — the labor of four generations poured over a pair of rosy beef medallions.

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