

THE FIND

Holy mole, this place is good

BY MILES CLEMENTS

For six years, La Huasteca 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, where she transformed the very notion of mole, crafting chocolatey sauces that 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. At La Huasteca, Camacho has unveiled a 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 inheritance of four generations of Oaxacan culinary tradition.

Few bites are as blissful as the squash blossom empanadas, glorious half-moons of fresh masa bursting with braised flowers, 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 fruit vinaigrette — can convert even those wary of the slimy succulent.

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 pistachio mole over salmon, both as vibrant as ever. Yet neither stains your memory quite like the brick-red *pescado tikin-xik*, 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



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La Huasteca in Lynwood specializes in moles, and focuses on a wider exploration of pre-Columbian cuisine.

perfume of banana leaf punctured by the citric sting of the sauce.

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.

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 *huitlacoche*. Destiny united chef and recipe — the labor of four generations poured over a pair of rosy beef medalions.

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