

# SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

## *sensibility*

LA'S TACO KING **CARLOS SALGADO** LAUNCHES A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH ACE HOTEL & SWIM CLUB THIS MONTH TO BRING A MORE MATURE UNDERSTANDING OF MULTICULTURAL CUISINE TO PALM SPRINGS.

WORDS BY **KRISTIN SCHARKEY**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ANNE WATSON PHOTOGRAPHY**

The first item I order off the menu at Taco María is the Caesar salad, because chef Carlos Salgado said it was “one of the best you’ve ever had.” At first bite, I have to concede that he’s right.

Bright bursts of Meyer lemon surprise amid the crunch of little gems, Parmesan cheese and sourdough croutons, all slathered in a slick anchoñade dressing. It’s an unexpected – yet incredibly satisfying – introduction to the Alta California cuisine served up at the Costa Mesa restaurant, named one of the top five eateries on *Los Angeles Times* food critic Jonathan Gold’s list of 101 best restaurants in Los Angeles for the past two years.

Even better news? This month, Salgado’s sensibilities are coming a bit closer to home.

The James Beard Foundation Best Chef: West award semifinalist launches a new program at Ace Hotel & Swim Club in Palm Springs on Feb. 1, bringing an exciting level of culinary caliber to the Coachella Valley. While his Orange County eatery is an intimate homage to his family’s Mexican heritage, the Ace presents an opportunity to explore completely different parts of his personality.

“If Taco María is my very personal statement about the romance and the ethics and the sensibilities that I have as a chef, and the responsibilities that I feel as a chef, then here is – to me – a place to have more fun with the cuisine and be a little bit more irreverent,” Salgado explains.

Local ingredients like cactus, grapefruit and dates will speak louder on the menu, says Salgado, described by *The Orange County Register’s* Paul Hodgins



### IF YOU GO:

King’s Highway  
701 E. Palm Canyon Dr.  
760-325-9900  
kingshighwaydiner.com



Clockwise from left: Taco María tacos; guacamole estilo japonés; aguachile; erizo de mar, taco de camarones

as having “a food scientist’s fascination with agriculture.” Salgado says he’s been working his back channels to secure a rare Mexican ingredient – huitlacoche – for a new entrée at King’s Highway: steak frites Mexicaine finished with a compound butter of the corn fungus, and served with a jus made of slow-roasted veal, oxtail and charred onion stock seasoned with mescal.

You’ll still be able to order some of the diner’s beloved fare, but Salgado’s Alta California cuisine is worth a try. I’ve never eaten a richer, more flavorful taco than his arrachera iteration at Taco María: Juicy hangar steak is covered in roasted chilies and queso, and topped with Applewood bacon. I mean, seriously? A steak taco with bacon? In a close second is the simple yet savory pescado frito, a Baja California-inspired fish taco with black cod, cabbage, grapes and charred scallion aioli. Both are encased in tortillas made – start to finish – with heirloom corns. These special tortillas will be served in Palm Springs, but Salgado is quick to caution that King’s Highway is not becoming “Taco María 2.”

“King’s Highway will not become a Mexican restaurant, but a strong Mexican influence is very important,” Salgado says. “Regionalism – strict regionalism and academic notions of authenticity – they’re not modern Mexican nor are they Southern Californian ideals. We’re very syncretic, very fun-loving. [There’s a] very open-minded, open-hearted culture here, especially here

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Carlos Salgado

in Palm Springs. It's such an accepting and open-minded community that we want to bring those influences here. But as someone who's first generation Mexican-American, born of immigrant parents here, traditionalism is very important to me and a respect for our culture is very important to me but rigid traditionalism I don't think is necessarily relevant or appropriate here. ... I imagine the restaurant itself having more of a confident, modern, multicultural, Mexican-American but primarily American and Southern Californian personality."

Salgado has hired Orange County chef Carlo Guardado to run day-to-day operations in Palm Springs; also of Mexican heritage, Guardado recently helmed the opening of Ballast Point in Long Beach. "He, like me, wants to dig deep into his roots," Salgado says. "Chef to chef, we hit it off straight away. ... It takes one to know one in this field."

All menus – from King's Highway to The Amigo Room – will differ, though the cross-cultural influence will remain a consistent theme. Salgado says he's inspired by the Southwestern flavors of Pioneertown's Pappy & Harriet's ("When I go there, it's like I'm coming home") as well as the barbecue cultures of northern Mexico – he's particularly excited about serving Sonoran dogs by the pool. The street food cultures of Tijuana and Los Angeles, he says, will also be mined for inspiration.

"In LA, with the strong street food culture, all the different multicultural influences make their way into Mexican food," Salgado explains. "Before it becomes LA cuisine – any other cultural influence – it's almost like it's filtered through a strong Mexican influence. That's one of the things that's very exciting about LA cuisine and that's something that's appropriate for us here in Palm Springs as well. I imagine Palm Springs and King's Highway as being a hub and drawing influences from the spokes of these surrounding regions."

Ultimately, Salgado hopes to enhance the literacy of modern cuisine in Palm Springs, which has traditionally been divided between smaller, independently-owned local restaurants and opulent, tourist-driven hotels. "It seems to me that it's only recently that young chefs are returning to Palm Springs and taking that risk to do a restaurant with a personal point of view and bringing other influences in," Salgado explains. "We're part of that new trend here at King's Highway to modernize a little bit, understand the surrounding area a little bit better [and] draw influences from a wider range of places and cuisines."

The concept is promising, and the chefs are more than equipped to execute. If I could have but one request? Please, Mr. Salgado, don't take my beloved crispy jidori chicken sandwich off the King's Highway menu. 🍴

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