

# BACK TO SCHOOL AT AZUL Y ORO

## Mexico's culinary traditions are being preserved and enjoyed at this C.U. eatery

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN  
Special to The News

If you're looking for some of the best Mexican food in Mexico City you'll have to go back to school.

In the middle of the campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, or UNAM, sits the unassuming but excellent Restaurante Azul y Oro. Named after the college colors, it's the baby of chef and culinary investigator Ricardo Muñoz Zurita.

Muñoz deserves "national living treasure" status for his tireless work conserving and documenting our country's rich culinary traditions. He is author of the "Diccionario Enciclopédico de Gastronomía Mexicana," an invaluable resource for any home chef, as are his other cookbooks.

His restaurant is housed in a sunny second floor space across from the Sala Nezahualcōyotl music hall and the new University Museum of Contemporary Art, and is popular with students and university staff alike. An umbrella-covered patio area offers an appealing outdoor dining option.

The menu has Mexican standards as well as less common specialties. Start with a "tamalito de acelga" (a tamal stuffed with swiss chard and fresh cheese), or the soothing and savory crema de cilantro. Standard "international" salads are available for those who want something light – the salad with pear and blue cheese is generous and perfectly dressed. There's even a large plate of cooked vegetables topped with a blue cheese sauce for vegetarians.

But it's the house specialties that I go for. My favorite is the "ravioles crujientes rellenos de pato," a fusion dish of deep-



The chef recommends Pescado Tikin-Xic with beans and banana.



Chef Ricardo Muñoz Zurita brings haute cuisine to the UNAM.

fried wontons filled with duck then bathed in a deep, dark chocolate Oaxacan mole.

An unusual vegetarian option is the "enchiladas de jamaica orgánica," fragrant tortillas filled with tart, fruity hibiscus flowers and augmented by a mildly spicy tomato and chipotle sauce.

Desserts are worth the calories. On my "don't miss" list is the hot chocolate – made either with milk or water. The chocolate itself comes from Oaxaca and is a special blend containing 30 percent almonds.

### SITTING WITH THE CHEF

On a recent balmy afternoon, I sat down with chef Muñoz during a quiet moment before the lunch hour to investigate the investigator. He's quiet but passionate, and very determined when it comes to the subject of Mexican cuisine.

### What was your concept for this restaurant?

I wanted to do something different. Azul y Oro is the

only place of its kind in Mexico serving carefully researched and authentic traditional dishes made with very high quality ingredients. We didn't need another expensive Polanco-type place. I wanted it to be accessible, unpretentious, but of high quality.

### How do you characterize "traditional" dishes?

Foods prepared and presented with respect for their origins. For example, we do a duck with black mole from a carefully researched Oaxacan recipe – other than the fancy presentation, the flavors are those of Oaxaca. In fact, we import all necessary ingredients from the source. We use artisanal and organic products whenever possible. Taste a corner of this: [he produces a perfumy loaf of "achiote," a ground red spice often used in Yucatecan cooking]

### Yes, I see what you mean!

[It is amber colored, mild and aromatic, not neon red

and acrid like the packaged variety.]

We also utilize organic produce, such as corn for tortillas, milk, coffee, salad greens and vegetables.

### Can you tell me a little bit about your menu?

We have a base menu that offers a range of standard dishes from different regions of Mexico and, periodically offer "festival" menus featuring regional specialties. Past festivals have focused on Oaxaca, Veracruz and Yucatán.

### Will you be repeating these festivals?

Yes, our customers demand it. We're about to present a new one, to celebrate mango season [which has already started]. I call it "mmm ... Mango!" This special menu will offer nine dishes, from appetizers to desserts, all featuring mango.

### What is your favorite dish, the one you recommend most?

Pescado Tikin-Xic – without a doubt. It comes from a town called Chuburná in Yucatán. Fish filets are marinated in achiote, grilled and served stacked over sauteed plátano, frijoles and avocado. It's beautifully presented, our most popular dish.

### Tell me about your books.

I've done five; the latest [and the only one available at the moment] is called "Salsas Mexicanas."

### Your "Diccionario Enciclopédico de Gastronomía Mexicana" is an extraordinary work. How did it come about?

I decided to do it because I thought it needed to be done. It began as a glossary, but evolved into a more extensive work. It took over twelve years to produce and it's the only one of its kind. I did all the research myself.

### What are your plans for the future?

We're coming out with a huge new cookbook on classic Mexican cooking ...

### Any new restaurants?

Not this year, but I'm sure we will eventually open a branch somewhere else in the city.

THE NEWS/PHOTOS/RODRIGO OROPEZA