



The Culinate Interview

We talk with people doing influential, important, or just plain unusual work in food.



Jesús González — The teaching chef

By Caron Golden
November 4, 2008

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Jesús González

The teaching chef

By Caron Golden
November 4, 2008

A native of Mexico City, Jesús González grew up cooking under his mom's tutelage; his family of 11 grew and ate their own produce. After his family moved to California in 1985, González pursued a kitchen career. A dishwasher gig at The Golden Door spa in Escondido soon morphed into a cooking job; 14 years later, González moved to sister spa Rancho La Puerta in Tecate, Mexico.

At age 36, González is now creative chef and chief instructor at the spa's year-old La Cocina Que Canta cooking school, where he teaches his philosophy of healthy Mexican and Mediterranean cooking. The school uses produce grown in an adjacent six-acre garden, and many of González' recipes appear in the new book *Cooking with the Seasons at Rancho La Puerta*.

How did you get interested in healthy, seasonal cooking?

My parents are from a little town called Toluca outside of Mexico City. They always grew their own vegetables and had a cow and chickens. They never used chemicals to grow vegetables and used the cow manure to feed the plants. My mom never used recipes. She would see what was in season and make meals from that. I started cooking with her when I was seven or eight. From there I got a lot of passion for food.



Jesús González

How do you create your recipes?

My inspiration is the garden. I love to go outside and taste the peppers or the tomatoes or even the onions. When I create a recipe, there are three things I'm looking for: that it's healthy, tasty, and has different textures. I'm always looking for complementary tastes and textures.

Recipes are important, but I tell my students not to be a slave to them. It doesn't matter how good the recipe is; if you don't add your own touch, it won't be any good. If a recipe calls for tomatoes, remember that not all tomatoes will have the same flavor from one part of the season to the next. So you have to make adjustments.

And you have to add a lot of love. That's what my mom used to say. My mom also used to say you have to be in a good mood when you cook, or the food won't taste

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What is the greatest misconception about Mexican cooking?

Let's start with Taco Bell. When I first heard of burritos when I moved to California, I thought they were talking about donkeys, because the word for "donkey" in Spanish is *burro*. That's not Mexican food. People think it has to be tortillas, chiles, rice and beans. And that everything is fried. Authentic Mexican food is different. It depends on the region. It can be fish, sauces, beans and rice, but also a lot of vegetables. The food my mom cooked is from Toluca, so we ate a lot of moles, vegetables, and legumes.

Is there a specific dish from childhood that you treasure?

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I'm still learning from my mom. She makes an amazing dark-chocolate mole. Her recipe takes about three days to prepare. She makes it for special occasions with chicken, but you could use it in enchiladas or with fish. I've asked her to give me the recipe; it's the only thing I don't have from her. She said she'll give it to me, but not yet.

People often think they have to compromise on taste to eat healthfully. But you say we gain taste. How?

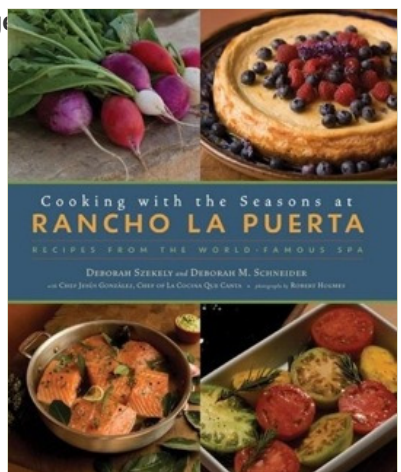
When you eat something healthy, you can taste different flavors and not sacrifice anything. Butter covers up a lot of flavor. So does salt. When you use a lot of salt, you put your tongue to sleep. You want to taste the carrot or celery. You want to taste those natural flavors. Add a little good sea salt, but don't overwhelm a dish with salt.

You incorporate some unusual ingredients as substitutes for high-fat and high-salt recipes. What are some of your favorites?

When it comes to baking, agave syrup is wonderful as a sugar substitute. It's high in antioxidants and gives the sweetness you want. Instead of using butter and oil, use fruit or vegetables. If one cup of butter is called for, you can use apples, bananas, or mangoes. Or half a cup of butter and one cup of fruit. I've used cooked carrots, squash, yams, or even roasted beets. I use ground flaxseeds to add fat to recipes, but it has **omega-3 fatty acids**, so it's good fat.

You live in an area where there are fresh vegetables year-round. What can people who live in colder climates do?

It would be hard. But you can always grow fresh herbs under a grow light; they add a lot of flavor to dishes. Instead of making do with flavorless tomatoes out of season, you can buy organic canned tomatoes. If there are vegetables in season, give yourself time to carefully choose them. Be smart about the produce you select. After all, you're paying for it.



Rancho La Puerta is very upscale but in a remote location. Have you ever wanted to open your own restaurant or be a chef somewhere more accessible?

Yes, I've thought of maybe opening a restaurant. But how many people would I help there? So I'm thinking of going more places to teach, so I can help people cook more healthfully. I can pass along what my mom passed on to me. And I love to

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teach. I like to know that I'm helping people learn how to mix flavors and not be afraid of the ingredients. I like to help people eat healthfully. I want them to know that gourmet cooking is for everybody, not just chefs.

Caron Golden is a San Diego-based freelance writer. She covers the market scene with her blog, [San Diego Foodstuff](#), and appears regularly on the KPBS radio show "These Days" to talk about food.

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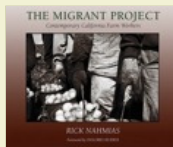
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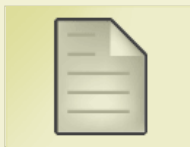
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