



THE *Real* DEAL

To find “authentic” Mexican cuisine, our food critic ventures deep in the heart of Texas. **BY ALAN RICHMAN**

Photographs by CLINTON HUSSEY // Styling by MURRAY BANCROFT

Pico de Gallo

This simple tomato, onion and chile mixture—also called salsa fresca—is a classic dip or condiment. Recipe on page 70.

PRACTICALLY NOBODY OUTSIDE Texas takes Tex-Mex food seriously, which is unfortunate, because it’s one of North America’s most distinctive and joyful regional cuisines. It’s also understandable that they feel this way, because Tex-Mex platters can look suspiciously like those tragically oversauced combination plates of tamales, enchiladas and tostados that are a fundamental part of chain-restaurant Mexican dining elsewhere in Canada and the U.S.

Throughout southern Texas, particularly in Houston and San Antonio, Tex-Mex food is more than a culinary oddity resulting from proximity to the Mexican border. It’s very nearly a way of life. As one San Antonio resident told me, “Any Italian restaurant or Asian noodle shop or whatever that opens here will close within a year, re-open as a Mexican restaurant, and stay open for 20 years with lines out the door.”

It’s significant that “Mexican” (as she put it) and “Tex Mex” (as it’s known elsewhere) are synonymous in these parts. Tex-Mex restaurants in Texas almost always call themselves “Mexican restaurants,” in much the same way that Italian-American restaurants elsewhere refer to themselves as Italian. They feel absolutely authentic to the people running them.

To be honest, I’m one of the few people I know who doesn’t sneer at Tex-Mex cuisine. That might be because I was introduced to it by Dean Fearing, one of the great chefs of Texas, or because I respect any cuisine that was sourcing local, home-grown products before it became fashionable to do so.

Once I arrived in San Antonio, it didn’t take long for me to comprehend how deeply the cuisine is entrenched in everyday life. I was off the plane and picking up a rental car when I asked