

# el Restaurante

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*Cachapas:*  
Sweet Corn Cakes  
PHOTO COURTESY  
OF CHICA RESTAURANT



| **BY ANNELISE KELLY** | “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

Mothers, *abuelas*, doctors, media and advertisements recite that bit of wisdom regularly. And it’s increasingly true from a restaurant operator’s perspective as well. Market research firm Datassential says brunch appeared on 5.8 percent of U.S. menus in 2018 but is anticipated to expand by 17 percent by 2022.

Historically, Mexican and Latin restaurants haven’t emphasized breakfast and brunch: Many establishments serve lunch and dinner only. When they do open for breakfast service, they’ve often relied on traditional plates of hearty, simple food like huevos rancheros and breakfast burritos.

That’s changing, influenced by both culinary and social trends.

Exotic global flavors are suddenly dominating morning menus. Hospitality consultant firm af&co. places globally influenced breakfast items as a top trend in its 2019 *Hospitality Trend Report Overview*. Flavors once unknown at the American breakfast table—Asian, Middle Eastern, European, Latin American—are attracting customers, loyalty and social media attention. For example, Denny’s—not exactly the first place that comes to mind when thinking of globally inspired fare—now offers Latin-inspired dishes including Dulce de Leche Crunch Pancakes, Tres Leches Pancakes, and Spicy Poblano Omelets.

From a demographic point of view, Hispanic diners have an increasing impact on the U.S. breakfast industry. The Hispanic population is increasing, and market research firm Packaged Facts cites Hispanics as among the nation’s most influential “breakfast believers”—consumers who

prefer breakfast over other meals.

That’s all good news for Mexican and other Latin-inspired restaurants looking to get a leg up in this daypart that’s ripe for reinvention!

### INCORPORATING CONSUMER TRENDS

Just what do diners want when they dine out for their morning meal?

There are some interesting, albeit opposing, trends that are driving consumers’ dining decisions, according to “Spring



Breakfast Pizza with California Avocado  
RECIPE COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA AVOCADO COMMISSION



“...it’s a loyalty-driven meal. Satisfied customers return again and again, and they’ll try lunch and dinner after you’ve won them over with breakfast.”

— ROBERT SAUNDERS, *Chica*

2019’s Biggest Brunch Trends” from Chefs Warehouse Magazine.

Some diners want what can be described as healthy—think plant-based dishes; cleanly sourced ingredients like organic produce and cage-free eggs; and dishes crafted to accommodate vegetarian and vegan customers. Some are simply those embracing gluten-free, keto and paleo diets. Others throw dietary caution to the wind and crave indulgent menu selections that ooze with rich components like hollandaise sauce and

whipped cream along with sweet treats like French toast and decadent pastries.

All these trends are easily accessible to Latin restaurant operators. Here, several operators at Mexican- and Latin-inspired concepts who have embraced the breakfast and brunch segment share their experience.

#### CHICA

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

Chica, serving “elevated Latin cuisine” in The Venetian on the Las Vegas strip, launched breakfast and brunch about six months

after opening in 2017. Director of Operations Robert Saunders calls it a good financial decision, partly because “it’s a loyalty-driven meal. Satisfied customers return again and again, and they’ll try lunch and dinner after you’ve won them over with breakfast.” He warns that the pace of morning service is a lot faster, which can challenge restaurants transitioning from fine dining dinner service.

When creating a breakfast/brunch menu, Saunders advises that “the tastes and smells of family, home, childhood always trigger an emotional response, and breakfast might be the strongest meal for this. Evoking an emotional response wins customer enthusiasm and loyalty.” He suggests staying true to your concept, but with a little twist. For example, Chica’s most popular morning dish, Benedict Cazuela, substitutes cheese arepas for English muffins and house-made chorizo for Canadian bacon. Their hash is based on yuca instead of potatoes, and is accompanied by porchetta and pearl onion escabeche. Gluten-free Sweet Corn Pancakes rely on masa and are topped with fresh fruit and whipped coconut cream. Saunders credits their largely vacationing clientele with driving the popularity of Chica’s



Huevos Divorciados

high-end morning cocktail program.

### VERDE COCINA

Portland, Oregon

Portland's Verde Cocina got its start at the Portland Farmer's Market, where easy access to pastured eggs and local vegetables informed their menu from day one. Today, they serve brunch, on weekends only, at all three locations. While they do cater to the indulgent side of the equation with gluten-free Horchata French Toast, their brunch includes primarily healthy, veggie-loaded

Latin spins on familiar fare. Eggs Benito is made with poached eggs on corn masa cakes topped with Hollandaise sauce and served with roasted potatoes and grilled veggies; the Garden Hash features Yukon and sweet potatoes, mushrooms and fresh, seasonal veggies tossed in a green herb jalapeño dressing.

Marketing Manager Jocelyn SyCip says owner/chef Noé Garnica "wasn't thinking about trends, he was just really excited about using local resources and showing folks that Mexican food could be healthy."

Today's clientele know Verde Cocina can satisfy every diet from paleo to keto. The biggest trend according to SyCip? "Vegan, vegan, vegan. People are thinking about climate and are more conscious of lowering their carbon footprint."

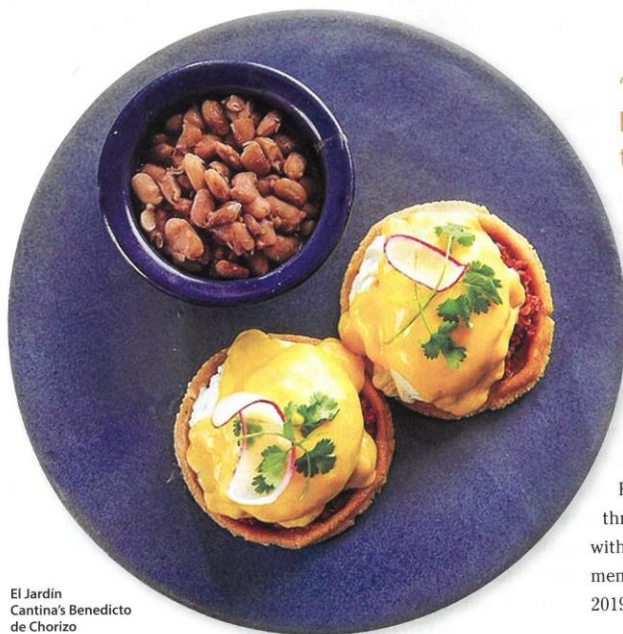
When crafting a new menu, SyCip recommends perfecting "a few marquee dishes and staying focused on doing those really, really well. Be really thoughtful about what will set your breakfast offering apart and make it on brand, truly yours."

While their three-dollar

Brunch appeared on 5.8 percent of U.S. menus in 2018 but is anticipated to expand by 17 percent by 2022.

—DATASSENTIAL

| COVER STORY |



El Jardín Cantina's Benedicto de Chorizo

"Be really thoughtful about what will set your breakfast offering apart and make it on brand, truly yours." — JOCELYN SYCIP, Verde Cocina

mimosas bring some people in the door, they don't play a big role in total receipts.

### CITY TACOS

San Diego, California

Gerry Torres owns City Tacos in San Diego. The Imperial Beach location, one of three existing branches with four more in development, opened in March 2019 and quickly launched

weekend breakfast service. Located steps from the sand, and operated in partnership with a local brewer, the restaurant "seats around 450—it's a very high-volume operation. So, if you're able to open those doors and get a crowd a little bit earlier, that helps you maximize your sales potential," Torres says. "It's been a good decision money-wise. Some people do breakfast to generate



funds. I don't necessarily do it to generate funds, but to generate a little buzz to get the place going earlier." If the location and existing client base will support breakfast service, he recommends pursuing the breakfast crowd, since "it's a very lucrative business."

The top breakfast sellers at City Tacos are the chilaquiles, with tomatillo sauce or chocolate mole. High-quality ingredients are key to City Tacos' success, says Torres, who cites handmade corn and flour tortillas, homemade salsas, and premium proteins such as rib eye steak and Australian leg of lamb as things that elevate their product over that of many competitors.

### **EL JARDÍN CANTINA**

*San Diego, California*

Johan Engman founded Rise and Shine restaurant group. With nine locations of Breakfast Republic and one cafe called North Park Breakfast Company, "brunch is really the lifeblood of our restaurant group," Engman says.

El Jardín Cantina, his only Mexican restaurant, serves brunch on weekends. Huevos rancheros—served con chorizo and a la Mexicana—are joined by specialty plates like Enmoladas de Camaron (shrimp enchiladas with eggs, any style) and Omelet de Rajas made with grilled poblano peppers and corn. The Benedicto de Chorizo substitutes

sopes for English muffins, while chilaquiles are the most popular morning dish.

Engman also is focused on the craft cocktail trend, which can be very profitable as well as fun. "You can be really creative, not only with flavor profiles, but with presentations. We offer a number of cocktails with garnishes from our own garden. I think that's definitely a hot thing."

When crafting a morning menu, "it's great to have fun and play around and try new things, come up with fresh interpretations," says Engman. "However, I encourage people to always offer those staple items" for customers who prefer the basics, so he keeps buttermilk pancakes and steak and eggs on the menu.

No matter your concept, size or location, operators suggest doing some homework before taking on the business of breakfast.

Engman, for one, advises undertaking breakfast/brunch service thoughtfully. His suggestions: Examine your location for morning foot traffic and recognize that breakfast demands faster service and higher volume. While loyal dinner customers may be excited to check out your morning offerings, if there are problems with service or execution there's a risk of driving away existing customers.

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Annelise Kelly is a freelance writer based in Portland, Oregon, and a regular contributor to *el Restaurant*