

Quinto Sol: The Sols of Puebla

By Emily Mangini

Quinto Sol has a story to tell. It's part historical drama, part family lore, and it's best told through food.

Quinto Sol is Redwood City's passport to the heart of Puebla, a state in central Mexico famed for its *cocina barroca poblana* culinary tradition. Quinto Sol's fare is different from what many in Redwood City would consider familiar. Most common Mexican fare here is from the state of Michoacan. The food of Puebla, considered Mexico's culinary epicenter, is marked by a polygamous marriage of flavors that only political and historical strife can bring.

Moving through the menu at Quinto Sol is to navigate culinary and political history. With its vicinity to the port Veracruz, Puebla was privy to an influx of ingredients tucked under the arms of foreign traders and invaders alike.

Enjoy the Lomo de Cerdo, a chorizo stuffed pork tenderloin, and taste the Spanish conquistadors arriving in the 16th century.

The French invasion and historic defeat in the 19th century is most often celebrated with parades and parties on Cinco de Mayo. But from a culinary perspective, the lasting impact is in the sauces. Rich, decadent cream sauces churned from indigenous herbs, spice and peppers, are living history of the French and Poblana cultures colliding.

When the Chinese arrived in Mexico ready to build railroads, their course was set through Puebla. Railroads were built. Noodles and chicken consommé were introduced to the Poblana palate. This is the context of the sautéed vermicelli noodles in Fideos Secos al Sol. It is not the odd man



The Sol family from left to right: Camila, Alexa, Hector, Helena, Paulina and (seated) Chef Rafael Bailon.

out amongst burritos and enchiladas, the dish is a reflection of history. The same goes for Caldo de Pollo, a chicken soup that tastes as if your own grandmother was in the kitchen.

While each of Quinto Sol's dishes is a plated history lesson, it is also a window into the Sol family. Hector, Helena and daughters Alexa, Paulina, and Camilla have crafted a menu based on family recipes.

"I was very close to my grandmother, and would cling to her side as she cooked," Helena said with a smile. "I can still smell the aromas of her cooking, the feeling of rocking back and forth with her as she would grind cacao beans onto a stone board."

Grandmother lives on at Quinto Sol. The guajillo sauce, a slow-cooked sour cream reduction made of peppers, garlic and cinnamon, is her original recipe. A signature sauce, it has been awarded the honor of "the essence of our family," by Paulina. Rich and decadent, it is unlike any flavor to be found elsewhere and should not be missed.

Though Puebla history and Sol family traditions are the foundations of Quinto Sol, one motto reigns supreme, according to Paulina: "My dad always says, whatever you do, make it flavorful."

This emphasis on flavor holds throughout the menu, with each dish a true standout.

Lighter dishes such as the fresh fish Ceviche or the cacti Nopales salad, are packed with as much flavor as heartier, saucier dishes, such as the Rajas Poblanas. Flavor makes it possible to have an indulgent meal at Quinto Sol without feeling

gluttonous.

Quinto Sol's offers a unique cocktail menu. The Espiritu de Oaxaca, a cocktail crafted by Alexa, capitalizes on the smoky flavors of the liquor, mezcal. Hector and Helena selected each tequila. Margaritas are made following a perfected recipe.

Look up to at the ceiling to see the stars created by a Pueblan artist that Helena discovered, or to the bar to see what she calls "the tree of life", a piece from an artist in her mother's hometown. The collective impression is an ambiance that is both vibrant yet sophisticated. No detail of the Quinto Sol experience was left to chance.

Quinto Sol expands Redwood City's definition of Mexican food. It brings to light the culture and history of a family and state. Through Quinto Sol, one travels to Puebla, Spain, France, even China. The restaurant experience evokes a feeling unique to the Sols — one of tradition and passion for flavor and hospitality. The Sols are stewards of Puebla's history, of *cocina barroca poblana*, and are keeping it alive in the heart of Redwood City. **C**

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