

COLOUR, POWER, SPIRIT

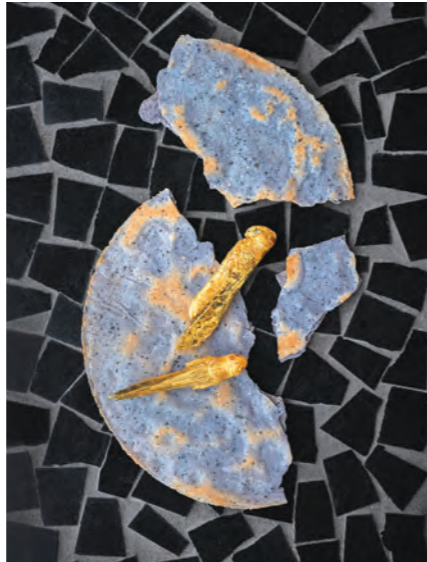
With foodies in raptures over the stories Martha Ortiz creates with her exquisite dishes, Kathryn Conway meets the woman intent on changing perceptions of Mexican food



We need a few more people like Martha Ortiz in the world. That is the conclusion one makes after only an hour in her company. She might be the brains behind one of the hottest restaurants to open in London in 2017, but she could just as easily be running for parliamentary office in her native Mexico, tackling the corruption and poverty that so blights her homeland. While our conversation focuses on Ortiz's vision for the recently opened Ella Canta and its unashamedly feminine take on Mexican cuisine, our chat is made all the richer for her thoughts on politics, gender equality and the tragedy of the recent earthquake in Mexico City – a topic that moves her to tears.

Ortiz reveals that she and her restaurant team were out on the streets helping as best they could in the aftermath of the earthquake. The heart-wrenching scenes she witnessed left her both distraught and completely in awe of the human spirit. "I adored the campaign film by director Alfonso Cuarón about helping Mexico not just in the aftermath of the earthquake, but as a reminder to us all to keep helping," she says. "What is beautiful is that Mexicans help each other beyond our corrupt government. The attitude is, 'I'm Mexican, so if he's suffering, I'm suffering'."





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TALAVERA PURPURA; FIRE-DANCED SEA BASS WITH CABBAGE TORTILLAS; GOLD GRASS HOPPERS; PORK MARBLES. ALL DISHES AT ELLA CANTA © MARTHA ORTIZ

Ortiz is a self-confessed activist, a stance informed by her studies in political science while at university and now manifesting itself in everything from her views on the place of women in society today, to how she can use her restaurants as a force for good. “I think we, as women, can provide another point of view on things, so I cried for three days when Hillary Clinton lost,” she says. “I hated the way she was branded as being too tough. The biggest economy in the world and a woman lost? We are all lost.”

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

For Ortiz, women need to break through what she calls the “caramel ceiling”. “I don’t have children, but I educate my nieces to be as powerful as they can be,” she reveals. “I have always said to them, ‘you don’t have to play at being a mother, you know, let’s change the way you play. Today you can be the president.’ And now, when you ask them what they want in life, one says she wants to be a medical doctor and the other wants to be an engineer.”

Ortiz is quick to highlight that, in her view at least, modern feminism doesn’t have an anti-male bias. “For me, it’s about equal circumstances, equal opportunities and equal salaries,” she says – but it is interesting to note that more often than not it is a woman that Ortiz will reference as a source of inspiration.

Perhaps most revered are the women she spent time with in the Mexican state of Michoacán. “When I toured Mexico after university, the women I met felt like magicians to me,” says Ortiz. “It was clear they didn’t have a big income but they had fire, masa [maize] and chilli, and with these three elements they were able to create magic. They were creating food that had an identity, a soul, using recipes that have been passed down through the generations. I learnt so much from them.”

RESPECTING THE PAST

The ancient cooking techniques of authentic Mexican cuisine have influenced Ortiz’s career in food and are the very ethos behind Dulce Patria, her award-winning restaurant in Mexico, and London’s Ella Canta. Here, guests are treated to tortillas that taste as they would in the hands of the women of Michoacán – “they taste like the sun,” says Ortiz – and the black mole that accompanies a dish of duck, plantain purée and red rice is as close to the authentic black mole as Ortiz could get (it contains 50 or so ingredients). “I don’t trust people who say they are making a mole without understanding what a mole is or the time required to make it,” she says. “Mole is an adorable labour. It’s a magical thing, like conducting an orchestra.”

For Ortiz, taste and aroma seem to operate on a higher plane. She talks about being able to taste beauty, and Mexican food in particular having a certain spirit, being almost godlike. “I think when you try a mole, you change. Imagine those 50 ingredients coursing through your system; it’s spiritual, you are in ecstasy,” she reveals. “When you try a mole, it stays with you, it stays like a memory.”

Ortiz recalls vividly the first time she experienced this ecstasy. She was with her grandfather in a market in Oaxaca when she was presented with a dry paste. “I put it in my mouth and in that moment I told my grandfather that I wanted to be a Mexican princess so I could eat mole every day,” she laughs.

Today, it is her vampiro sea bass ceviche accompanied by a mango and sangrita sorbet topped with nasturtium and pineapple butterflies that fills her with joy. “It’s feminine and sexy,” Ortiz says of the dish. Indeed, it’s a statement that sums up the whole experience at Ella Canta – beautiful, colourful dishes that sing with the spirit of their creator.