



Michael Cordúa's restaurants celebrate the flavors of North and South America. Corn, one of the "most profoundly American of all ingredients," is prominently featured in many of his dishes, such as this corn poblano soup.

A Not-So-Temporary Texan

Michael Cordúa '80 didn't go to culinary school. Becoming a chef was not one of his childhood—or, for that matter, early adulthood—aspirations. But these details have not prevented him from becoming one of the most celebrated restaurateurs in Texas. In fact, one could argue they have only enhanced his success: humble Nicaraguan origins create the essence of his food, along with the hints of serendipity that made his restaurant empire possible.

One of the many challenges Cordúa faced when he opened the first Churrascos in 1988 was that, at the time, most Americans associated Latin cuisine solely with Tex Mex. But Churrascos was not Tex Mex. The restaurant would feature a menu rich with Latin flavors, and in the spirit of artistic license, the dishes would be, for the most part, regionally unspecific. The cuisine represented a hodge-podge of elements from Argentina, Peru, Brazil and, of course, Nicaragua.

With inventive combinations, Cordúa found ways to make his homeland flavors accessible to a more American palate. "I had to reinterpret the dishes, deconstruct them and present them in different ways," he said. "Rather than trying to find old recipes, I began to focus on the ingredient base and create dishes that had our flavors but not the mysteriousness."

BY MONIKA BLACKWELL

TRAILBLAZERS

Cordúally Yours

For Michael Cordúa '80, celebrity and competition are not ingredients found in his kitchen. His successful restaurant business is built upon collaboration, artistry and humility.

That he wound up on the path toward entrepreneurship in Houston at all was a departure from his original plans. In 1976, a 16-year-old Cordúa left home and headed to America. With the help of a connection at Texas A&M University, Cordúa's father got his son into college, sans SAT score and without English proficiency. The one condition: Cordúa had to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language. To prepare, he spent a few months with his brother Glenn in the U.S. (Glenn worked in Jackson, Mississippi), and by August of that year, he started his coursework in College Station.

For most students, the college transition is a bit of a shock. But for an international student in the '70s who spoke limited English and faced a whole new set of cultural norms, Texas A&M was an especially difficult acclimation. Cordúa found himself feeling like an outsider at the university. The traditions, American football hype and campus vernacular made his new surroundings seem like "a fraternity" of which he was not a member. So his time not studying was spent playing soccer with other South and Central American students and working in Sbisa, the campus dining hall.

"Money was tight," he explained. "My parents couldn't send much because of political unrest back home, and since international students couldn't work off-campus with our student visas, we went to work at Sbisa."

Roughly two dozen Nicaraguan students worked at Sbisa, but Cordúa wasn't keen on wearing a hairnet and serving his fellow students, so he got a new job behind the scenes placing orders and managing inventory. He didn't know it at the time, but the change was a crucial stepping stone in his path to becoming a restaurateur. "Not that I can tell you I brought any recipes from my time at Sbisa," Cordúa said with a dimpled smile, "but I learned how to feed the masses very efficiently."

Sbisa created a sense of community for Cordúa. Dennis McGuire, his general manager, welcomed the Nicaraguan students into his home. Among them was Cordúa's future wife Lucia, a girl Cordúa had known since he was nine years old. McGuire grew especially fond of Cordúa, and a friendship formed. A few years later, he would stand at Cordúa's side as the best man in his wedding.

Sbisa also taught Cordúa about all-you-can-eat dining, which took a slight toll on the young man's waistline. "I went nuts!" he said. "But after a few months my palate started to miss Nicaraguan food, and when I went home for summer I asked for some basic recipes."

Back in College Station the fall of his sophomore year, Cordúa became the designated

cook in the apartment he shared with several other students. While the food he prepared resembled the cuisine of his homeland, the role was a departure from his roots: in Nicaragua, cooking was a woman's job.

For the remainder of his time at Texas A&M, Cordúa worked hard in his finance classes, hoping to return home to become a banker after completing his degree. Staying in the United States was never his plan. But as graduation neared, the political situation in Nicaragua shifted. During Cordúa's junior year, a revolution transferred power from the Somoza dynasty to the Sandinistas, a Soviet-backed group. Violence erupted, and the Iran-Contra affair was brewing.

"If you were not with the Sandinistas, you were exiled or you voluntarily exiled yourself because of the danger," Cordúa said. "So I never moved back."

With hardly any savings—he couldn't even afford an Aggie ring his senior year—he knew he would need to find a job quickly to stay in the U.S. and support Lucia. By then they were discussing marriage.

Fate stepped in: McGuire wanted to help Cordúa find his footing. At first, he planned to bring Cordúa to Mexico with him as part of a food consultancy business he was starting, but he feared this wasn't a stable enough opportunity for his friend. So instead, McGuire connected Cordúa with a Houston shipping company looking for a Spanish-speaking port captain.

Oil was booming, and Cordúa took the job. He started as soon as he was done with classes, missing his own graduation.

Creating Perfect Bites

The early '80s brought exciting changes to Cordúa's life. He married Lucia in 1980, and they moved to Houston where Lucia finished her degree at the University of St. Thomas. Shortly thereafter they welcomed their first child, David, into the world. The couple had three more daughters in quick succession—Michelle, Elisa and Cristina. "It's life-changing," he said, his voice softening. "When you have a child, you understand the concept of loving so much that you would give your life for another. It's so transformative."

As his family life blossomed, so did his professional life. "Coming from a small, third-world country to College Station, my palate was not extensive. But the shipping job took me around the world. I'd load the ships and then fly with my boss to meet the cargo at the destination port. He was a real foody; he ate sushi before sushi was cool."

Cordúa caters to

a demographic in Houston that had not previously been a target audience for restaurant owners—the professional Latin American.





Signature starters such as Churrascos' empanadas (above) and Américas' corn smoked crab fingers with red pepper, jalapeños, scallions, lemon butter and yucca puffs helped Michael Cordúa '80 (right) earn critical acclaim. A self-taught chef with no formal training, the Nicaraguan native is the only Texas chef to be included in the prestigious Food & Wine magazine Hall of Fame, earning induction in 2008.



**“The Aggie experience
seemed foreign to me** because of my cultural background. For
example, the military in my country was part of a brutal dictatorship, so I didn’t realize that the Corps
of Cadets preserves and guards Aggie traditions. It wasn’t until years later that I finally understood
and appreciated that deeper meaning.” _____

Michael Cordúa '80





Appetizers like ceviche Copacabana—a medley of fresh seared Peruvian blue tilapia, sautéed shrimp, pineapple, red onion, jalapeño and cilantro—serve as perfect starters before guests enjoy their long-awaited steaks.

Cordúa was becoming a savvy businessman as he hopped from port to port, and he hoped he would work in the shipping industry for years to come. But then the price of oil dropped to \$10 per barrel, and the owner was forced to shut down the business.

"I didn't see myself as out of a job, but out of a career. It was the first time I found myself really asking what it is I wanted to do," Cordúa said.

He considered a number of jobs, at first planning to open a business with his father-in-law exporting frozen vegetables from Honduras and Costa Rica. When that opportunity didn't pan out, he briefly considered becoming a lay minister for the Catholic Church. (Cordúa is also a man of profound faith; he has completed two 30-day silent retreats as part of a Jesuit ministry.) After conversations with Lucia, though, he realized that also wasn't the path for him.

So Cordúa continued to reflect on what he valued in his work, a process the Jesuits call "discernment." He loved the traveling he did while working in the shipping business, and when he was presented with an opportunity to purchase a European furniture company (and therefore work part-time in Europe), he made an offer.

"We met to make the deal, and the lady selling the business put her pen down and said, 'Michael, this is not what you are supposed to do.' So she didn't sell me the business," Cordúa said. "At first, I was furious."

Later, Cordúa would see the conversation as a serendipitous sign. With some advice from his brother, he started to entertain the idea of opening a restaurant. "What tugged at my heart was cooking and serving people," he said.

On Aug. 8, 1988, he opened the first Churrascos. Cordúa had spent most of his shipping business severance package remodeling a building at Bissonnet and Highway 59, a spot in "a bad part of town" where numerous restaurants had failed. But that didn't deter him. "Eight is the luckiest number in Chinese culture," he said.

Despite the roles luck and fate may have played in Cordúa's entry into the restaurant scene, it took time for him to gain his footing as an entrepreneur and prove that Houstonians should forego their old Tex Mex ways of tortilla chips and fajitas to try more novel fare such as plantain chips and churrasco, the restaurant's signature beef tenderloin. "My very first customers looked at the menu and walked out," Cordúa said. "That was heart-breaking."



Cordúa's restaurants have met with national critical acclaim. The original Churrascos was named one of the "Best New Restaurants in America" by Esquire magazine in 1989. Esquire named América's "Restaurant of the Year" in 1993. Texas Monthly magazine named Artista "Best New Texas Restaurant" in 2004. Esquire also named Churrascos one of the "20 Best Steaks in America" in 2008 and, most recently, Travel + Leisure magazine named Churrascos one of "The Best Steakhouses in the U.S." in 2013.





Churrascos' signature steak—

a beef tenderloin topped with herby chimichurri sauce—is Cordúa's specialty. When asked what his last meal would be, he said the churrasco would be on the table along with plantain chips, crab fingers and tres leches cake (bottom left).

For the first few months, Cordúa paid for restaurant expenses and payroll out of pocket. "I had serious thoughts that we were not going to make it," he said. Gradually, though, customers caught on to the playful inventiveness in Cordúa's cooking. *Texas Monthly* got wind of the establishment, and then other Houston publications caught on. Each review brought in new clients. Soon, business was booming. Repeat customers craved the herby chimichurri sauce, daydreamed about the tres leches cake and couldn't wait for a taste of the mouthwateringly-tender churrasco. "Perfect bites," Cordúa said. "That's what I aim to create."

Later, the woman who sold her European furniture business came to Churrascos to eat. When she saw Cordúa, she said to him, "I told you so."

To Love is to Serve

In 1990, Cordúa opened his second Churrascos inside the Houston loop. The expansion was part of his effort to become "a cultural ambassador to Latin America." Cordúa views himself as bringing a culinary tradition and appreciation for the South and Central American aesthetic.

"People see the Hispanic immigrant as the person who does their yard work or day labor," he explained. "They don't realize you have Pablo Neruda or Gabriel García Márquez or a great number of Nobel Laureates. I wanted to do ambassador work through food."

Not surprisingly, Cordúa's success is, in large part, due to the quality of the food he prepares. But other factors are also at play. For one, Cordúa caters to a demographic in Houston that had not previously been a target audience for restaurant owners. "I made a conscious effort to attract the professional Latin American that lived in Houston because there were no nice restaurants that represented that culture," he explained.

In 1993, Cordúa opened Américas, his second restaurant concept. "Américas is all of us," Cordúa said. "It plays off of the concept that America spans from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego in Chile. I wanted a restaurant that paid culinary tribute to the ingredients the Americas gave the world." Cordúa used familiar ingredients like the potato, chocolate and peppers, but his dishes presented them in innovative ways. "It was like reintroducing and giving homage to these ingredients by using more refined techniques of cooking."

From the start, Américas was a hit. Shortly after opening, *Esquire* selected it as restaurant of the year. Later, *Food & Wine Magazine* would name Cordúa one of America's "Top 10 Chefs."

Those two accolades, he said, put his restaurants on the map. As a result, the business continues to expand.

Today, Cordúa Restaurants owns five Churrascos, two Américas, one Amazon Grill and a restaurant called Artista, which serves theatergoers on their way to performances at the Hobby Center. In all, there are 600 employees, and Cordúa has brought in his son David, a classically-trained chef from Le Cordon Bleu, to join the company. It would be partially inaccurate, though, to say this partnership made the business a family affair. Even before including David, Cordúa saw the restaurant staff as a family.

"I kept telling the managers in the beginning, 'Don't see this man as a dishwasher or this lady as a salad maker. This lady is a mother, a sister, a daughter. This man is a family man who has a wife,'" Cordúa said. "When you see us as a family of families, you change the way you deal with each other."

In this way, Cordúa emphasizes what he calls "dignified respect" among all of his employees. He signs his emails "cordúally yours," a nod to his dedication to hospitality, and he always provides his staff a meal before their shifts.

Cordúa recognizes that the way his staff treats one another translates to the way they treat patrons. He wants his guests to feel important so they continue to return. "Food will taste the way people treat each other. It comes through," he said. "We don't want a one-night stand. We want a relationship."

It's this ceaseless focus on relationships that makes Cordúa's restaurants stand out and weather the test of time, surviving multiple recessions in Houston that sunk other not-so-fortunate businesses.

His philosophy is simple: "It's not what's on the table, but who set the table that matters. Nothing makes a meal more memorable than who shares it with you. That's what makes the restaurant. It's the vehicle to bring people together."

Cordúa recently published a cookbook full of his celebrated recipes. When he signs a copy for a patron, he writes, "To love is to serve. Serve joyfully." ☺

In 2012, Cordúa was named Aggie of the Year by the Houston A&M Club. His wish for Texas A&M is that more students, faculty and staff become ambassadors for international students, helping them learn the culture and traditions that make Texas A&M special. He believes these connections would spread the university's culture of selfless service, honor and excellence to the far reaches of the globe.