

Meals Deconstructed- El Cholo Santa Monica

LA August Issue

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In a world where trendy restaurant concepts come and go, it's praiseworthy to see a place so immersed in history and heritage become a longstanding staple of the community. That's what El Cholo in Santa Monica has achieved with its tasty traditional Mexican food. This calm oasis is a striking contrast from the shiny, tall structures of Wilshire Blvd. and the bustling of the streets around the Santa Monica Pier. El Cholo is proof that a great recipe, tried and true, is the real recipe of a prosperous place.

This location was the third of six El Cholo restaurants throughout L.A. county, with its opening in 1997. Joe Reina, once a dishwasher but worked his way to head chef in 1932, came to Santa Monica and personally trained each kitchen worker. He took pride in spreading the old techniques and flavors of Mexico to the cooks to ensure the menu stayed authentic. These recipes come to Locale from across the border in Sonora, Mexico by founder Joe Reina. In fact, every recipe on El Cholo's menu was crafted and created by Reina, who brought his Sonoran influence to the everyday Mexican food of California. That includes this dish, and the first enchilada El Cholo ever served: the Sonora Style Enchiladas.

Even when zooming down Wilshire heading towards the beach, it's hard to miss El Cholo's large, freestanding, pale pink stature just minutes from the beach and Third St. Promenade. The entrance happens to be through a cool covered patio that is decorated around intimate tables with big umbrellas, surrounded by flower vines and hand-painted tile accents on the walls. The outside aesthetic and the ocean breeze rippling through from blocks away makes this spot a great way to spend a summer afternoon. Just add the margaritas!

The inside bar feels homey, with dim lighting and dark wooden tables but still holds plenty of life in its walls, covered in many more hand-painted small flowers and Spanish sayings. The main dining area brings contrast, as it is open to large windows and a balcony for an upstairs area for extra seating. And it's hard not to notice the enormous sign mounted on the south wall that reads, "El Cholo" in a fluorescent pink, which we soon learned is another piece of the restaurant's well-established history.

#### INGREDIENTS:

This recipe calls for tomatillos, corn tortillas (made fresh from homemade masa), black olives, black beans, green onions, guajillo chiles, green bell pepper, tomatoes, shredded chicken, and an egg.

Most of the ingredients are standard in traditional Mexican food, but the way they are incorporated is what makes them stand out. For starters, the masa is fresh, which many restaurants don't make themselves, and the egg on top adds the perfect consistency for each bite. The guajillo chiles add tons of spice to the shredded chicken, and the fresh tomatoes, black olives and green onions make for bright flavors through all the sauces and tortillas. The homemade red and green enchilada sauces give it not only that memorable impression upon looking at the dish but a best-of-both-worlds taste too.

Head Chef Sergio Ochoa brings out the dish with a smile and confidence from the time and hard work he's put into perfecting the menu. Ochoa is one of El Cholo's lasting employees, but he wasn't always in charge of the kitchen. "I came here when my cousin told me about a job opening here as a dishwasher," he explains through his heavy spanish accent. "After four or five days, I got moved to prep cook, and then Joe trained me to be a line cook." Ochoa has now been the head chef of the Santa Monica location since 1997.

Even though Southern California is known to have some amazing mexican food, not many have the benefit of these rich historical recipes that were handed down and perfected through generations. El Cholo also has six other locations spread all over the coast.