Neville Park Press
presents

Xola By the Shore

Malinali Fernandez grew up experienced the breadth and depth of her home country of Mexico, enjoying how its cuisine varied from place to place. Her summers were spent in Mexico City with her grandparents. Her parents moved with their work, so her school semesters were held in nearby Puebla or in more remote regions, such as Veracruz and Chiapas province. Sampling the delicious diversity of food whetted her appetite so much that when she and husband Francisco moved to Canada twenty years ago, she was invited to work in the Spanish restaurant Tapas at Embrujo Flamenco, on the Danforth.

The Beach Village was hands-down their choice of home for their growing family. As the years went by, Malinali wanted more and more to work as well as mother in her home area, even though the Danforth was close. Then one day, while having ice cream at Ed's Real Scoop on the north-west corner of Beech and Queen, she noticed that the space next door was empty. At once she called her sister and husband to come and look at it with her. "This was it," she says with relish. "This is the space where I can make my dreams of creative cheffing come true!"

Though the recipe for such a task includes hard work and effort, she accomplished just that. Xola opened its doors in 2013. The name is indigenous Mexican, though no one knows exactly how it was pronounced hundreds of years ago. Malinali pronounces it "Shola", and tells me that the meaning most dear to her heart is: "place close to the water".

Malinali started with traditional Mexican recipes such as *taco baja*, and found customers enjoyed experiencing this delicious fish as the centre of a complete sit-down meal in an atmosphere of relaxation. Malinali, with chefs Gloria and husband Angel, are constantly improving on the old style recipes as well as creating new ways to present the ingredients. Their menu has become representative of Mexico's cultured palate pleasures. One luscious example is her duck confit. Her *mole* (pronounced mo-lay, as in *guacamole*) sauces are skillfully and lovingly nurtured. She selects multiple ingredients that vary according to the destined dish. All her meats are Ontario grown, selected daily down at the St. Lawrence Market, as she wants only the best for her loyal clientele. Patrons coming in enjoy choosing a new dish just brought to the next table, with a smell too enchanting to ignore. Each of her experiments quickly becomes an old favourite.

Let Malinali explain her process: "I decided to make my family recipe for duck confit. I make it sometimes sweeter with pears, sometimes spicier with peppers. Another creation is my chicken wings; I went around to different places in Toronto to see how they do it, but I found some too sweet, some too vinegary. Sure, we Mexicans eat spicy foods, but we don't quite kill ourselves, right? No, we eat more flavourful kinds of spices. So, I say why not have a balance? To achieve that I use blackberries, hibiscus, chipotle, and caramelized garlic. Something is best sweet or spicy, you know, but not together. All my meats make beautiful dishes, with different peppers, chilli and chilli pasta.

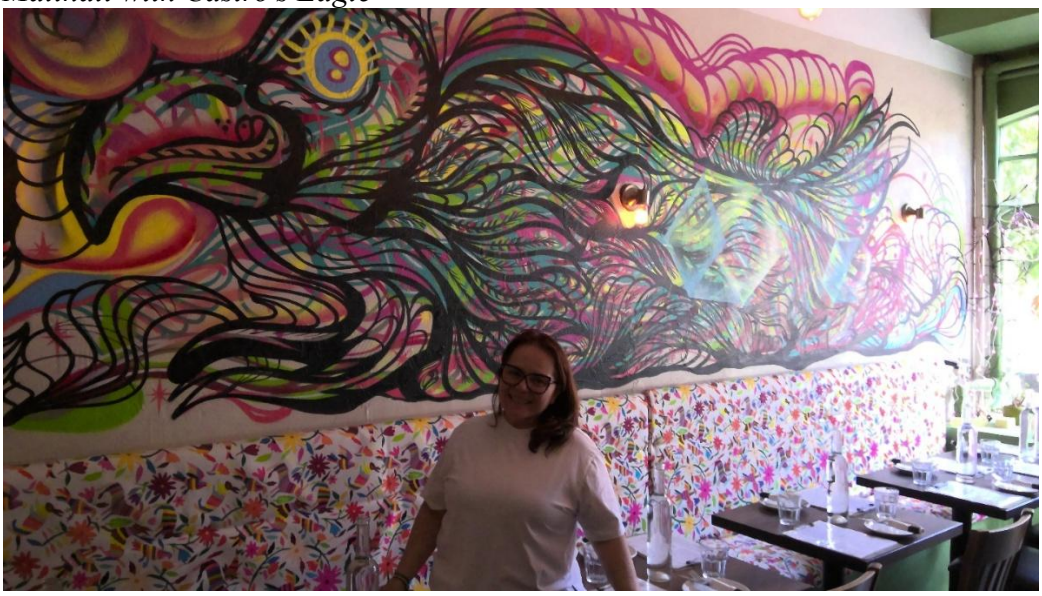
"Lamb is one of the favourites on the Xola menu. But the super special for me is *mole*, which I

started experimenting with thirty years ago. *Mole* is always a very sophisticated sauce with 23 ingredients, one being chocolate. I make a new *mole* with an older *mole* as my starter. And it's lovely. The new is a red, intense red. And then when you add the old *mole*, it goes dark. Because when you add something already old as a starter, like a sourdough, the result is a balanced chemical reaction. And it's beautiful how it gets a super deep flavour, right? Also don't forget to say: my husband makes the best margarita in the world!!!"

Xola has an indoor room and also, from May through September, a street patio. Setting it all up and monitoring daily requirements is son Max, whose friendly machismo ensures patrons are happily seated and served. Behind the counter are Gloria, her husband Angel, and her busy brother Guillermo, creating the suite of menu regulars and specials. Changes to a recipe are very doable if a patron has special dietary needs. Malinali serves it all to everyone and keeps her eye on everything, alert to nuances of pleasure or concern, while her husband tends the bar. A family enterprise indeed: their coordination and cooperation create an ambience for which their neighbours return often.

What struck me going inside Xola, along with enticing aromas, was its side walls. I saw at once how Mexico has been connected to the Beach Village. Malinali tells that story: "When we first opened, the walls were empty. You know how, when you see that in your home, you want to decorate it with something beautiful. You stare at the walls. You imagine, 'What do I want to put in there?' I didn't want anything tacky, or mariachi, or sombreros. In Mexico, we are more than mariachi and sombreros. In Mexico we have Diego, Frida, and Paseo. In any Mexican city we have music, galleries, theatres ~ a lot of art, pre-Hispanic or modern.

Malinali with Castro's Eagle



"Our Beach neighbourhood has always been supportive. During Covid, our regulars ordered from us all the time. The painting on this (western) wall is to remind us of the foxes who came out, especially along the boardwalk, during those quiet months. The hummingbird beside it is an important bird in both Mexico and Canada. It is like our soul. It is very important if one comes to visit you. On the opposite (eastern) wall is a mural by the Mexican artist Andre Castro. I think it is the first one he did in Canada. It shows the eagle, representing many aspects of traditional and

contemporary art which you could see in all places of my homeland."



Fox & Hummingbird

Something in the flight of the eagle on one side of me, and the pairing of fox and hummingbird on my other, was welcoming in the way affectionate laughter embraces. I was back in Mexico ~ until the Queen streetcar rambled by.

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