



Your Next Great Meal

In a rapidly diversifying South, Con Huevos showcases the promise of the decade to come

MARCO RODRIGUEZ, WEARING A REFLECTIVE vest and a sleepy smile, just walked off the Ford assembly line here in Louisville. His eyes droop behind smudged glasses. Bands of sweat streak his face. Born in Mexico City, he has lived and worked in the United States for thirteen years now. Once each week, he claims a 7:30 a.m. stool at Con Huevos, a breakfast and lunch restaurant set in a brick-fronted shotgun with yolk-yellow trim in the city's Crescent Hill neighborhood.

Chilaquiles are his usual. Stippled with salsa verde, striped with crema, sunny-side-up eggs arrive atop fried tortilla strips, scattered with

queso fresco. Sitting at the counter, sipping a fresh-pressed mango-orange juice, as Anglo and Mexican families course the dining room and an overflow crowd queues for one of the seven tables and five stools, I envy Rodríguez's chilaquiles and his regular status (though not his work schedule).

If I were a regular, Josh Gonzales, the bright-eyed counterman, would know my name. Paco Garcia, the chef, would memorize my order. Four meals into what I hope will prove a long and torrid affair with this tidy café, I have not yet committed to a single dish. But I do favor Garcia's poached eggs atop buttermilk biscuits, drowned in chipotle-chorizo gravy.

I've been a fan of the restaurant since it opened in 2015 and I ate my first breakfast torta, built on a pliant torpedo roll, dotted with avocado puree, and layered with chile-fluorescent chorizo and fat scrambled egg curds. Imagined by immigrants, designed to attract their friends and neighbors as well as bedrock natives, Con Huevos is a bilingual restaurant, where buttermilk biscuits, *tres leches* pancakes, and roasted pork burritos coexist. It's a modern evocation of this twenty-first-century moment, a place to perch for breakfast and glimpse what and how Southerners will eat during the second decade of the *Garden & Gun* run.

I contributed to this magazine in its first year. Two years later, I began this column, focused on dining as a cultural fount. I have taken forks in the road to the Roosevelt in Richmond, where the wine list showcases Virginia vintages and a foie gras pound cake anchors the dessert roster, and to Rocky & Carlo's, a Sicilian cafeteria on the fringe of New Orleans, where I walked the line to score a slab of cheese-paved baked macaroni, drenched in brown gravy. I've sung deep-throated praise for fritas, those Cuban hamburgers overstuffed with matchstick fries, long popular in Miami's Little Havana neighborhood. At FAD, a Nigerian restaurant tucked behind a Waffle House in suburban Atlanta, I supped on black-eyed peas cooked with palm oil and pondered the West African roots of Southern food.

Over the years, I have traveled to every state in the South. And I've roamed what Eugene

EYE-OPENER

A breakfast plate of chilaquiles.



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★ FORK in the ROAD

Walter, the Mobile, Alabama, poet and librettist, called the “extraterritorial” South to scarf garbanzo-bean hush puppies in Chicago and sip pinecone liqueur-infused mint juleps in Rome, Italy. Somehow, though, I missed one of the most important developments of the past decade. In a region of rapidly changing demographics, marked by Latino immigration, I haven’t written a single column about a Southern restaurant that works in the Mexican American tradition. That failing is not what attracted me to Con Huevos. But that realization—and the promise of the jalapeño potatoes, cut into rounds, stacked with homemade queso, and drenched in salsa verde—compelled my return to Louisville.

The name is a double entendre. *Con huevos* translates literally from the Spanish as “with eggs.” Used as slang, it signifies confidence and translates, less delicately, as “with balls.” Proprietor Jesus Martinez, a native of Mexico City, arrived in Kentucky to take a stateside job with Brown-Forman, the Louisville-based liquor conglomerate. His wife, Izmene Peredo, born in Guadalajara, descends from a line of chefs and caterers, beginning with her grandfather who cooked on a Mexican railroad line. She’s the palate. He’s the marketing muscle.

Together they have forged a restaurant that reflects the trends that now shape contemporary dining, from fast casual service, to a focus on local ingredients, to a purposefully Southern aesthetic. Orders, placed at the high-top counter, arrive quickly, often in cast-iron skillets or on wooden platters. Peredo sources pastured eggs from local coops. La Rosita, a nearby *paderia*, bakes the torta buns. Coffee arrives



TASTEMAKER

Chef Paco Garcia in the Con Huevos kitchen.

from the deeper South of Chiapas, the verdant Mexican state where coffee bushes thrive. Finished with hot milk poured with a flourish from a gooseneck pitcher, coffee service here echoes the style of Café Obregon in breakfast-obsessed Mexico City, where biscuits, much like cat heads in the South, accompany café con leche.

Those fusions will serve Con Huevos well as Martinez and Peredo plan to expand to five locations. Like Heirloom Market BBQ in Atlanta, where onetime Korean pop star Jiyeon Lee and her husband, Cody Taylor, pickle green tomato kimchi and smoke gochujang-rubbed pork shoulders, and Spice to Table, the Atlanta café where Asha Gomez adapts flavors from Kerala for her coconut-perfumed fried chicken atop rice flour waffles, Con Huevos showcases a South where immigrants reinvent traditional foods and new authenticities percolate. It’s a culinary research and development lab, crafting the chipotle-gravy-gilded dishes we will breakfast on when *Garden & Gun* celebrates its twentieth. ©

TABLE SERVICE

Doing good while eating
(and drinking) well

and Ryan Smith, funnels proceeds to the Giving Kitchen, a nonprofit that provides emergency assistance grants for restaurant workers facing unanticipated hardships. ¶ Such efforts at consumer-fueled charity are, I’m pleased to say, becoming de rigueur. One of the oldest, founded in 2012, is among the most ingenious. **Okra Charity Saloon** in downtown Houston, owned by a collective of hospitality pros and set in a barrel-vaulted space with a celestial canopy, renders classic cocktails with aplomb and hands patrons a chit with each drink. With that token in hand, drinkers vote to support one of four charities. The charity that receives the most votes at the end of the month receives the profits for the following month. ¶ In the South, a region with a long and inspiring history of philanthropy, Pie Lab, Staplehouse, and Okra Charity Saloon chart paths that progressive restaurants and bars will follow into the future.—J.T.E.

Pie Lab in the Black Belt town of Greensboro, Alabama, began as an outreach project by a handful of recent college graduates. Focused on community building and job training, the storefront bakery and café effects social change one chocolate pecan pie at a time. **Staplehouse**, the bold Atlanta restaurant directed by Jen Hidingier