

# TASTE

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THE PLAIN DEALER

## RESTAURANT ROW

JOE CREA



### New York chef adds his flavor to E. 4th eatery

**B**y any measure, the buzz around downtown's East Fourth Street is upbeat. Stroll down the pedestrian corridor, where guests fill gated seating areas up and down the street, and the enthusiasm is understandable.

Its voltage is about to jump, with the arrival of one of New York City's most popular chefs.

Aaron Sanchez has signed on as consulting chef to Zocalo Mexican Grill and Tequileria. Not only is he Food Network's go-to guy for Latin cuisine; Sanchez is the chef/co-owner of Paladar Latino Food and Drink in Manhattan's Lower East Side and Centrico, the Tribeca neighborhood destination he operates with restaurant power-player Drew Nieporent. The 32-year-old chef will play a role in the evolution of Zocalo's menu and food service. Strategically, his arrival could not have come at a better time for East Fourth.

From the nightlife meccas of House of Blues and Pickwick & Frolic to fine dining at Lola or the quirkiness of Corner Alley's bowling lanes-cum-martini bar, this short street is a jolt of life in an otherwise battered business district. Like an oasis in a limestone and granite desert, the unfolding entertainment district is abloom with diversions during a downbeat time.

But a thorn jutted from the roses. Conceptually, Zocalo was a great idea — an upscale Latino restaurant with its exuberant décor and zesty spirit — and promised a decidedly different destination amid this diverse neighborhood. Problem was, the food was a big disappointment.

Anthony Penn, chief operating officer for Agoura Hills, Calif.-based Trifecta Management Group, which runs Zocalo, is the first to admit it. "There were some grumblings about the food — this place needed some time and attention," says Penn. "We had been looking at how things went on for the first six months, then started tweaking some of the recipes and getting some consistency back there in the kitchen. Then Aaron came upon us. When we met, and realized what he could do, I didn't hesitate," says Penn.

So why would Sanchez, whose roots in New York run deep (he also happens to be the son of Zarela Martinez, owner of Zarela and Manhattan's foremost Latina restaurateur) jump into a downtown Cleveland restaurant?

It has a lot to do with the friends he keeps. Namely, Zocalo's East Fourth neighbor, Michael Symon.

"Michael and I go back 10 years," Sanchez says. "We first worked together on 'Melting Pot' on Food Network. And then he beat me last year on 'Next Iron Chef.' He deserved to win — though the right man didn't win," Sanchez adds with a wink.

For his part, Symon's enthusiasm for his friend Aaron (pronounced air-ROHN) is boundless.

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SPECIAL TO THE PLAIN DEALER

Aaron Sanchez, a finalist on "Next Iron Chef" and chef/co-owner of two restaurants in New York, is helping to reshape the menu at Zocalo Mexican Grill and Tequileria on East Fourth Street in Cleveland.

## ROW

FROM F1

### Zocalo downtown to debut new menu

"He's a great guy, just a really great guy. When they said they weren't happy with the food at Zocalo, I said one of my very close friends is one of the top Mexican chefs in the country, and I'd be more than happy to bring them together," says Symon, in Philadelphia to tape an episode for his forthcoming Food Network show "Dinner Impossible."

"My feeling is that every restaurant on [East Fourth] needs to be great, for whatever it does, and the better they are, the more it benefits every other restaurant," he adds. "Before, the food was, well, average. Aaron is changing that."

Review Zocalo's soon-to-debut new menu — and better still, sample some of Sanchez's prototype

dishes — and you'll notice the shift. Into the existing bill of fare he has installed bright lights like his *sopes*, small tarts made of fine cornmeal dough or masa, then filled with a mellow black bean paste, topped with a swirl of *crema fresco*, a tomatillo salsa, shaved lettuce and *cojito* cheese. And a pair of Caesar salads (an early 20th century Tijuana creation), as well as a delicious ceviche featuring shrimp bathed in a marinade of charred tomatoes, chiles, avocado and lime. It's a tangy, smoke-scented bath that brings out the sugar sweetness of the seafood.

"My collaboration is an effort to express my culture and my food — to create an awareness of all that Mexican cuisine can be," says Sanchez, whose menu changes go into effect later this month. Most people, he says, think of it as a set piece of standards: tacos, tostados and enchiladas.

"That's one of the challenges

### ROW RESOURCES

**Zocalo Mexican Grill and Tequileria**, 2071 East Fourth St., Cleveland; 216-781-0420; [zocalocleveland.com](http://zocalocleveland.com)

we have here: to get away from the clichés and the homogenization of Mexican food. But at the same time, authenticity is very important," Sanchez says. "As a chef, you always want to create a challenge for yourself."

Symon hopes that, along with Eric Williams of Momocho, his friend Sanchez will help to establish a new benchmark for fine Mexican cuisine in Northeast Ohio.

"He'll do some jazzy stuff and some really great, straightforward Mexican — real, simple Mexican food," Symon says of Sanchez. "There aren't many who do Mexican food as good as him. He's very, very good at what he does." Sanchez insists that beyond the initial three weeks of revising the restaurant's menu and

refining the way dishes are prepared, he will be "playing a significant role in the food here, coming in for holiday menus, seasonal changes, or whenever something special should be done."

Besides, beyond Zocalo, Tri-fecta Management has a greater stake in the success of East Fourth. The firm also operates Flannery's Pub, Corner Alley and 4th Street Bar and Grill — and has a hand in Cowboy Food and Drink in Chagrin Falls. Like Corner Alley and 4th Street Bar, Zocalo has the potential to serve as a prototype for similar restaurants around the United States. "But our goal is to create something really interesting on Fourth Street, so that people from the suburbs will come experience," Penn says.

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