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NEXT STOP | CHICAGO

Finding the Beat of Chicago's Latino Quarter



Sally Ryan for The New York Times

A mural in Pilsen reflects the Mexican roots of much of Chicago's large Hispanic population.

By **JEFF BAILEY**


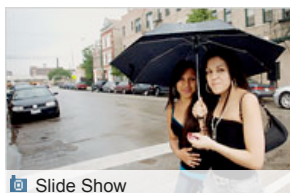
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IN a fifth-floor art gallery in Pilsen, [Chicago's](#) fashionable Latino neighborhood, vibrant guitar chords were pouring out an open window on a recent Friday night. Four Latina artists were showing their paintings, and the shoebox of a gallery was jammed with a mixed, talkative crowd. Some swayed in time to the music, swigging beer and sipping wine. The din seemed to be drawing art patrons and good-time Chicagoans from all over the huge building at 1932 South Halsted Street, the central site of an every-second-Friday art walk.

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Many come to the art walk from the suburbs or other parts of the city, but like much of Chicago these days, the affair draws its real energy from the city's surging Latino population. One of the painters whose work was on display — Carolina Reyes — moved to Pilsen from a North Side neighborhood two years ago to paint. "Being a Latina, I'm still searching to learn more about my culture," she said.

For that, there is no need for her to leave Chicago. More than 1,000 miles from the Mexican border, the city is home to about 800,000 people of Hispanic origin, mostly Mexican. That's more than a quarter of the population and gaining share daily — this when the city shrank by nearly a million residents after the 1950s. But in Latin Chicago, there is a new boomtown to explore.

A native of a mostly Latino suburb of Los Angeles, I moved here 25 years ago; my wife, a Latina from Texas, came 12 years ago. So, it's

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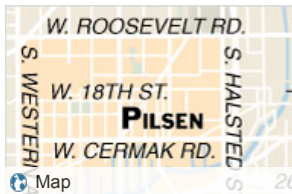
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Pilsen, Chicago

natural we would be drawn to areas like Pilsen, where Spanish and English mix against a backdrop of brilliant mosaics and murals of Mexican heroes, and Little Village nearby, where mariachi bands carrying their instruments into restaurants could easily be south of the border. But it's more than just familiarity and the fact that eating and entertainment on the Latin side of Chicago is generally cheaper. It's where the energy is.

"It's happening so fast," said Carlos Tortolero, who came to Chicago from [Mexico](#) at age 3 and, as a 28-year-old school teacher in 1982, started what would become the [National Museum of Mexican Art](#), the city's leading Latino cultural organization. "It's becoming a very Mexican city."

The museum made a name for itself in 2006 when it opened an exhibition about the influence of Africans in Mexico. In a city known for its racial separation, blacks flocked to Pilsen for the show. This summer, the museum will insert itself into the national political debate with an exhibition opening on the Fourth of July — "A Declaration of Immigration" — that will go beyond painting and sculpture to present data to argue that point. "It is pro-American to be pro-immigrant," Mr. Tortolero said.

Immigrants certainly made Chicago one of history's great boomtowns. It grew from a nearly uninhabited swamp in the early 1800s to a metropolis of a million people by 1890. An up-to-date version of that multicultural frontier town is on display every Sunday morning at a flea market, just around the corner from where Mrs. O'Leary's cow — in fable, anyway — is said to have kicked over the lantern that started the Great Fire of 1871. Known as the [Maxwell Street Market](#), it runs along Canal Street south of Roosevelt Road. (The city closed down the original location on nearby Maxwell Street in the 1990s, but the name stuck.) After more than 100 years, it still attracts immigrants and their offspring from many points on the globe. But today, as with much of Chicago, the market moves to a Latin beat. Browsers seem to move in step with the blaring Latin music as they peruse the four-block stretch of stalls that feature art, jewelry and the usual knock-off purses and leather goods.

If you see a skinny fellow with a goatee who appears to know the street-food vendors, he might be Rick Bayless, the Chicago chef and cookbook author who raised traditional Mexican cooking to gourmet status, stopping by on his day off to snack on mole and hand-pressed tortillas. The crowds become thicker around the stall for [Lencho's Tacos](#), where people take a number and wait their turn. Well before 10 a.m., Lencho's fans are three and four deep around the counter, lined up for tacos of grilled beef, onions, cilantro and hot sauce — a perfect on-the-go lunch for about \$5.

To the north, above the stalls and the brightly dressed shoppers, rises the Loop and its towering skyscrapers, and in a single frame the city's remarkable accomplishments and its restless, unrealized dreams come into focus.

With much of Chicago's Latino population relatively new, many of the restaurants, much of the music and other cultural offerings burst with the flavor of home.

Upon arrival in Chicago, "people are much freer to be who they are," says Mr. Bayless, an [Oklahoma](#) native who has adopted Mexico's cuisine with singular fervor, and in 1987 opened [Frontera Grill](#) in the River North area. Its success, along with the success of his more refined restaurant next door, Topolobampo, has spawned many other serious and un-Americanized Latin places, making Chicago an unlikely culinary standout when it comes to Latin cuisine.

Frontera is decorated with Mexican art that Mr. Bayless and his wife have collected over the years, a riot of color and images, and Latin music plays at a volume to permit dinner conversation, though you may still find your legs dancing under the table. His simplest dishes, like the tacos al carbón (\$16) — grilled meats served with guacamole, beans and tortillas made on the premises — are memorable for their simplicity and freshness.

Mr. Bayless's restaurants are, of course, just one side of the story when it comes to Chicago's Latin cuisine. In the West Side neighborhood of Humboldt Park, a lively Puerto Rican and Mexican area, Carlos Reyna's small restaurant, [Maiz](#), is a shrine to the many corn vessels — tortillas, tamales, sopes — used in traditional Mexican cooking. In the cozy storefront, Mr. Reyna waits on many of the tables himself and can help you choose a series of small dishes, like a vegetable tamale cooked in banana leaf and triangular tamales covered in mole, to be washed down by tart margaritas. He also serves bebidas frías, the sweet, refreshing mixtures of fruit and water that he grew up drinking in [Mexico City](#). (Try the cucumber flavor.)

Mr. Reyna moved to Chicago in 1986 to pursue a career as a dancer, waiting tables to support himself. When he decided to open a restaurant, he focused on food that reminded him of home. "I always wanted to bring it to Chicago," he said.

Similarly, over the last 36 years, another immigrant, Roberto Marín, has kept playing the salsa he grew up on in his native [Colombia](#). He works days as a machine operator at an electrical components factory

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and plays bass most Saturday nights at Las Tablas, a mid-price Colombian steak house on Irving Park Road, north and west of downtown. As dinner wound down one recent night, half the patrons were grooving in their seats to Mr. Marin’s beat, and the other half were rising to dance.

Las Tablas is in a very mixed neighborhood; Latin, sure, but also Eastern European and plenty else. And that is one of the beauties of Latin Chicago: it is spread throughout the city.

But Pilsen, on the city’s near southwest side, may be the neighborhood that is most closely identified with Latin Chicago. Always working class, initially Czech, and now 100 years or so old, Pilsen is mostly a neighborhood of modest cottages and three-flats — the Chicago term for a detached three-family house. For every trendy restaurant or shop in the conspicuously gentrifying area, there remains at least a dozen stores very plainly serving local residents. It remains perhaps 90 percent Latino, and it is mostly Latinos who run those welcoming coffeehouses, upscale restaurants and trendy new stores. But apartments in the area are being fixed up, and higher rents are squeezing out some residents. Anglo newcomers in their 20s and 30s are out and about, jogging and walking their dogs.

“Right now we’re co-existing,” said Sylvia Rivera, general manager of a youth-programmed radio station, WRTE-FM (www.wrte.org), based in Pilsen and owned by the National Museum of Mexican Art. “Hopefully, we’ll be able to do that and share, as well.”

A walk east on 18th Street from the Blue Line El stop cuts through the heart of Pilsen. It is a street lined with cafes and restaurants like Cafe Mestizo (1646 West 18th Street; 312-421-5920), a laid-back coffeehouse where a T-shirt displayed on a wall announces, “Pilsen is not for sale”; and Mundial Cocina Mestiza (1640 West 18th Street; 312-491-9908), an upscale and friendly place (for weekend brunch, try the steak and eggs, surrounded by delicious Mexican side dishes and served with warm, chewy tortillas for about \$12). Farther east is Bombon (1508 West 18th Street; 312-733-7788), an elaborate Mexican bakery and wedding cake shop.

Ms. Rivera used to give tours of 18th Street and the surrounding neighborhood, but increasingly visitors arrive unguided and wander by themselves. “It’s all a good thing,” she said.

Indeed, as the Latino population expands its influence in Chicago, as in other American cities, visitors won’t have to go looking for the Latin beat. It will be all around.

PAN AMERICAN

WHERE TO STAY

In the Loop, the [Hotel Burnham](#) (1 West Washington Street; 312-782-1111) is in the landmark Reliance Building, which reopened as a boutique hotel in 1999. Rooms start at \$239 and suites at \$389 in June and July. It’s a block away from the Blue Line train, which you can take south to the 18th Street stop (elevated at that point) for Pilsen.

The **Omni Chicago Hotel** (676 North Michigan Avenue; 312-944-6664) is a short walk from the Frontera Grill and Topolobampo. Rooms start at \$201.75 in July.

WHERE TO EAT

The **Frontera Grill** (445 North Clark Street; 312-661-1434) is the home restaurant of the cookbook author and TV show host Rick Bayless. It has eye-popping art on the walls and lively [music](#). The food ranges from tacos al carbón for \$16 to nightly specials, exquisitely prepared for \$36. Next door is **Topolobampo**, Mr. Bayless’s high-end restaurant.

At **Maiz** (1041 North California Street; 773-276-3149), order and share a series of small traditional Mexican dishes, like tamales in mole, for \$4.75 to \$7.75.

Café Aorta (2002 West 21st Street; 312-738-2002) serves Caribbean cooking near the National Museum of Mexican Art. A Cubano sandwich is \$9. Corn beef hash with Puerto Rican rice and eggs and toast is \$9.

Carnitas la Michoacana (2049 West Cermak Road; 773-254-2970) serves pork fried in a giant cauldron, chopped and served in fresh soft tacos for \$1.35 each. (If you’ve come this far, after lunch walk around the corner to St. Paul’s Church, a massive pile of bricks on West 22nd Place; it once rivaled the skyscrapers of the Loop.)

Taqueria Moran (2226 North California Avenue; 773-235-2663) is a reliable and friendly Mexican diner. Try the eggs and machaca (shredded beef), \$7.50; the taco plate (try the carnitas) is \$6.95.

Kristoffer Cafe & Bakery (1733 South Halsted Street; 312-829-4150) is a small coffeehouse that serves baked goods as well as Mexican- and Central American-style tamales (wrapped in a green banana leaf) for \$1.75 to \$2.75 and stays open for the second Friday art walks on Halsted, sometimes with live music.

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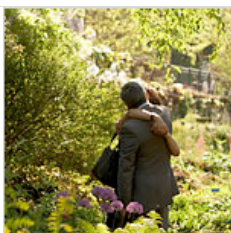
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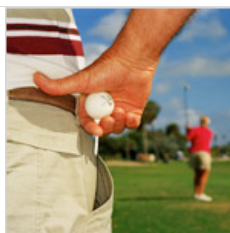
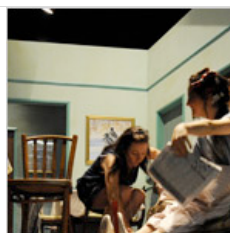
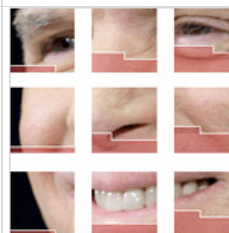
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