



## “Down Mexico Way” and Back — Aikens Freshens Espita’s Menu with Authenticity



British-born **ROBERT AIKENS** brings 28 years of experience to his new position. He launched his culinary career in 1989 with the Roux Brothers, cooking at their London Michelin 3-star restaurant, Le Gavroche. “It was very high pressure but focused on every little detail,” recalled Aikens. “Everything was prepared meticulously with speed and efficiency.”

Aikens holds an advanced craft diploma from Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education in the UK. In the United States, he cooked at New York’s famous Rainbow Room and, in Philadelphia, was executive chef for the STARR Restaurant’s Dandelion gastropub. There, he honed his farm-to-table philosophy and cultivated relationships with farmers throughout the Mid-Atlantic. During Aikens’ three-year tenure, Dandelion received three stars (out of four) from critic Craig LaBan of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

**R**obert Aikens, the new executive chef at Espita Mezcaleria, recently returned from a fact-finding jaunt to Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. There, he visited restaurant kitchens and browsed local markets, gathering knowledge about the region’s cuisine and ingredients. For four days, he cooked — and learned — alongside Chef Luis Arellano at Criollo, one of Oaxaca’s top restaurants. He also spent time at Pujol, a top Mexico City restaurant, helmed by Enrique Olvera.

“I’m excited to bring a new edge to the cuisine at Espita,” said Aikens. “My goal is to reinterpret what a Mexican dish can be by incorporating new techniques that elevate the flavors and take us outside of the box of classic Mexican cooking.”

### Foodservice Monthly asked: What did you learn at Criollo?

**Aikens:** “I learned a lot at Criollo. Although the team was small, we accomplished a lot with an ever-changing daily tasting menu. This is where I learned to make tamales. I always thought it was a long and arduous task, wrapping the masa in corn husks, tricky to assemble. Instead, they used fresh banana leaves, which was easier and more efficient. They made a different flavor every day: epazote (herb), zucchini blossoms, black beans, and queso. They also offered little street snacks at the beginning of the meal — tetras — a hand-pressed corn tortilla folded over various fillings and cooked on a hot comal (clay surface). Served with a different salsa each day, they were fantastic.”

### FSM: Did you visit food markets?

**Aikens:** “I went to the huge market in Oaxaca and was taken by the



Espita’s “Hamburguesa Torta,” now with salsa macha (photos: Espita Mezcaleria)

wonderful bounty, variety, and superb quality of the produce and how affordable it is. It annoys me that we can’t get such beautiful produce in the States, for whatever reason, and that we have to pay so much for so little... it does not add up when we must pay a hundred times more, and we could easily grow this in the States.”

### FSM: Which “authentic” dishes did you learn at Criollo and Pujol? Which dishes will appear on Espita’s menu?

**Aikens:** “I’ve already incorporated a few techniques from Criollo and Pujol. For our butternut squash tamale — great for fall — we grind masa (corn) and finish with roasted squash puree and brown butter walnut dressing with pumpkin oil and dried Pasilla de Oaxaca. Other dishes include charred octopus (from Pujol’s menu), with my own twist. It’s light and flavorful from the poaching broth and marinade of roasted onions, garlic, tomato, red wine, olives, and fresh herbs.

For Espita’s hamburguesa, I’ve added salsa macha, which I tasted at Pujol, very spicy, with chile de arbol, roasted peanuts, and tomatoes. We’ve also added house-made Kirby pickles, packed full of flavor, sour, salty, and herbaceous. They take on a pink hue from the

hibiscus in the pickling liquid. Finally, we tie it together with Queso Oaxaca, which we also make in house.”

### FSM: Where do you find ingredients in the D.C. area?

**Aikens:** “We use multiple suppliers. Most specialty items are imported from Mexico. Others come from vendors mostly based outside the Washington area. We import dry chiles, spices, and heirloom corn for tortillas and masa.

To be frankly honest, [buying] produce on the east coast is challenging for several reasons. Variety is very limited, and what is available is extremely expensive. For example, I could go to a local (Mexican) bodega and pick up an herb called epazote for \$2 a bunch, but if I go to one of our D.C. suppliers, they charge \$28 per pound! This plant is essentially a weed, which makes it particularly frustrating. In Oaxaca, you can buy ten pounds for about 100 pesos (about \$5). I don’t know why we cannot grow such amazing produce here in the States. I guess it comes to supply and demand. When there is not much call for epazote, chepiche, or the like, suppliers want to charge a ridiculous amount. It stifles creativity.

### FSM: Any advice for aspiring chefs wishing to learn “authentic” cooking?

**Aikens:** “Go to the source where it originates. Reading a book or seeing it on TV will not give you the right experience. If you want something badly enough, you will find a way to do it.”

Open daily, **ESPITA MEZCALERIA** is located at 1250 9th St., NW. For more information, call 202- 621-9695 or visit [espitadc.com](http://espitadc.com).