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## CULINARY CURRENTS®

### Flan gone wild

*Sweet Spanish custard dessert enjoys widespread resurgence from quick service to fine dining*

BY LISA JENNINGS

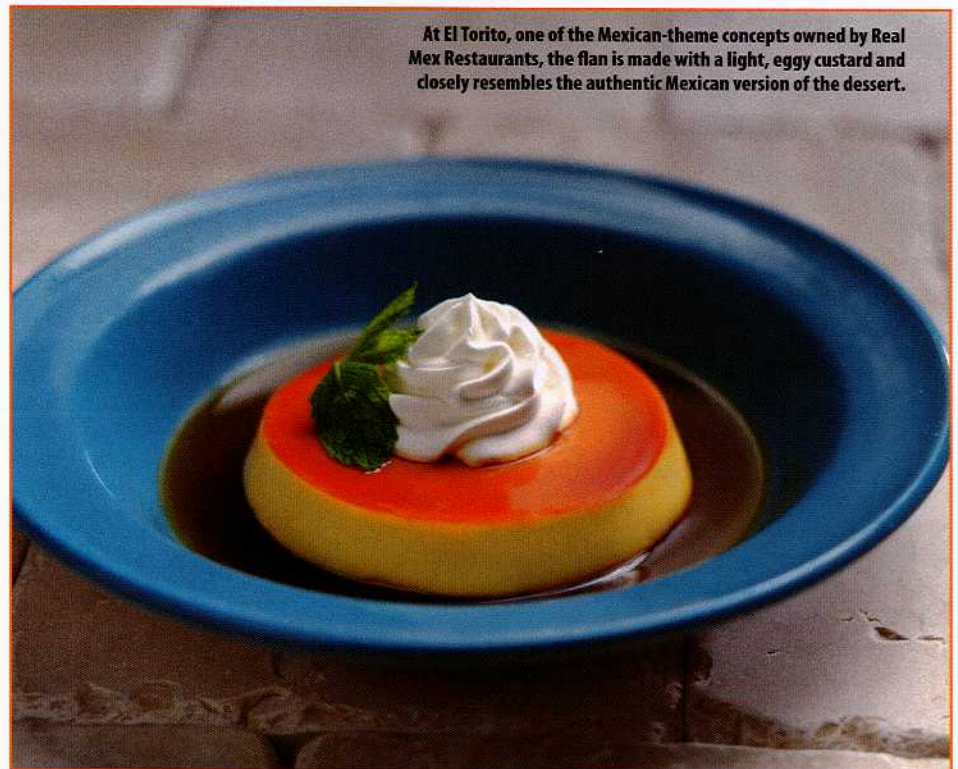
**W**ith an increasing number of chefs turning to Latin cultures for new and exciting flavors, it's no surprise to see a resurgence of interest in flan for dessert.

The classic dish of custard baked in caramel is known by various names: In France, it is *crème caramel* or *crème reversée*; in Italy, it is *crema caramella*. But in most Spanish-speaking countries it is *flan*, a dessert that is as appropriate in fine-dining restaurants as it is in the most casual mom-and-pop operations.

According to the "History of Food," by Maquellonne Toussaint-Samat, caramel was invented by the Arabs, who brought it to Spain centuries ago. There, the golden melted sugar was married with creamy custard, and flan was born. Spanish settlers brought the dessert to Latin America, and the French – who have always known a good dessert when they see one – created their own take on the dish. Flan's cousin, *crema Catalana*, also from Spain, is more commonly known by its French moniker *crème brûlée* and features similar elements but has a hard caramel topping.

Now flan can be found on the menu at a diverse range of restaurants across the United States, from the Mexican-inspired quick-serve El Pollo Loco chain, based in Southern California, to Mark Militello's upscale Mark's South Beach in Miami Beach, Fla.

Some chefs play with the custard, which is typically flavored with vanilla. Now it's not uncommon to find flans made with pumpkin-flavored custard or ones spiked with pistachio, coconut or mango.



At El Torito, one of the Mexican-theme concepts owned by Real Mex Restaurants, the flan is made with a light, eggy custard and closely resembles the authentic Mexican version of the dessert.

Flans – typically without caramel – also can work as a savory component in a dish. Blended with puréed asparagus, sweet potato or corn, the molded custard can become a cool island in a velvety soup, for example. At Mark's South Beach, executive chef Larry LaValley recently offered a New Year's dish featuring a winter truffle flan with wild mushrooms and foie gras. For that dish, a savory flan custard without caramel was infused with truffles and topped with mushrooms roasted with herbs and shallots. More truffles were shaved on top,

and it was served with pan-seared foie gras for a \$25 appetizer that was so popular, it was added to the regular menu.

But for most, flan means something sweet at the end of the meal.

At Real Mex Restaurants, based in Cypress, Calif., for example, flan is the No. 1 dessert at each of the 11 casual-dining brands the company operates, including El Torito, Chevys Fresh Mex and Acapulco. They sell for between \$2.99 and \$5.95.

Almost all of Real Mex's brands are Mexican-themed, but each is its own

## CULINARY CURRENTS®

# Flan enjoys resurgence in QSR, fine dining

concept. And each brand has its own take on flan, says Julie Koenig-Brown, Real Mex's vice president of marketing.

"It's a very traditional Mexican dessert," Koenig-Brown says. "All our brands serve a version of it. Each is a very different recipe."

At the 69 El Torito restaurants, for example, the flan is most authentically Mexican, with a light, eggy custard.

But at the 36 Acapulco Mexican Restaurants, where the menu leans more toward California-Mexican influences, the dessert is creamier and more decadent, thanks to a "secret ingredient" that gives it more of a cheesecake-like texture, she says.

During the holiday season, a pumpkin flan was offered as a chef's special at the company's seven El Torito Grill restaurants for the first time, Koenig-Brown notes that the special accounted for about 19 percent of dessert sales during that season.

A traditional flan begins with a caramel made from melted sugar and perhaps a bit of water. The golden liquid caramel is poured into a flan ring or a ramekin, where it hardens.

A flan custard is not unlike a basic pastry cream made with sugar, eggs and cream, though it usually calls for more egg yolks to give it structure. The custard is poured into the caramel-lined dish and baked in a water bath. While baking, the custard firms and the caramel melts into a viscous sauce. The dish is then

cooled and chilled.

To serve, the flan is inverted onto a plate, on which – hopefully – the custard will stand independently, and the liquid caramel becomes the topping.

El Pollo Loco, based in Irvine, Calif., launched a flan dessert in 2003, and now the chain's 333 units sell an average of about 100 servings of the dessert each week.

Because an inverted custard is tricky at a quick-serve restaurant, El Pollo Loco's version, priced at \$1.59, is served in a plastic container, but the rich, pudding-like vanilla custard is appropriately bathed in a slightly thickened caramel for an authentic flavor.

At the Fogo de Chão Churrascaria, based in Addison, Texas, with five U.S. units, a Brazilian version of flan is on the menu and priced at \$7.75. There, the dish depends on what company officials describe as a specific condensed milk shipped in from Brazil.

Dunia Borga, pastry chef and co-owner of La Duni Latin Kitchen and Baking Studio, which has two locations in Dallas, says Brazilian flan often uses dulce de leche, a type of cow's milk cooked down until the sugar develops a caramel flavor – similar to Mexico's cajeta, which is typically made from goat's milk. Borga, who is

Quick-service chain El Pollo Loco offers a flan dessert for \$1.59 and sells about 100 servings a week at its 333 locations.



originally from Colombia, notes that the flans she grew up with often included Caribbean flavors, such as coconut or mango, and that the versatile dessert works well with fruit in general.

At The Spanish Kitchen in Los Angeles, a high-end Latin-inspired restaurant, executive chef Luis Castro offers a trio of flavored flans served on one plate: sweet potato, pistachio and traditional vanilla.

Castro adds Kahlúa, a Mexican liqueur, to the caramel. The liqueur cooks off he notes, but it leaves a coffee flavor. He uses 2-ounce ramekins for each flavor in the trio. The dessert is offered for a price of \$7.

"Flan is something so rich. You really only want one bite of each," he contends, though a larger, vanilla-flavored version also is available on the menu.

Juan Villaparedes, pastry chef at Mark's South Beach, likes to infuse his flan custard, \$9, with rose petal or lavender.

Sometimes he uses coconut milk instead of cream, he notes, or infuses the milk with chocolate, rum or other liqueurs. Orange peel, lemon or cinnamon also can be used.

For Villaparedes, however, flan is generally one component of a dessert plate, matched with fruit, a small cake or a cookie, such as tuile, to add texture to contrast with the melt-in-your-mouth dessert.

At Asi es la Vida in Phoenix, however, chef-owner Arturo Rodriguez is a purist when treating his popular flan dessert, which he sells for \$6. Rodriguez special orders a Mexican queso de tres leches, which he describes as "like cream cheese, but lighter," to make his flan. "Other flans you see around are more like cheesecake," he says. He bakes his custard in the caramel, as is traditionally done, but Rodriguez steams the flan slowly over low temperatures. "It's best to make it and serve it the next day," he notes.

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