



# Mama's Hot Tamales Café™

## COVER STORY

# Culture con coffee

Have a seat and a sip of strong brew at cafes around the Southland that serve up arts, literature, music and more, all with a Latino flavor.

By AGUSTIN GURZA  
Times Staff Writer

**T**HE Border Balladeers are warbling tales of heart-break and migration at Espresso Mi Cultura, a combination coffeehouse, art gallery and bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard.

The acoustic trio performs by the front window, where a neon Aztec figure signals the venue's modern Latino identity, urban and contemporary but rooted in tradition.

The bright and colorful cafe becomes a comforting refuge for bundled-up customers who trickle in from a chilly evening drizzle.

Settled into multicolored chairs to match their multiracial backgrounds, they soak up the trio's repertoire of traditional ranchera and country-western music, a blend as distinctive as the Mexican mocha, a house specialty. At this L.A. cafe, customers get strong shots of culture with their cups of joe.

Espresso Mi Cultura — a Spanish play on words that can also be read as "I express my culture" — is one of the most popular of a growing number of Latino-themed cafes that have been percolating all across Southern California. From Sylmar to Santa Monica, from Pomona to Pasadena, these culturally conscious coffeehouses offer literature with their lattes, music with their mochas and poetry with their cappuccinos, all with a Latino flavor.

The cafes are owned independently by a new

generation of community-oriented Latino entrepreneurs who reflect the demographic they serve — many are bicultural, descendants of immigrants, with college degrees and disposable income. In creating cafes as bilingual cultural spaces, they've tapped into two formidable forces: the demand for strong, flavorful coffee and the need for outlets for Latino artistic expression, pent up for years like the compressed steam in an espresso machine.

"The cafe is an entryway into something much larger than we could ever imagine those four walls providing," says Evonne Gallardo of Self-Help Graphics, a pioneering East L.A. arts center. "The next cultural movement breeds itself in these small spaces, and people don't even know it. It's the ideas of tomorrow that are brewing there."

So what is it that makes a cafe Latino?

"You can say it's the art, or the music or the books," says Espresso's co-owner, Ramon Pan-toja, a former Time Warner accountant who created his store's Mexican mocha with Abuelita brand chocolate.

"But alone, none of that would make this place what it is. It's almost an intangible. There's a spirit here. There's a warmth that's been created from different factors, and it comes together in this place."

Like many minority-owned mom-and-pop shops, these small business are struggling. The coffee is reliable, but [See Cafes, Page 36]



BRIGHT IDEAS: Mama's Hot Tamales Café is among Los Angeles venues that spotlight Latino artistry and cooking.

ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

## Five signs you're in a Latino cafe:

1. Mexican mocha is on the menu.

2. The book section carries the essential troika of biographies: Che Guevara, Emiliano Zapata and Subcomandante Marcos.

3. Walls and ceilings are painted in vibrant colors evoking the palette of Latin American murals, or at least one wall is a mural.

4. Its art exhibit has featured, is featuring or will soon feature the ubiquitous paintings by L.A. grade-school teacher Jose Ramirez.

5. The owner pines for the good old days when members of East L.A. bands Quetzal or Ozomatli used to hang around and play for the fun of it.