

Los Angeles

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Best Upscale Mexican, August 2013

Babita Mexicuisine

When pomegranate season starts in early August, customers begin pestering owner Roberto Berrelleza for his chiles en nogada (\$21.95—okay, not so cheap but too good to pass up); the stuffed green poblanos in a white ground-almond sauce need the red accent of pomegranate to mirror the colors of Mexico's flag. A symbol of that country's independence, the dish is the emotional equivalent of our Thanksgiving turkey. According to Berrellaza, in 1822 the nuns at the Santa Monica convent near Puebla prepared chiles en nogada to honor visiting Agustín de Iturbide, the hero who helped free Mexico from Spanish rule. With a nod to contemporary tastes, Berrelleza now adds goat cheese and ground pecans to the traditional mélange of braised pork and fresh dried fruit stuffing.

We know there's more to Mexican food than pork tacos, yet savoring that country's authentic flavors in an environment where flip-flops are discouraged can prove a challenge. John Sedlar's Rivera has a slick downtown dining room (complete with tequila lockers), but the ingredients skew more pan-Latin. The family-friendly suppers of chicken *flautas* and *asada* at La Casita Mexicana in Bell certainly taste of tradition; they're also supercasual. Nestled in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it suburban storefront, San Gabriel's Babita Mexicuisine finds the gracious middle ground with heavy drapes, white tablecloths, and such daintily presented dishes as green cilantro margarita sorbet, tequila-soaked salmon *sopes*, or during winter, *chiles en nogada* enveloped in goat cheese cream and pomegranate seeds. Boisterous chef-owner Roberto Berrelleza gladly shares his recommendations, while his wife, Elba, refills your sangria glass.