The Eye

Beach, Village + Urban Living in Mexico
San Miguel de Allende · Issue 2
January 2026
FREE

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Fernanda Garza:
Equine Photographer

Between the Pages:
2026's New Novels

Asian Delights in SMA

Year of the Fire Horse

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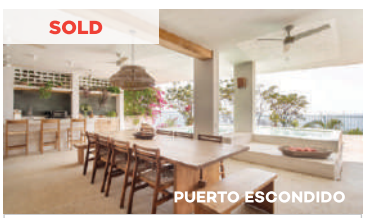

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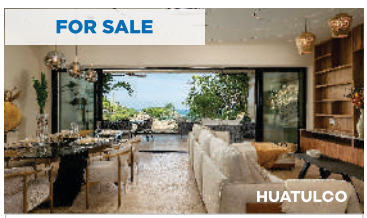

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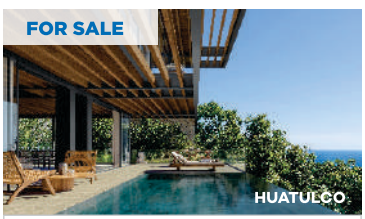

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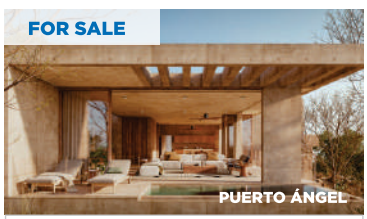

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Editor's Letter

"We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves."— Chief Seattle

It's the New Year… again.

Suddenly it is 2026, and at times I feel as though I'm living in a science-fiction film. The kind where a woman goes to sleep and wakes up to find that ten or twenty years have passed. Everyone looks a little older, the world is a little less shiny, yet the headlines remain stubbornly familiar. Immigration crises. War. Corporate takeovers. The looming threat of environmental collapse. Will we ever learn?

As humans, we try to make sense of the world by dividing it into fragments. We divide the vastness of space into time — years, months, days, minutes, seconds. We divide land into countries and cities, drawing imaginary lines that we then defend and fight over. We separate ourselves by identity, ideology, belief. And in all this dividing, we search for meaning: Who are we? What is our purpose? Why does harmony feel so elusive?

There is no shortage of resources on this planet for all of us to live well. And yet, as a species, we continue to make decisions from a frequency of lack. We are taught, explicitly and implicitly, that things are limited, that if someone else has more, there will be inevitably less for us. I believe scarcity is something we have learned, reinforced by systems that benefit from fear and competition rather than trust and cooperation.

This year, according to Chinese astrology, is the Year of the Fire Horse, a cycle that comes around only once every sixty years. Rare, not quite a Halley's Comet moment, but close. The Fire Horse (Bing-Wu) is associated with vitality, momentum, and spiritual transformation. It represents a powerful alignment of motion and illumination, a time when people feel called to take bold steps, to embark on pilgrimages, and to pursue both outer and inner journeys. So what does this mean for us?

Perhaps it means that speed is no longer the answer. That moving faster, consuming more, and fragmenting the world into ever-smaller pieces has not brought us closer but only further from one another. The Fire Horse does not ask us to escape what feels difficult, but to meet it with courage, clarity, and movement that has direction, not reaction, but intention.

Fire does not simply destroy; it illuminates. Let us step out of patterns rooted in fear and into a different way of being, one where there is enough when we move in alignment rather than competition.

Let us choose presence over paralysis, connection over fragmentation, and curiosity over certainty. To take our own quiet pilgrimages, inward or outward, and to participate more consciously in the systems we belong to. Not to fix the world all at once, but to move differently within it. Sometimes, that is where real change begins.

See you next month,

Jane

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In This Issue

Letter from SMA

It's the start of a new year. This issue has me thinking about new beginnings. Beginnings can be exciting and scary. How do you know when it's time to start something new? Not everyone has the privilege of starting something new by choice, but for those fortunate enough who do, how can they know?

Enthusiasm toward the desired change must be greater than the comfort of staying where you are now. Comfort can be a beautiful place, but when it starts to quiet your curiosity, it may no longer be serving you. Enthusiasm, on the other hand, carries movement. It propels you forward.

But enthusiasm is not always comfortable. One of the ideas I return to often, inspired by the semiological approach of Alfonso Ruiz Soto, is that what is true is not always what is easy. Real enthusiasm does not necessarily feel light or effortless. It can coexist with fear. It can appear alongside grief for what is being left behind. It can even exist without the approval or understanding of those around you.

And yet, it remains.That persistence is what differentiates enthusiasm from impulse or passing emotion. An impulse burns fast and disappears just as quickly. Semiological enthusiasm stays. It returns quietly, again and again, even when doubt is present. Even when the path is unclear. Even when staying where you are would be simpler.

Enthusiasm is not a promise of ease or success. What it offers instead is direction. It functions as a compass, not a map. It doesn't explain every step, but it consistently points somewhere meaningful.

So how do you know what to start? Follow what genuinely enthuses you—not only what excites you in the moment, but what continues to call your attention over time. Follow what feels alive, even if it feels inconvenient. Often, clarity does not come before movement. It comes after the first small step, once you allow yourself to begin.

Thank you tosome of the people who have helped me and opened their doors to me with this new project.

Roger Jones, our dear family friend, who always takes the time to welcome us at his breakfast table at his beautiful boutique hotel, Casa Angelitos.

Susana Alonso, an incredible glass artist with whom I spent hours talking at her studio and who made me feel completely at home.

Mike Solof, one of our incredible writers, who simply brings me so much joy.

To everyone who is reading this issue and who read the previous one, thank you. I wish you a beautiful start to 2026.Let's start this Year of the Horse with strength, fire, and enthusiasm.

See you in February,
Ximena Collado

The Eye

Call for Submissions

Are you a storyteller, writer, or photographer?

We're always looking for creative voices and new perspectives that explore life in Mexico — its people, culture, cuisine, travel, and ideas.

Each issue follows a theme.
Upcoming topics include:

February – Spiritual Pilgrimages and Religion in Mexico
March – Healthcare
April – The French–Mexico Connection

If you have an idea, photo essay, or finished story that connects to one of these themes, we'd love to hear from you. We also accept submissions that are not on theme.

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Tell your story. Share your Mexico.

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San Miguel's Oldest No-Kill Shelter: The Lifesaving Work of the S.P.A.

By Megan Gabel

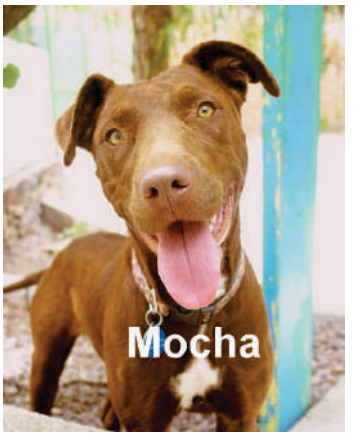
The **Sociedad Protectora de Animales de San Miguel de Allende, A.C.** is the oldest no-kill shelter for cats and dogs in San Miguel de Allende. Since 1980, we have provided food, care, and a safe place for stray, abandoned, and homeless animals. Today, we are home to **35 dogs and 20 cats**. Our volunteers and staff offer daily love, attention, and support to every animal in our care.

We have a lower-cost in-house clinic with a full-time veterinarian who provides medical care to our shelter animals as well as pets belonging to others in the community. The clinic is open to the public and offers puppy, kitten, and adult wellness packages to keep veterinary costs manageable.

As a no-kill shelter, the S.P.A. is committed to finding homes for all of our animals, no matter how long it takes. We encourage adoptions through a very reasonable all-inclusive adoption fee. Our adoption fee is only 600 pesos, far less than the out-of-pocket costs we incur for tests at intake alone. When we are able to accept an animal, we request a donation to help defray expenses. We are mindful that when a shelter animal is adopted, it saves two lives: the animal who goes home and the one who now has space to come in.

We warmly welcome volunteers and value their help socializing cats and dogs and taking dogs for walks. The feedback we receive from volunteers is extremely positive—they enjoy their time at the S.P.A. and are complimentary about our animals and facilities. The best way to arrange a volunteer visit is to write to **info@spasanmiguel.org**, so we can exchange information and schedule an interview.

Our adoption process is simple. We encourage potential adopters to explore our website (www.spasanmiguel.org) in advance to see the animals currently available. It's helpful for us to know who caught their eye and which animals they're most interested in meeting. Upon arrival, we begin with a brief interview to learn more about the potential adopters and what kind of life they can offer a cat or dog. We also ask what qualities they're looking for—small, medium, or large dog; male or female; preferred age range; preferred energy level. We know our animals well and can guide adopters toward the best match. Cat adopters are then invited into the cattery, where our adoptions/volunteers coordinator helps them meet potential companions.



For dog adoptions, potential adopters sit in the Jardín, where staff bring out dogs that match their preferences. After each meeting, we ask a few questions to determine whether we're heading in the right direction. The only time constraint is feeding time, around 1:30 p.m., when dogs are far more interested in their food than in greeting new people. Adoption hours are Monday–Saturday, 11 a.m.–2 p.m.

Once a cat or dog is chosen, the next step is payment of the adoption fee, an optional adoption kit (250 pesos), and an exit exam by our veterinarian. A mandatory free two-week follow-up visit is scheduled, and our Adoption Return Policy is signed.

Although we are not a rescue organization, we do work with rescuers. Maria and Yaba are examples of dogs taken in through rescue partnerships. We frequently receive Facebook messages about abandoned or mistreated animals, with people asking us to send someone out to help. As much as we would like to, the S.P.A. cannot directly intervene—we lack the personnel, finances, and, in some cases, legal authority. Space, particularly for dogs, is extremely limited, and we cannot create room when we are full.

We accept animals from rescuers and Canine Control when space allows. Beyond space, we must also consider health, adoptability, and temperament. Before admitting any animal, our veterinarian performs a thorough exam, including parvo and distemper tests for all dogs. We cannot accept feral cats, and we must assess each animal's level of socialization before making a final decision.

Mocha and Bonnie are examples of stray dogs now safe at the S.P.A. and waiting for forever homes. Lucky and Jazmin were saved from near-certain death at Canine Control. Litters of homeless kittens—like Ollie, Diego, Zara, and Darcy—have found refuge and warmth with us.

If you encounter abandoned puppies or kittens, we can guide you. It's a difficult situation—walking away is painful. If you choose to rescue an animal, that animal becomes your responsibility. Call us, and we will let you know if we can take one or more of the animals or offer alternatives. Even when we are full, we can add your rescues to our waiting list.

The S.P.A. is a private non-profit organization. **Donations are our only source of income.** We receive no government support. Our major annual fundraiser is the **Pet Food Money Bank**, launched each May to raise the funds needed to feed our shelter animals for the year. Thanks to our generous supporters, we have reached our goal every year since 2015.

Our clinic provides top-quality veterinary services, led by our excellent full-time veterinarian, **Dr. Omar Córdova**. We offer routine care (checkups and vaccinations), diagnostics, x-rays, lab work, sterilizations, other surgeries, and emergency care. The clinic is open Monday–Saturday from 9 a.m.–3 p.m., and until 4 p.m. on Tuesdays and Saturdays (our discount days). Adoption hours are Monday–Saturday, 11 a.m.–2 p.m.

We are located at **Los Pinos 7**, near the bus station. Phone: **415-152-6124**

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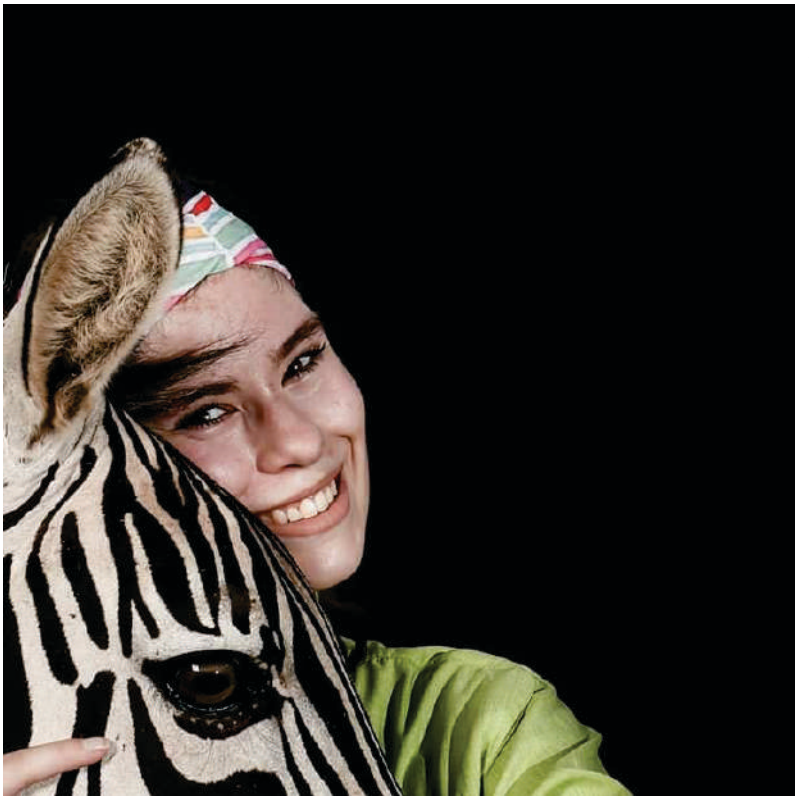
Visit our website for a map: www.spasanmiguel.org
Stop by—we'd love to meet you!

Looking for the Encounter: An Equine Photographer at Work

By Estefanía Camacho

To stand in the presence of a horse is to confront its grandeur. How do you translate, into a single image, the velvety texture of its coat, the gleam of its mane, the musculature that unfolds through agile, precise movements? How do you capture its fierce gaze, its distinct personality? It is no easy task. Yet María Fernanda Garza, a 28-year-old equine photographer from Monterrey, has been refining what she seeks to convey through her work since she was ten years old, when she first began riding.



Her beginnings

"There was never a clearly defined boundary between the two," says Mafer, as she prefers to be called, referring to her practice of both dressage and photography. The interview takes place via video call from Pamplona, Spain. She recalls bringing her camera to the riding club and, after riding, photographing the horses with a bodily awareness shaped by her equestrian training.

"I'd take off my helmet, and the first thing I'd grab was the camera."

She later earned a degree in Professional Photography, specializing in equine photography, at Universidad LCI Monterrey.

Mafer began by photographing horses at sporting events. "To understand a horse, you also have to understand the sport and how horses move. Otherwise, how can you expect to see a horse in freedom and photograph it aesthetically?" Although she no longer focuses on competition portraits, she considers that experience essential to her work.

Her influences

Among her visual references, she cites Baroque painters Caravaggio and Diego Velázquez, as well as contemporary equine photographers Ekaterina Druz (Russia), Katarzyna Okrzesik-Mikolajek (Poland), and Rita Fernández (Portugal).

"Their work taught me that horses can be portrayed from a more intimate, more sensitive place," she explains. Mafer took photography courses with both Druz and Fernández, experiences that deeply shaped her perspective. "I'm interested in photography as a universal language — a way of thinking about the world."

Patience and humility: working with horses

For Mafer, photographing horses demands patience above all else.

"Learning to read them — how they move, how they use their bodies, how they tell me 'I've had enough.' They speak through their own language."

She describes the work as humbling, requiring her to adapt to the animal's sense of time, mood, and breath. "I let the horse tell me when to be present and when not to be. My job is to stay attentive, available, and to accept that many times the photograph happens simply by watching. If the horse turns or moves, the image appears."

Unlike with other animals, she notes, it is not always obvious when a horse is uncomfortable or at ease.

"When a horse considers a pasture its territory, sees you as an intruder, and decides to charge at full speed — and you have to remain still with the camera. Sometimes, because of the focal length, you misjudge the distance. I have to remind myself: 'Move now,' because it can crush you."

She has not been immune to accidents: she has been kicked and bitten. She considers them occupational hazards.

Earning a horse's trust

In 2016, a study from the University of Sussex showed that domesticated horses can distinguish between human facial expressions of anger and happiness, and that their heart rate increases when exposed to angry faces. For those who work closely with horses, the finding comes as little surprise.

Mafer confirms it through experience. "Trust stops being a goal and becomes a state."

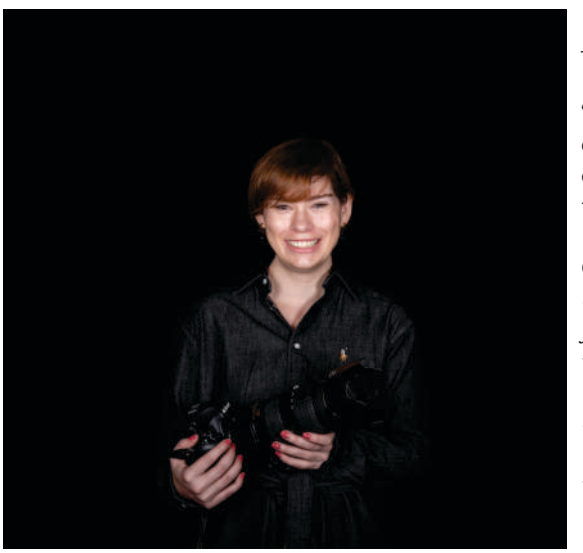
To cultivate that trust, she arrives early, sets up her equipment, and allows the horse to become accustomed to her presence. "I let it see me, feel me. The camera becomes a tool that doesn't interrupt but accompanies both the horse and me."

She avoids forcing situations. If a horse seems unsettled, she steps away and returns later to see whether its disposition has shifted.

That was the case with Fandango — a six-year-old colt, she estimates. "Very *canijo*," she recalls. He tried to bite and step on her. She moved away, continued working, and later returned to find him lying down. She entered the stable and lay beside him.

Her team panicked when they couldn't find her. "What do you mean she's with Fandango? He's going to kill her," they said. Soon after, they found them together: Fandango resting, Mafer leaning against his abdomen.

"It was a magical moment for me," she says. "In the morning that horse wanted to do all sorts of things to me, and by the afternoon he was calm. Since then, he's been one of my favorite horses."



The horse as subject, not aesthetic object

"How does my way of working change when I think of the horse as a subject rather than an aesthetic motif?" Mafer repeats my question.

"It changes everything. From the beginning, I don't see the horse as something merely aesthetic; I see it as another living being. A horse with a history, with memory, with a presence that deserves to be heard, with a story that deserves to be told. My work starts there, from deep respect—because beyond aesthetic admiration, it's about never crossing boundaries. It can be dangerous for both of us. Through photography, its story can find a place in the world," she explains.

When the horse is treated as a subject, she continues, the photograph stops being a formal exercise and becomes a relationship. "I'm no longer looking for the image; I'm looking for the encounter," she says frankly.

What still needs to be said about horses in 2026

For Mafer, there is still much to discuss about horses in 2026. How far would we have come technologically and socially — particularly in Mexico — without them? Horses also remind us of our relationship with time: the pause, the calm, the act of simply being.

In an era defined by speed, technology, and control, horses demand patience and presence. "You can't be distracted when you're with a horse — it can be dangerous," she says.

"They remind us that some bonds only exist through trust. That not everything can be dominated. And that it is possible to inhabit the world without violating it."

Clarice Lispector writes in *Seco Estudo de Cavalos*: *"What is a horse? It is freedom so untamable that it becomes useless to imprison it to serve humankind... it allows itself to be domesticated, but with a simple rebellious toss of the head, it shows that its innermost nature is always fierce, limpid, and free."*

While images of strength and power can be striking, Mafer notes that calm, stillness, and vulnerability carry equal weight. "The vulnerability horses sometimes reveal to me is extraordinary. For me, the truth of photographing a horse lives in that tension between strength and serenity."

Mafer is currently pursuing a master's degree in Curatorial Studies at the University of Navarra in Pamplona, Spain. She has exhibited in four museums in Mexico and has received multiple awards, including an Honorable Mention at the International Photography Awards for her series *Lancelot*.

To see more of Mafer's work visit her Instagram: www.instagram.com/fgphotographyyy

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LA CONDESA

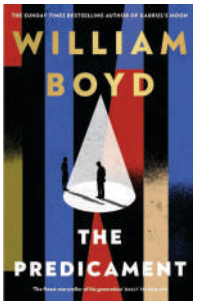
PRIVADAS

Sneak Peek Between the Pages: 2026's New Novels

By Carole Reedy

The new year ignites excitement for passionate readers, but too often novels published at the year's end don't receive proper publicity. So first let's look at a few scintillating novels that hit the shelves late in 2025.

The Predicament by William Boyd (November 2025)

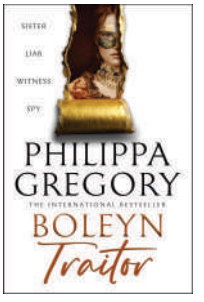


Although I'm not typically drawn to spy novels, this book was a delightful exception.

William Boyd's novels seldom disappoint. His range is broad, characterizations diverse, and plots compelling. This one takes the reader around the globe from London and Guatemala to Berlin and Dallas (not to worry, it's a leisurely adventure). Gabriel Dax isn't your stereotypic spy, making his experiences unpredictable.

Boyd's collection of work is diverse in subject, but always focused and pristine in pace and local color. I'm a recent fan of his and eager to read anything he writes.

The Boleyn Traitor by Philippa Gregory (October 2025)



In 2001 I read *The Other Boleyn Girl*, at the time Gregory's popular (with readers and critics alike) and well-researched novel about Anne Boleyn's sister, Mary. In the ensuing years, readers have been ensconced in the Tudor and Plantagenet series, which has brought critical accolades. Gregory has more than 100 books to her credit.

Now, 24 years later we find ourselves still fascinated by the 16th century and the age of kings and queens. Praise from critics always focuses on Gregory's detailed research and ability to bring to the 21st century an understanding of this distinct past.

The Boleyn Traitor tells the tale of Jane Boleyn, the wife of Anne Boleyn's infamous brother George. The reviews tell us the magic endures, so it looks like another bestseller.

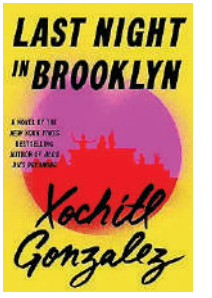
Queen Ester by John Irving (November 2025)

Many of us look back to 1978 and the publication of John Irving's popular breakout fourth novel, *The World According to Garp.* To date, Irving has published 16 novels, among them the popular *The Cider House Rules, A Prayer for Owen Meany,* and *Avenue of Mysteries*, set in Oaxaca, Mexico.

In his latest, you will recognize the town of Penacook, New Hampshire, and nearby St. Cloud Orphanage from *The Cider House Rules*. The time is the early 20th century, and a young Jewish girl is adopted by a non-Jewish couple who wonder how they will handle this responsibility. We follow one of the characters to Israel and her political involvement there.

Irving recently stated: "The construction of this novel long predates the events of Oct. 7, 2023, and everything that's happened in Israel since those terrorist attacks and the hostage-taking. With hindsight, it's easy to say that what I saw and heard in Israel in the early 1980s serves as a precursor to what has developed since that time, but this is what historical fiction is for."

Last Night in Brooklyn by Xóchitl Gonzalez (April 2026)



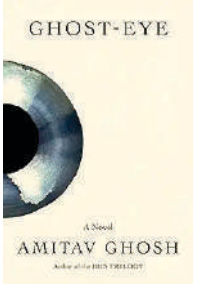
Two unforgettable novels by Gonzalez (also a staff writer at The Atlantic), published in 2022 and 2024, captured my mind and heart: *Olga Dies Dreaming* and *Anita de Monte Laughs Last.*

Both focus on women's role in society and within their own lives. Gonzalez draws us deep into the characters' worlds, exploring the psychological and philosophical forces that shape their way of living. These novels are unforgettable and beautifully rendered, the first delving into the lives of a Puerto Rican family in New York and the second centered on an aspiring artist.

Gonzalez describes her latest book as a retelling of the Gatsby story. It takes place in a rapidly changing Brooklyn neighborhood in the midst of a financial crisis and a significant presidential election.

Undoubtedly, she'll be gracing us again with her finely tuned characters and intriguing plot, including lots of surprises in this novel about class, color, and gentrification.

Ghost-Eye by Amitav Ghosh (January 2026)



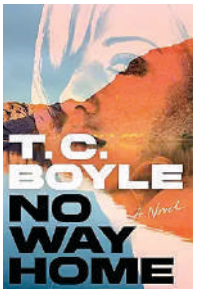
The captivating subject of reincarnation forms the backbone of this novel by the beloved author of *The Hungary Tide* and the Ibis Trilogy *(Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke,* and *Flood of Fire*).

From late 1960s Calcutta to present-day Brooklyn, Ghosh takes us on a reincarnation journey. It starts with a young girl, Varsha Gupta, who seems to remember other lives she's lived. Her concerned parents take her to a psychologist, who investigates "cases of the reincarnation type."

Jump to a half century later when Vasha's case file is unearthed by a group of environmental activists who want to investigate more about Varsha's memories.

Thus begins one of the long, luscious tales for which Ghosh is famous.

No Way Home by T C Boyle (April 2026)



In the early years of the 21st century I read a novel that to this day remains in the corners of my mind, occasionally sneaking into present consciousness. That book is *The Tortilla Curtain*, a powerful novel about the juxtaposition of poor Mexican immigrants and wealthy Los Angeles homeowners and the space they share. It takes a grand writer to engender in the reader a variety of emotions simultaneously. I've now read most of the fiction of T C Boyle, an author who has blessed us with novels and short stories to entertain and remind.

Pre-publication praise is no surprise to Boyle fans. This book is already receiving sparkling reviews. Set in the Nevada desert, it focuses on a Los Angeles physician, whose mother has just died, in the midst of a desiccating city in a remote desert. It is described as a "compulsive, obsessive, psychologically disturbing" novel.

I Give You My Silence by Mario Vargas Llosa (February 2026)

The latest and final novel of Mario Vargas Llosa (1936-2025) is appropriately a love song to his native Peru as well as a statement about the power of art.

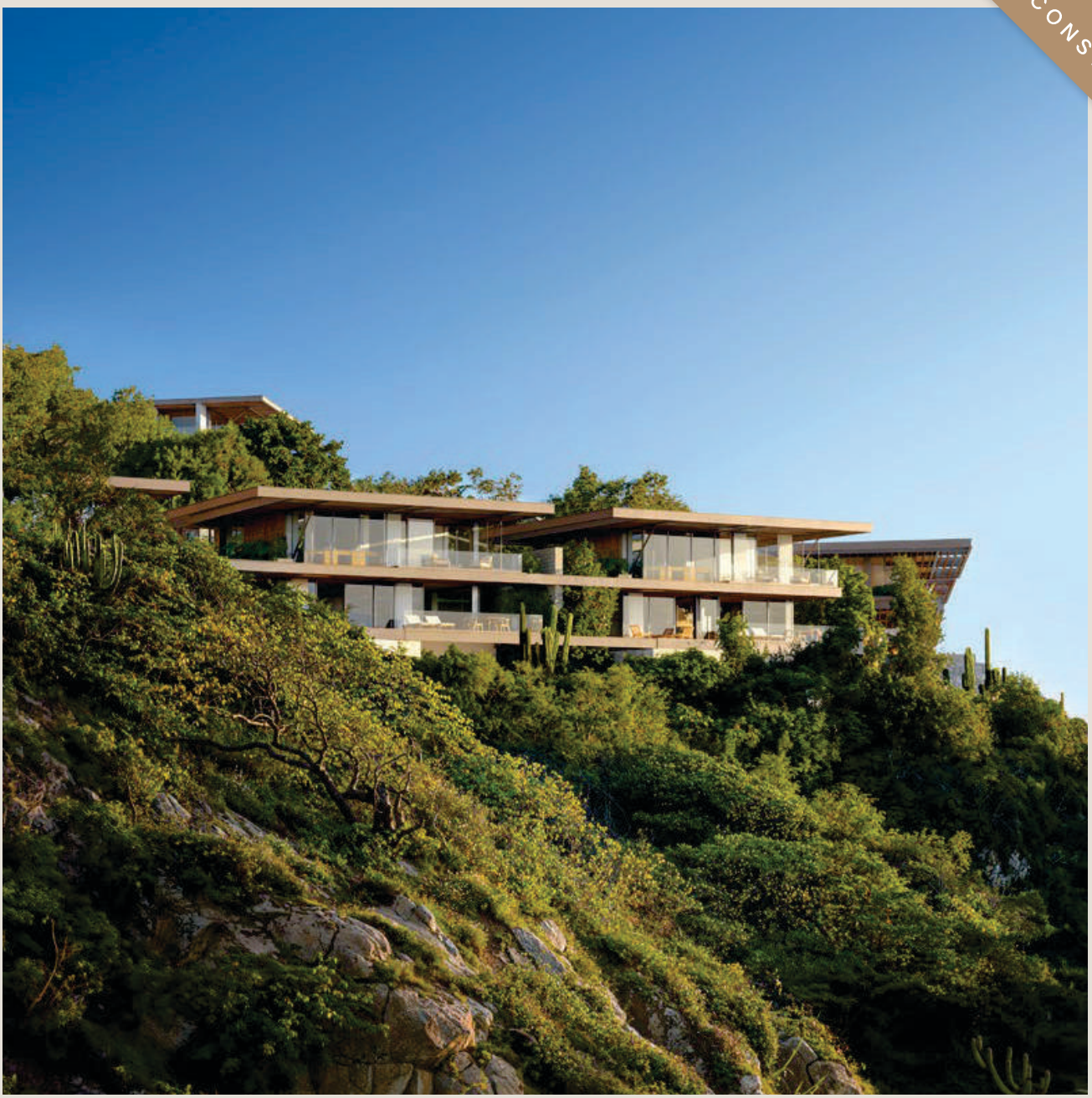
His was a life dedicated to writing. In 2010 he won the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature for "his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt, and defeat."

The main character in his final novel is an expert in the vals, a genre of music descended from the European waltz but also rooted in Creole culture. He views the music as having a social function, as a means of uniting the people of Peru through their culture.

The book is dedicated to Llosa's ex-wife of 50 years.

There's much more to come in the eleven remaining months of 2026.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION



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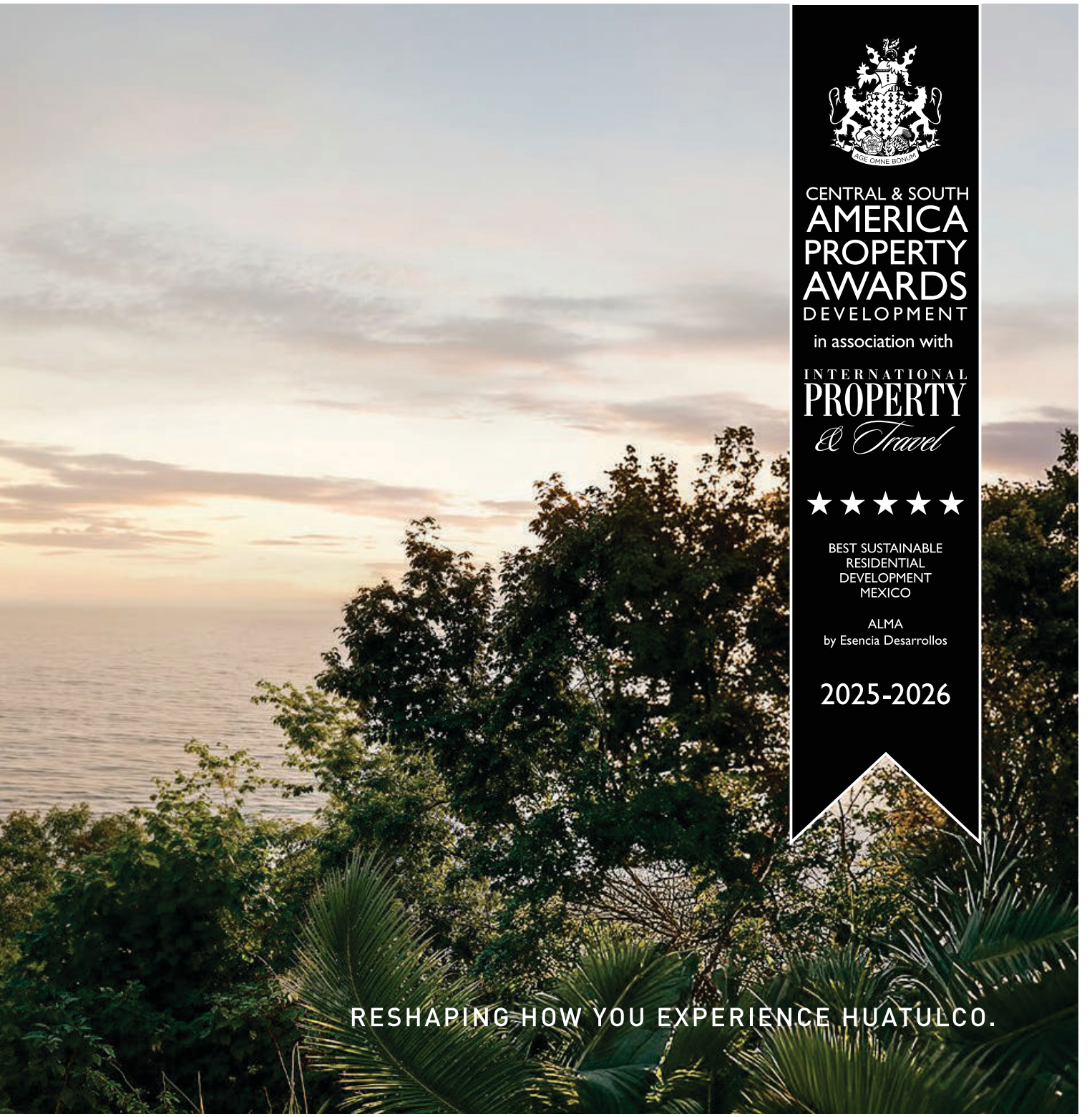

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Your Guide to Asian Delights in SMA

By Michael Solof

This month, in honor of the Chinese Year of the Horse, I want to share a few of my favorite Asian restaurants in SMA. I picked four very different types of restaurants and spoke with the owners and chefs about their establishments and what inspired them to create their own unique spin on Asian cuisine. I selected places with not only varied menus and pricing but also different philosophies and goals.

SPICE MARKET- (Calz. De La Presa 85) 1pm -11:30pm, Daily

Spice Market opened inside the Live Aqua Hotel seven years ago. They specialize in a combination of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese foods. Each dish captivates your taste buds while delighting you with beautiful visuals and tantalizing smells. I spoke with Ernesto, the executive chef, and Oscar, the Operations Manager, to get a sneak peek behind the scenes of the restaurant. Spice Market's dishes are served family-style so that everyone gets involved. The decor feels like you've stepped out of Mexico and into an Asian palace. According to Ernesto, Spice Market only uses the finest ingredients, both imported and, as much as possible, locally sourced. Both he and Oscar are especially proud of the service provided in the restaurant. The wait staff offers perfect recommendations after finding out if you have any specific preferences or allergies to any given foods. I love salads, and my waiter recommended the Endive salad with Asian pears, which had a delicious creamy sesame, chili oil-infused takai furikake dressing. The restaurant switches up its menu at least twice a year to keep up with the latest trends and to keep it exciting for returning guests. Ernesto says the key to a great dish is loving what you are cooking and realizing that you are cooking for others and not just yourself. His cooks constantly taste the meals they are prepping to ensure each dish is perfectly flavored. “Cooking is easy to do if you love what you're doing.”

DRAGON CHINO - (Salida a Celaya 71) 12:30pm - 7pm, Daily

Dragon Chino opened in its current location in 2008 and is the oldest Chinese restaurant in SMA. Over the years, they have developed a devoted local following. The restaurant is small and sparsely decorated, but that's because the focus is on the dishes they create. I talked with Luis, the owner, and his wife, Lily, who, along with their entire staff, have operated the restaurant since its opening.

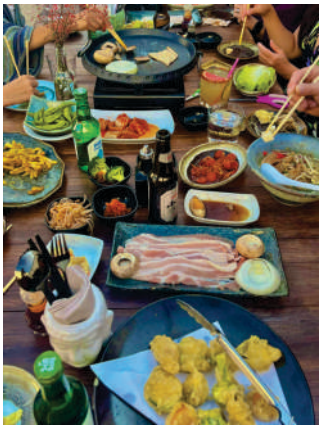
A family atmosphere pervades at Dragon Chino, which is open from 12:30 to 7 PM, seven days a week. The menu is packed with well-known and well-loved favorites, as well as a selection of specialty dishes. Luis recommends trying the Peking duck or the crispy orange chicken, which sells the best among long-term customers. “All our food has no MSG, is prepared to order, locally sourced as much as possible, and made with all-natural, fresh ingredients. And the best part is we have an open kitchen, so you can watch as they prepare your meal. It's lots of fun!” Luis's words of wisdom are, “Treat your customers like family, and you'll never go wrong.”

FUNKY PANDA - (Salida a Celaya 16a) 1pm – 9:30pm, Daily

Funky Panda has been open for a year and a half at its current location. Mario, the owner, has big plans and hopes to expand Funky Panda to locations all over Mexico. They are working on opening a new spot in Mexico City early next year. The menu is very varied because Andrea, Mario's wife and co-owner, likes different types of food than he does, so the menu runs the gamut from sushi to hamburgers. But don't let those two extremes scare you; the various flavors and tastes are what's key there, no matter what the dish is.

“We focus on the best ingredients around. All our sauces and salsas are made in-house using traditional family recipes and methods. We respect the past. Some of our recipes are even from my grandmother, who was a famous cook in our neighborhood growing up. For instance, our hamburgers are made by combining three wonderful, yet different types of meat. It may not be the biggest hamburger in town, but I guarantee it's the most delicious. Many of our ingredients are organic and locally sourced. We're very proud of the fusion between cultures that we offer, and we love connecting different elements to make unique dishes, all at very affordable prices. I feel you don't need to be a classically trained chef to succeed; you just have to have a love and a passion for good food and cooking... and everyone here does,” explains Mario.

KOKUMI - (Stirling Dickinson 2) 11am - 8 pm, Closed Wednesdays



There is a brand-new Korean restaurant that opened just over a month ago called Kokumi. When I asked the owner, Aleysha, and her husband, Satoru (who is also the chef), the meaning of the unique name, they stated that it's a Japanese food-based expression that you say when you eat something wonderful. Kokumi is a sensation of richness, depth, and complexity...and that's a perfect description for the food they offer. Aleysha was inspired by the fact that her husband is Japanese and they both love Korean food, so they decided to open a Japanese-Korean restaurant but with a goal to go beyond the typical sushi place. They strive to combine traditional Japanese and Korean foods with the warmth of Mexican hospitality. Using many unique ingredients, they make their own kimchi and miso on-site, and bibimbap, Korean BBQ, and shabu-shabu are just some of their specialty dishes. They also love serving Soba noodles because they are not found in many restaurants. Aleysha and Satoru are always looking for ways to reach out to the local community by planning fun, special events and collaborating with other chefs and bartenders. Satoru follows his passion for cooking by starting with a traditional foundation and then innovating it. Aleysha says, "We love this new start and new location, and especially our name... and can't wait to share our passion for cooking with the community."

SMA continues to expand its culinary horizons and offerings... and these are just some of the unique culinary experiences that you can enjoy while celebrating the Year of the Horse. I hope to see you at some of these incredible restaurants soon. Each one promises an unforgettable experience that showcases the best of Asian cuisine in SMA.

For those looking to discover more culinary treasures and engage with the local community, I lead *SMA Adventure Hound*, a group that organizes brunches and dinners at various restaurants every week. Additionally, I offer classes in the art of smartphone photography. Feel free to reach out to me via WhatsApp at +1 443-310-9214 for more information and to reserve your spot.

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Growing Up Escaramuza: My Path Through Charrería

By Ana Domínguez

My story as a rider began at age nine. I first learned to ride astride, using a standard saddle, and did not belong to any *escaramuza*—I simply enjoyed being around horses and riding.

Escaramuza means "skirmish" in Spanish, referring to a small fight or brief combat, but in a Mexican cultural context, it specifically describes a team of women performing synchronized, choreographed maneuvers on horseback, riding side-saddle in traditional attire, as part of the national sport of *charrería* (charro horsemanship). More than an equestrian ballet, it is a tradition that gallops with strength and color at the heart of charrería.

Charrería is considered one of the most complete sports, as it is practiced outdoors and engages every muscle in the body—from the moment the horse begins to move to the application of strength in direct interaction with the animals involved.

This equestrian discipline, unique in the world, represents the feminine expression of Mexico's national sport: charrería. It is a visual spectacle that blends athletic discipline with the richness of Mexican folklore and history.

I had experience in multiple equestrian disciplines before becoming a high-performance escaramuza rider. I practiced show jumping and barrel racing. However, escaramuza fully met my expectations and became my sport.

Before the term escaramuza existed, there were women known as Adelitas or Soldaderas who participated during the Mexican Revolution—not only as nurses and followers, but also as brave combatants. They rode horses, led troops, and carried out heroic acts, showing strength and courage on horseback in both battle and military life. Alongside the charros, they were a fundamental part of the Revolution's identity.

On the haciendas of that era, many women rode horses sidesaddle. This was not a sporting choice, but a social imposition: long dresses, etiquette, and the norms of the time required women to ride this way. However, this style of riding became the first expression of feminine horsemanship. Despite its limitations, many women developed remarkable skill in controlling their horses, maneuvering difficult terrain, and executing agile movements while maintaining the rigid posture society demanded. Unknowingly, they were laying the foundations of what would later become a formal discipline.

In 1921, the first formal charro associations were founded, and throughout the 1920s and 1930s, events and regulations were consolidated, giving rise to modern charrería. Although women did not yet participate officially, they began appearing in exhibitions during patriotic celebrations and regional festivities. The true starting point of the discipline came in 1953, when the first organized female groups began to be documented—groups that trained and performed mounted routines at charro events. These were exhibition performances, but for the first time, there was systematic work: uniforms, defined formations, regular training, and a shared objective.

During the 1960s, these groups multiplied and began to be called escaramuzas. By the end of that decade, it was common to see them included in the programs of state charro associations, although still without a formal rulebook.

Growth accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s, when escaramuza evolved from a purely visual spectacle into a competitive discipline. Teams from different states began training more rigorously, developing more complex maneuvers and seeking their own identity within charrería. This led to a decisive milestone: the publication of the first *Official Escaramuza Rulebook* in 1992 by the Mexican Federation of Charrería. This document formally established the rules still in effect today, including team size, required maneuvers, scoring system, penalties, attire, and the importance of puntas as a scored element. With this regulation, escaramuza transitioned from stylized performances to a formal sport.

From the 2000s onward, the discipline entered a phase of professionalization. Riding schools, specialized trainers, and youth and junior categories emerged. State, regional, and national championships— and the National Olympiads — incorporated escaramuzas as a core part of their programs. International recognition also grew, particularly within Mexican communities in the United States.

Finally, in 2016, with the recognition of charrería as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, escaramuza gained a new level of significance. It represents not only a sport, but a living symbol of Mexican identity and the only space within charrería where women hold a leading role—affirming their strength, discipline, and historical participation.

Escaramuza charra is the only charrería discipline performed exclusively by women. It combines equestrian precision, group synchronization, and a profound sense of tradition. While it may appear visually like a dance on horseback, it is in fact a highly technical routine that demands absolute concentration, mastery of the horse, and perfect coordination among the eight riders that make up the team. Each team consists of eight riders, one substitute, a trainer, and staff responsible for supervising the horses' welfare and needs to keep them in optimal condition, as they are high-performance athletes.

Each rider uses a sidesaddle charro saddle (*albarda charra*), — the traditional feminine style inherited from the 19th century. Despite this seemingly restrictive position, riders perform tight crossings, rapid turns, and complex formations that require leg strength, lateral balance, and constant communication between horse and rider. During the approximately three-minute routine, the team executes a sequence of twelve pre-designed maneuvers (suertes). These include emblematic figures such as the fan (abanico), the flower (flor), the strainer (coladera), the ladder (escalera), and spins, all performed at high speed and with minimal distance between horses.

The routine begins with the *puntas*, a controlled sliding stop that leaves a straight mark in the arena and demonstrates the horse's responsiveness, often contributing crucial points to the final score.

Riders wear long dresses in the Adelita style or traditional *charra de faena* attire, and on gala occasions, *china poblana* or formal charra dresses. Each outfit is crafted in accordance with Mexican traditions while honoring the style of our roots. All costumes are unique, handmade pieces with intricate embroidery, sometimes using gold and silver thread, and distinctive designs that set each one apart.

These garments are designed to allow mobility without compromising safety. Although visually striking, they are strictly regulated: they must not include elements that could catch, must cover the legs, and must coordinate with the team's colors. The charro hat—rigid and decorated within specific guidelines—not only completes the attire but serves as the most important piece, functioning as a helmet. Along with it, a single ponytail adorned with a matching bow represents the group's identity. Boots, made of suede or leather, are designed to withstand the lateral pressure of the foot when riding sidesaddle.

The horse also plays both a visual and functional role. Quarter Horses are commonly used, breeds known for their speed, agility, and ability to execute tight turns. Their presentation is sober and elegant, with carefully groomed manes and tails to ensure a uniform team appearance. Saddles and tack (reins, headstall, bit, protective gear, saddle) are identical across the eight riders, reinforcing uniformity. Beyond aesthetics, the true value lies in training: the horse must respond smoothly, remain steady during long stops, and maintain a consistent rhythm while the rider performs technical movements.

While the rulebook is detailed, the most important scoring elements include puntas, suertes, synchronization, and presentation and discipline. The final score is calculated by adding earned points and subtracting penalties. While details may vary annually according to the current regulations of the Mexican Federation of Charrería, the essence remains the same: to reward impeccable technique and group harmony.

Today, escaramuza has national and international presence. In Mexico, teams compete in state and regional championships and in the National Charro Championship—the country's most important event—where the best escaramuzas from each state face off to determine the national champions.

There are also competitions and special exhibitions outside the Mexican Federation of Charrería. Although not officially affiliated, these events have had a significant impact on the discipline's development, pushing teams to pursue greater difficulty and higher performance levels. The growth of children's and youth categories has allowed girls as young as four or five years old to begin training, ensuring the continuity of the tradition.

At twelve, I had the opportunity to join the Tuitán team in Querétaro, where I was trained by Miguel Ángel García Castro, a key figure in my development as a rider. I learned the true art of riding and became a high-performance athlete. With Tuitán, we won several tournaments in our category, and a particularly meaningful achievement for me was winning the 2019 National Olympiads, where we earned one gold medal and one silver medal, with me serving as team captain.

Later, I was invited to join the Chiapas charra team—an organization with a strong trajectory that allowed me to continue growing. Eventually, I received another call to join Escaramuza Charra del Pedregal in Mexico City, trained by Heriberto Sáenz Romero, an outstanding coach who plays a crucial role in the continuation of my career. It is a team rich in tradition, history, and presence within the discipline, where I continue to develop my craft and my passion. Being part of maintaining the competitive and athletic level of this team is a great responsibility for me as a rider.

Charrería has given me incredible fulfillment and unforgettable moments both inside and outside the arena—sensations that are impossible to describe, filled with adrenaline, emotion, and joy. I would not trade it for anything. For me, the bond you form with your horse is deeply special. Being in contact with horses is the greatest feeling that exists, it is absolute peace and an unparalleled connection. A horse embodies nobility, strength, empathy and is simply unique.

The Role of Horses in the Spanish Conquest of Mexico

By Jan Chaiken and Marcia Chaiken

When Hernán Cortés and his expeditionary force first arrived near present-day Veracruz in 1519, the ships from Spain carried about 500 soldiers, along with horses, cannons, and other military supplies. At that time, horses had been extinct in Mesoamerica for thousands of years. As a result, the Indigenous Aztecs—who had never seen similar animals—experienced awe, fear, and confusion, with some early accounts suggesting that the horse and rider were perceived as a single, unfamiliar being. Some Indigenous communities reportedly made offerings to horses or used captured horses as sacrifices to their gods.

The Spaniards capitalized on this reaction by staging carefully choreographed military demonstrations to intimidate the population. Mounted conquistadores proved to be a highly effective military force against native foot soldiers. They were deployed in formations now known as cavalry—large mounted units capable of pursuing and overtaking enemies on foot. Horses were also used to transport cargo and supplies, as well as to control and move captured Aztecs. As soon as new territory was secured, the Spanish established horse-breeding farms in preparation for future expeditions.

Cortés quickly recognized that the ruling Aztec Triple Alliance was deeply resented by many of its subjects and that other Indigenous groups were long-standing enemies of the Aztecs. He formalized alliances first with the Totonacs near the Gulf Coast and later, inland, with the Tlaxcaltecs. The Tlaxcaltecs became loyal and indispensable allies, supplying tens of thousands of warriors. In return, they were granted key privileges, including the right to ride Spanish horses, carry Spanish weapons, and continue governing their own settlements autonomously.

When the Spanish first entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the Tlaxcaltecs accompanied them on horseback and helped take hostages, including the ruler Moctezuma II. The Aztecs revolted and rapidly adopted tactics and technology to counter the horses' advantages. They lured cavalry into narrow causeways, mountain trails, or swampy areas, fired stones and arrows at horses as well as riders, and developed specific shouts and whistles to signal tactical opportunities.

After the eventual Spanish conquest, Indigenous people incorporated horses into their cultures, using them for transportation and labor. Even today, in Mayan communities such as Todos Santos in Guatemala, residents maintain elaborate—and sometimes dangerous—traditions of drunken horse racing, which they consider an important cultural expression.

While the conquistadors' use of horses in war against the Aztecs is highly dramatic and graphically portrayed in films and books, horses and other livestock brought by the Spanish may also have introduced a far more lethal, invisible agent—Salmonella enterica. Some historians argue that Europeans brought fatal diseases to the New World, including smallpox. Recent DNA analysis has shown that one of the most widespread diseases to wipe out vast numbers of Aztecs and other Indigenous people in Mexico was caused by the bacterium Salmonella enterica. The disease wreaked havoc on the digestive systems of those infected and was often lethal among populations with no prior exposure. The bacteria spread through food and water contaminated with fecal matter—often originating from livestock, including horses. It may be that horses themselves were among the most powerful, if unwitting, agents of conquest in Mexico.

Image: Hernán Cortés received by emissaries of Tlaxcala, Codex Duran, 1579, Biblioteca Nacional de de España. Source: Noticonquista Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)

Drs. Marcia and Jan Chaiken have been married for 62 years and have published many justice system research reports together.

Feria de León 2026: Guanajuato's Grand Winter Spectacle

By Alicia Flores

From January 16 to February 8, 2026, the city of León hosts one of Mexico's most ambitious and widely attended annual events: the Feria Estatal de León. Spanning more than three weeks, the Feria transforms the fairgrounds into a vast, temporary city dedicated to live music, cultural exhibitions, food, and large-scale entertainment—drawing millions of visitors from across the country.

What began generations ago as a regional agricultural and livestock fair has evolved into a major cultural and economic showcase for the state of Guanajuato. While its roots remain firmly planted in rural tradition, today's Feria de León balances heritage with spectacle, offering something that feels both deeply local and unmistakably international.

One of the defining features of the 2026 edition is its concert program, anchored by the Foro Mazda, the fair's main open-air stage. This year's lineup underscores the Feria's growing global reach, with Foo Fighters headlining one of the Foro Mazda's marquee nights—an appearance that places León firmly on the international touring map. The Foro Mazda hosts large-format concerts throughout the Feria, featuring major Mexican and international artists across pop, rock, and Latin genres, and serves as the heartbeat of the fair after dark.

Complementing the main stage is the Palenque de la Feria, a venue deeply rooted in Mexican fair culture. Known for its circular, arena-style seating and late-night performances, the Palenque offers a more intimate concert experience, traditionally focused on regional Mexican music. Tickets for Palenque shows are sold separately and are often among the most coveted of the season.

Beyond the music, the Feria's original spirit remains visible in its livestock and agricultural exhibitions, which showcase prize cattle, equestrian events, and rural traditions that reflect Guanajuato's ranching heritage. These exhibitions coexist with expansive artisan and industrial pavilions, where León's long-standing identity as Mexico's leather and footwear capital takes center stage through displays of craftsmanship, design, and innovation.

Throughout the grounds, carnival rides, games, and food halls operate daily. Visitors can sample classic antojitos and regional Guanajuato dishes, wander shaded exhibition areas during the day, and return at night for concerts, illuminated rides, and a festive, high-energy atmosphere.

Admission to the fairgrounds is generally affordable, while concerts, Palenque shows, rides, and select attractions require separate tickets. Weekday visits offer a calmer pace, while weekends bring peak crowds and full programming.

For those based in San Miguel de Allende, the Feria de León makes an easy day trip or overnight escape—offering a striking contrast to San Miguel's intimate plazas and galleries. Where San Miguel invites quiet discovery, the Feria invites immersion, marking the energetic start of the year in Guanajuato with music, tradition, and spectacle.

Full schedules, showtimes, and ticket details available at www.feriadeleon.mx/FEL26
Programming subject to change.

Chinese New Year and Mexico's Forgotten Past

By Kary Vannice

The presence of Chinese New Year in Mexico is not a new-age novelty or recent cultural appropriation. It's steeped in history and honors the tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants and their descendants' migration story that started over a century ago. A story that unfolded through cheap labor recruitment, entrepreneurship, discrimination, expulsion, adaptation, and survival. To understand why Chinese New Year has a place in Mexico's public calendar, it's important to understand the impact that Chinese immigrants have had upon Mexican history.

Chinese immigration to Mexico began during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz. Railroads were expanding, mining operations were growing, and agricultural production was increasing, and like many countries undergoing rapid development, Mexico faced a labor shortage.

Chinese workers, primarily from Guangdong province in southern China, began arriving in Mexico in the 1880s and 1890s. Most didn't come directly from China, they were already working in countries like United States, Canada, and Southeast Asia. Because of this, they were actively sought out by labor recruiters to work in northern Mexico.

By the early 1900s, it was estimated that there were between 13,000 and 20,000 Chinese immigrants living in Mexico, with the highest concentrations in northern states such as Sonora, Baja California, Sinaloa, and Coahuila. These numbers were small relative to Mexico's total population, but their presence was highly visible in certain northern regions.

Chinese immigrants tended to settle where economic opportunity was most accessible, working in agriculture, railroad construction, mining, and commerce. Mexicali, in northern Baja California, became one of the most significant centers of Chinese settlement. Over time, Mexicali developed La Chinesca, a neighborhood that became home to Chinese businesses, associations, and families. At its peak, Chinese residents made up the majority of Mexicali's population, and La Chinesca was considered one of the largest Chinese communities in Latin America.

Many Chinese men married Mexican women, forming families that blended language, customs, and traditions. Chinese businesses became permanent fixtures of local economies. This transition from laborers to neighbors marked a turning point in Chinese-Mexican history, and not a positive one.

What had been tolerated, even welcomed, began to be seen as a social and economic threat. Anti-Chinese sentiment began to grow, in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution.

By the 1920s, anti-Chinese movements had gained momentum, particularly in Sonora. Chinese immigrants were accused of unfair business practices, economic exploitation, and moral corruption. Propaganda portrayed them as unclean, dangerous, and incompatible with Mexican identity. Because of this, women who had married Chinese men were also targeted and portrayed as immoral, corrupted, or disloyal to their nation. These women were publicly shamed, pressured to dissolve marriages, and stripped of all social standing.

Several Mexican states passed laws that banned marriages between Chinese men and Mexican women, restricted where Chinese people could live, and limited the types of businesses they could operate. And these laws named the Chinese immigrants explicitly.

The same Mexican government that once encouraged Chinese immigration to help modernize Mexico, just a few decades later, labeled Chinese migrants as undesirable and even dangerous. And between the late 1920s and early 1930s, thousands of Chinese immigrants were expelled from Mexico, often with little warning and minimal legal protection. Entire families were affected. Mexican wives were forced to choose between remaining in Mexico or following their husbands to China. Children born in Mexico were deported to a country they had never known.

The Chinese population in Mexico dropped sharply. Thriving communities that had taken decades to build were dismantled in a matter of years. By the mid twentieth century, the once visible Chinese presence in many parts of Mexico had almost disappeared. Some families returned decades later. Others assimilated quietly into the local culture, and their histories and stories were lost…or deliberately forgotten.

And yet, not everything disappeared.

In Mexicali, Chinese-Mexican cuisine continued to evolve, becoming a defining feature of that city's identity. Old world Chinese recipes were adapted to regional tastes and ingredients. What began as a way for families to survive became local tradition. Today, Mexicali is known nationally for its Chinese food, even by people who know little about how or why it came to be.

In recent years, Chinese migration to Mexico has increased again, though under very different circumstances. According to Mexico's 2020 census, there are just over 10,000 Chinese-born residents living in the country today. Migration authorities report a steady rise in temporary and permanent residency permits issued to Chinese nationals since 2019.

This contemporary migration is driven by trade, manufacturing, education, and globalization rather than labor recruitment. Some arrive to work in Chinese-owned factories tied to North American supply chains. Others come seeking opportunity, stability, or a jumping off point to countries like the United States or Canada.

Alongside this renewed presence has come a renewed visibility. Chinese New Year celebrations in Mexico today are not just cultural performances. They are acts of recognition. Chinese immigrants are part of the history that shaped this nation, and their story, like so many migration stories, includes welcome and rejection, contribution and contention, loss and renewal.

The red lanterns and dragon dances seen in communities around Mexico are not a new chapter in that story, they're what remains visible after more than a century of perseverance, persecution and integration.

Kary Vannice is a writer and energetic healer who explores the intersections of culture, consciousness, and daily life in Mexico.

Jazz & Blues Concert Series Winter–Spring 2026 San Miguel de Allende

The Festival Internacional de Jazz y Blues de San Miguel de Allende continues its year-round concert programming with a rich Winter–Spring 2026 series, bringing international and Mexican jazz and blues artists to some of San Miguel's most intimate and beloved venues.

In addition to supporting live music in the community, these concerts help fund and sustain the San Miguel Jazz organization, whose mission includes cultural programming, music education, and international artistic exchange.

Concerts are held primarily at Casa Cent'anni and Teatro Ángela Peralta, offering audiences an up-close listening experience that has become a hallmark of the festival's programming.

January 2026
January 3 – Latin Jazz Trio, Antonio Lozoya
Casa Cent'anni

January 10 – The Great American Songbook, Louise Phelan
Casa Cent'anni

January 17 – Tribute to Carlos Santana
Teatro Ángela Peralta

January 24 – Hot Club San Miguel featuring Ale Morales
Casa Cent'anni

January 31 – Craig Caffall Blues Band
Casa Cent'anni

February 2026

February 7 – An Evening with Chet Baker, Jesús Espinosa – Casa Cent'anni

February 13 – Soul Divas Tribute, Karely Esparza & Jenny Beaujean – Teatro Ángela Peralta

February 14 – Valentine's Jazz Day, Jenny Beaujean
Casa Cent'anni

February 27 – Women in Jazz, Montserrat Borrego
Casa Cent'anni

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The Year of the Horse

By Roger D. Jones

There are moments in history when humanity is asked, softly but unmistakably, to remember what it once knew. The horse has always been one of our greatest teachers.

Before machines carried us forward, horses did. Before modern medicine, they carried the wounded. Before therapy had a name, horses regulated our nervous systems with their presence, rhythm, and breath. Across cultures and continents, the horse has symbolized freedom, endurance, sensitivity, and profound intelligence.

Year of the Horse is an invitation to slow down. To listen. To restore a relationship that has quietly suffered in an age of speed and extraction.

Why 2026 Is the Year of the Horse

In the Chinese lunar calendar, 2026 marks the Year of the Horse, beginning with the Lunar New Year in February. In Chinese tradition, the Horse represents energy, intelligence, loyalty, perseverance, and freedom, as well as a deep sensitivity to environment and leadership. The Horse is not ruled through force—it responds to clarity, trust, and mutual respect. When treated well, it gives everything. When misunderstood or pushed beyond its limits, it suffers quietly.

In places like San Miguel de Allende, where tradition, artistry, and community remain deeply woven into daily life—this symbolism feels especially present. Here, the relationship between humans, animals, and land is not abstract, but lived, observed, and felt.

Edgar Cayce and the Future Role of the Horse

The American mystic and healer Edgar Cayce (1877–1945) spoke of a future in which humanity would need to rebalance—between technology and nature, intellect and intuition, power and compassion. In several readings, Cayce suggested that horses would again become essential not as beasts of labor, but as agents of healing, emotional regulation, and spiritual grounding.

Cayce emphasized that horses respond to the inner condition of humans rather than command alone. In this way, they reveal imbalance without judgment and harmony without words. Whether approached as prophecy or symbolism, his insight aligns with both ancient wisdom and modern science: horses help humans remember how to be whole.

Horses as Healers: Living Examples

Across the world, and increasingly here in central Mexico, equine-assisted healing therapies are offering quiet, powerful support to people navigating emotional and neurological challenges.

Autistic children often experience improved emotional regulation, focus, and nonverbal communication when working with horses, whose calm presence and predictable rhythms provide a sense of safety without verbal interaction.

Veterans and first responders coping with post-traumatic stress frequently find that horses respond to their internal state with honesty and without stigma, helping restore trust, confidence, and nervous-system balance.

Individuals dealing with trauma, grief, or major life transitions often report that time spent with horses creates space for presence, emotional release, and reconnection—especially when traditional talk-based therapies fall short.

These outcomes are not based on force or training tricks, but on relationship, consistency, and respect. The Year of the Horse is not a campaign and not owned by any organization or individual. It belongs to anyone willing to approach horses with humility, patience, and respect. You do not need to own a horse to participate. You only need to care.

Editorial Note

For readers wishing to engage directly with equine rescue and education efforts highlighted in this year-long series, visit **www.EsperanzaEquina.com**.

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