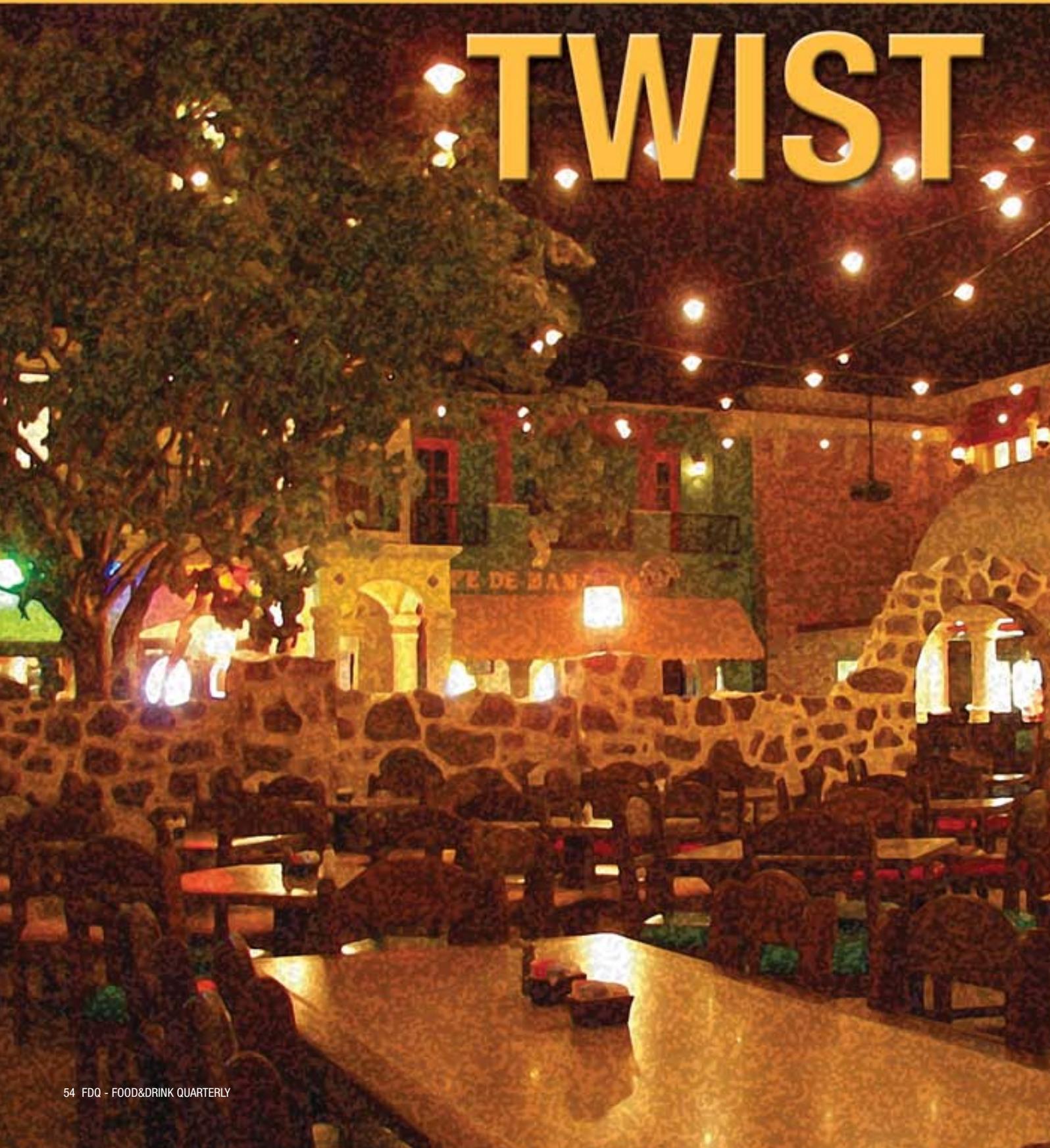


A MEXICAN

TWIST



IRANIAN IMMIGRANT HOSSEIN HAGIGHOLAM CAME TO AMERICA TO STUDY ENGLISH TO BECOME AN ENGINEER. BUT HIS KEEN BUSINESS SENSE LED HIM TO THE ROLE OF RESTAURATEUR OF A SUCCESSFUL CHAIN OF MEXICAN RESTAURANTS THAT PROMISES HEALTHY FARE, VIP SERVICE AND A BIG SHOW. PAT WHITEMAN HAS THE STORY.



WHEN HOSSEIN HAGIGHOLAM – OR “HAGI,” AS HE is now known by his employees – came to the United States in 1976, he could barely speak English. “I came here right after high school because I had a dream of becoming an engineer and then to go back to Iran,” explains Hagigholam. He was supposed to go to Houston to study English as a second language, but ended up in Boston after mispronouncing Houston and being misunderstood by airline staff. After two days in the airport, he eventually made it to Texas.

He arrived only to find a classroom filled with other Iranians. “I knew I had to learn English and I knew it would take me longer if I was surrounded by others who spoke my native language,” says Hagi. “The teacher even had to learn our language to begin communicating with us. So I looked for a college where I would be the only Iranian student.” He found that school in Shriner College in Kerrville, Texas. While he was studying and learning English, Hagi worked in restaurants throughout the area as a dishwasher, a bus-boy and eventually, a waiter. “When I became a waiter I thought I had hit the jackpot. It was such easy cash.” Hagi waited tables until 1983 and was cautious about his earnings, putting them away in savings. When he was just 26 years old he opened his own burger place called Burger Island. “I didn’t have the capital to buy major real estate. So I started selling hamburgers out of my 900-square-foot Burger Island stand.” The burger business proved to be profitable for Hagi. However, he was noticing a distinct trend in Texas – everywhere you went, Mexican restaurants were packed with patrons.

“Mexican food is the number one food in Texas. So I decided to open a restaurant called Mamacita’s,” says Hagi. He opened the restaurant in 1988 in Kerrville. Another restaurant soon followed in Fredericksburg, Texas, a community with a large German population. “People tease me a bit, and say how can an Iranian come here, open a Mexican restaurant in a German community and make it? While it does seem strange, it worked,” says Hagi. There are three other Mamacita’s locations, one in San Antonio, New Braunfels and San Marcos.

FIVE ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Hagi contributes his restaurant success to five elements. “First of all, I took it slow, one at a time. Plus, I believe that if you have five key elements in a restaurant – quality, service, atmosphere, location and reasonable prices – you will succeed. If you have those five qualities in a restaurant anywhere in the world, people will support what you’re doing. If you have four of the five, you’ll make a living, but you might not achieve great success. If you have less than four, forget it.”

Hagi also believes there are five key elements to keeping a business running – consistency, cleanliness, communication, maintenance and memory. “Everything has to be consistent so customers keep coming back and get what they remembered to be so good. Also, everything must be extremely clean – it’s common sense,” says Hagi. “Communication with employees and customers is also critical, as is maintenance. You can’t expect to have happy customers if your air conditioner is broken or you don’t maintain your refrigerators. Finally there is memory, which means



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As Christopher Columbus, Cotes, La Salle and other later explorers journeyed to the Americas that decorative mix of Spanish, Moorish, and Christian influence made a stronghold in the new lands.

Today, throughout cities such as Guadalajara, San Miguel de Allende, St. Augustine and especially the city of San Antonio, that gentle blend of architecture, culture and artistic creativity are visible.

We hope you enjoy your dining experience at Mamacita's and that you will also enjoy, in a small way, architectural tradition that is more than 1500 years old.



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Pictured: Mamacita's boasts architecture that invokes Middle Eastern, Mexican and Texas styles.

not to forget the top four things.”

BRINGING VEGAS TO TEXAS

Hagi believes atmosphere is an extremely important part of the Mamacita's restaurant experience. In fact, his restaurants' décor is inspired by one of the most unique American showplaces – Las Vegas. “I made a few trips to Las Vegas and was always fascinated



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with the Las Vegas look. What I also found extremely interesting is that since Las Vegas began concentrating on atmosphere over gambling it has tripled its tourist numbers,” says Hagi.

Taking the lead from Vegas, Mamacita's restaurants boast elaborate architecture, fusing the elements of Mexican, Texan and Middle Eastern styles. Mamacita's Kerrville location welcomes visitors with a beautiful foyer featuring a huge wrought iron chandelier draped with crystal. Inside, there is an indoor replica of a small Mexican village complete with original murals by Lee and Matt Casbeer depicting scenes from Mexico and the Southwest. Visitors will also find a replica of the Alamo. The restaurant's outdoor patio – next to a man-made river – large screen TVs and a fully animated figure of Davy Crockett entertain and delight patrons. In addition, the Kerrville location is home to the corporate offices where Hagi and his team oversee the other locations and develop strategies for future expansion.



AUTHENTIC MEXICAN – THE HEALTHY WAY

In a quest to provide the healthiest and tastiest food possible, Mamacita's uses only the freshest ingredients available to create its popular menu items. “We don't use any animal fat in our recipes. We have totally eliminated the use of any oil or fat in the preparation of our beans,” confirms Hagi. One of its most popular items, its tortilla chips, are prepared in canola oil, which is free of cholesterol and low in saturated fats. Mamacita's tortillas are also homemade and prepared fresh hourly, without the use of any animal products. “It takes a bit longer and requires more personal attention,” says Hagi, “but



Pictured: The dining atmosphere at Mamacita's invites people to sit and sample the company's tasty Mexican food; right: Hossein Hagigholam and his chef welcome patrons.

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we think it's worth it and so do our customers.”

Visitors delight to the tastes of fresh Mexican fare including nachos, chalupas, fajitas, tacos, and quesadillas. Mamacita's also offers the largest line of enchiladas of any restaurant in the area (green, jalapeno, shrimp and more), as well as a generous variety of Mexican fried shrimp and other seafood delights.

VIP SERVICE

Mamacita's believes in exceptional service. “When customers remember Mamacita's, above all else we want them to remember the way they were treated,” says Hagi. “We are always working on this. I never want someone to leave without feeling important inside. Everybody is a VIP in our restaurant. We want them to leave planning on when to come back.”

Mamacita's ensures top-notch service by employing two general managers at each location. “Most chains have one general manager and that's just too much work. We have one for the front of the house who can concentrate on service and public relations and the other general manager handles the back of the house and focuses on the recipes and quality. No customers can ever eat at Mamacita's without a manager talking to them. Managers visit every single table. We believe if something is wrong we want to fix it before the customer leaves.”

The five Mamacita's locations do \$20 million annually in business and have 500 employees. The small chain has a five-year plan entailing opening a store in Austin, as well as locations in Houston and Dallas, and hopefully draw attention from a larger chain to help take it to the next level.