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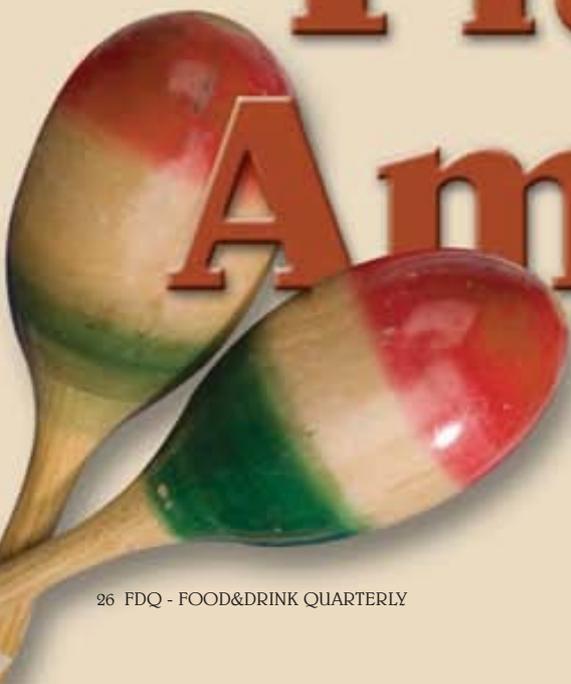
Making Their Mark



Mamacita's Mexican Restaurant



Mexican- Flavored American Dream





WHEN YOU WISH UPON
A STAR, YOUR DREAMS
COME TRUE. IT SOUNDS
CORNY, BUT IT HAPPENS. ASK
HOSSEIN HAGIGHOLAM,
FOUNDER OF MAMACITA'S
MEXICAN RESTAURANTS. THE
IRANIAN IMMIGRANT BOUGHT
INTO THE "AMERICAN DREAM"
AND BECAME A SUCCESSFUL
ENTREPRENEUR. DAN HARVEY
SERVES UP THIS SOUTHWESTERN
DISH OF A STORY.

MAMACITA'S MEXICAN RESTAURANT demonstrates that the "American Dream" remains alive. Indeed, the history of the company and its founder relates the quintessential Melting Pot story: It involves the ambitions – and subsequent success – of an Iranian immigrant who fell in love with Mexican cuisine and then started a restaurant chain deep in the heart of Texas.

The central figure in the narrative is Hossein Hagigholam (or Hagi, as he prefers to be called by friends and associates), who came to the United States in 1976 with a headful of ambition but minimal grasp of the English language. Amazingly enough, about 30 years later, he owns a chain of the most popular Tex-Mex style of restaurants in his adopted state.

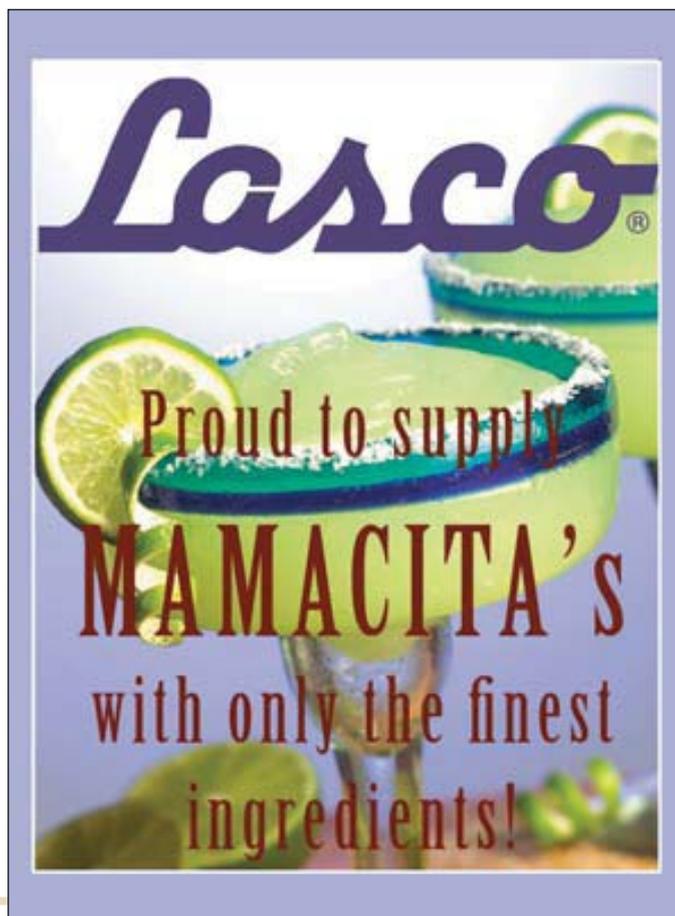
Initially, Hagi wanted to study engineering. "I came to the United States right out of high school and intended to become an engineer and then return to Iran," he recalls. But things didn't turn out as planned, much to his – and Mexican food lovers' – great fortune.

After a circuitous route that took him from Boston to Houston, he began studying English as a second language in Kerrville, Texas. It was no easy feat. As any bi-lingual world citizen will tell you, the English language (especially, the American version) contains so many nuances that involve slang and usage peculiarities. But Hagi picked up the lingo, which led him to perceive certain essential truths. "I understood American slang,





Pictured above: Dining room inside San Antonio Mamacita's.



particularly the phrase ‘no pain, no gain,’” he recalls, “and that relates to the enormous opportunities that still exist in the United States. People from other countries come here to seize available opportunities.”

And that involves another American colloquialism that Hagi came to embrace. “When opportunity knocks, you open the door,” he says. “True, success still involves some luck, as well as being positioned at the right place at the right time. But it comes down to seizing the opportunity. In my case, I grabbed my chance and didn’t let it slip through my hands. After you grasp the opportunity, you work hard to make it all happen.”

RESTAURANT BUSINESS EDUCATION

But we’re jumping ahead of the story. Let’s return to the beginning of Hagi’s international quest. To support himself while attending Kerrville’s Shriners College, he worked in the food service sector. He explains: “Many people who don’t understand English very well find work in restaurants, typically as a dishwasher or busboy or waiter, and that’s how I got my start,” Hagi relates.

He enjoyed the income; food service jobs provide a student with a relatively substantial income. “I thought I hit the jackpot,” he would later say.

A hard-working young man, he also was given more tasks – which allowed him to learn the restaurant business from the ground up as well as to carefully observe all that was going on around him. “When I worked as a waiter in Mexican-

style restaurants, I saw that these food establishments were by far the busiest.”

So, Hagi picked up more than dishes and a paycheck during this “internship.” When he felt he learned enough, he decided to go into business for himself. A frugal future gourmet, he socked away his earnings, and this enabled him to eventually open his own business. However, his initial enterprise didn’t involve Mexican cuisine. Rather, he opened a hamburger restaurant in a Texas shopping center. This led to more savings and observations. He couldn’t get the Mexican cuisine idea out of his mind. “In Texas, the Mexican restaurants were the ones that attracted the most customers,” he says.

By 1985, he opened the first Mamacita’s restaurant. He was only 26 years old. It took a lot of hard work, but through sheer force of will, he endured: “Persistence and determination,” he simply states.

It was a bold move. To open yet another Mexican restaurant in Texas seemed an insane proposition, and the banks told him as much. Only an “idiot” would attempt it, he once remarked, with his characteristic self-deprecating humor.

However, everything worked out well. Recently, a San Antonio publication called Mamacita’s “the mother of all Mexican Restaurants.” Success with the first Mexican restaurant venture led to expansion. Eventually, the chain grew to include five Texas locations. And here’s where the “melting pot” element of the story comes back into play. One of the restaurants is located in Fredericksburg, a city that arose from a 19th-century influx of adventurous German-American settlers. “People tell me that it’s amazing that an Iranian immigrant can open a Mexican restaurant in a German community that’s located in Texas,” says Hagi. “It amazes me, too.”

Today, Mamacita’s other restaurants are located in Kerrville, San Marcos, San Antonio and New Braunfels.

UNIQUE OFFERINGS

Obviously, it takes more than a simple wish to make a go of a Mexican restaurant in Texas. This the perceptive Hagi understood quite well. He knew he had to differentiate his menu in some substantial way – yet, at the same time, he realized his offerings needed to satisfy the basic craving of Mexican food aficionados. It was a fine line to tread, but Hagi proved an adept tightrope walker.

As such the Mamacita’s menu includes Mexican-food favorites such as nachos, chalupas, fajitas, quesadillas, tacos and enchiladas. “But we also offer dishes that don’t even exist in restaurants that offer traditional Mexican food or Tex-Mex cuisine,” Hagi reveals.

Coming up with these unique options required a broad leap of imagination. “Even in Texas, there are so many different versions of Mexican and Tex-Mex dishes,” he points out.

Still, Mamacita’s managed to distinguish its fare from the rest of the pack. “For example, we’ve created a dish called Guisado Monterrey that you will not see on the menu of any other Texas Mexican restaurant or even on the table of a Mexican family,” says Hagi.

For the record, this unique dish comes in beef or chicken versions, but if you want to you get an idea what it truly is, you’ll have to taste it for yourself.

“Further, about 40 percent of our entire menu includes dishes that we created ourselves,” adds Hagi. “All you have to do is look at our menu and compare it to other restaurants’. You’ll see that we offer items that aren’t available anyplace else. Also, we



Pictured above (from top): dining room inside San Antonio Mamacita’s; fountain inside San Antonio Mamacita’s; replica of the Alamo inside Kerrville Mamacita’s.



Pictured above: Mural inside Fredericksburg Mamacita's; left: Hagi (Hossein Hagigholam), founder and owner of Mamacita's Mexican Restaurant.



strongly communicate to our customers that we offer the healthiest Mexican cuisine.”

To make that boast possible, Mamacita's uses only the freshest ingredients and it eschews the use of animal fats in its dishes. This conscientiousness extends through every item. “Take our beans, for instance,” says Hagi. “Mexican restaurants throughout the world put bacon into their bean preparations. We are the only restaurant that doesn't use bacon.”

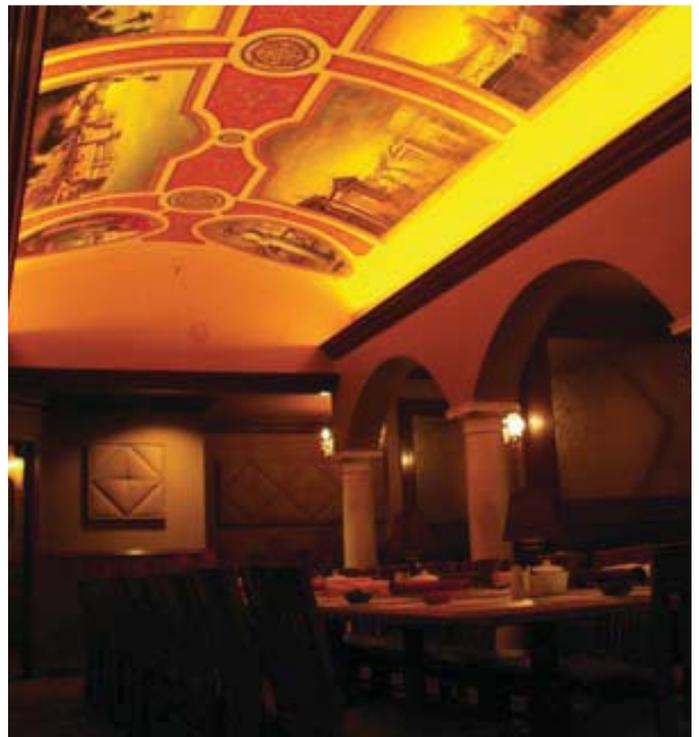
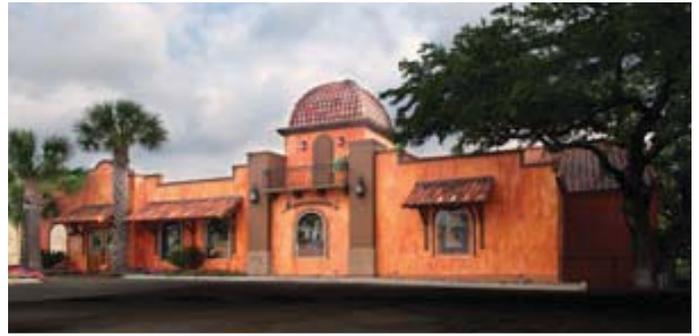
Also, Mamacita's only uses canola oil in one of its most popular items – tortilla chips – which translates into reduced saturated fats and, in turn, no cholesterol.

“Preparing our food in this fashion takes extra time and diligent care, but we want to take care of our customers,” says Hagi. “We think it's worth it and so do our customers. That separates us from the competition.”

KEYS TO SUCCESS

That indicates a main focus: customer service. “Many similar restaurants are misdirected when it comes to their business operations,” says Hagi. “They focus on costs related to food and labor. But we focus on customer satisfaction. If you take care of that, everything else – including cost and labor issues – will take care of itself.”

Customer service is but one of five elements that Hagi describes as “the keys to success.” The others include food



Pictured above (from top): Fredericksburg Mamacita's; crystal chandelier in main entrance; private dining room in Mamacita's Kerrville.

quality, restaurant atmosphere, location and reasonable prices. "Anyone who wants to run a successful business will need to address those five elements," he says. "It's a law of life and business. If you focus on all five, you'll succeed. If you focus on four out of five, you'll probably do okay. With three out of five, you're break even. If you'll focus on less than three, you better get yourself into another business."

With its five locations, which include about 500 employees, Mamacita's serves about 40,000 people each week. The small chain is so successful that several national food companies want to buy it. But Hagi isn't selling. He wants to continue working for himself (again, the American Dream in action) and his company remains solid while other restaurant chains have experienced trouble during the recent economic circumstances. The five locations bring in about \$20 million each year, and the company has a five-year growth plan. The immediate objective is to open a restaurant in Austin, Texas. From there, the company seeks to establish locations in Houston and Dallas.

"We haven't been impacted by the recession," reveals Hagi. "If you believe in the 'dream,' you can circumvent the negatives, such as the economy. The great thing about this country – and it still holds true, no matter what anyone might tell you – is that you can come from anywhere and, if you are willing to work hard, you can make it. Despite what you read in the news, this country is still very accepting of different cultures and attitudes. The American Dream still exists."

Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam, and his Mamacita's Mexican Restaurants chain, is proof positive. ●