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From the Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/twincities/news/2025/12/11/icons-el-burrito-mercado-st-paul.html>

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LEADING A LANDMARK

How does St. Paul's El Burrito Mercado endure? Its owners literally grew up in the business.

From left, Suzanne, Milissa and Analita Silva are the owners of El Burrito Mercado in St. Paul.

NANCY KUEHN | MSPBJ



By [Anna Adamson](#) – Reporter, Minneapolis / St. Paul Business Journal

Dec 11, 2025

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Story Highlights

- Two sisters took over St. Paul's El Burrito Mercado in 2016.
- Business took root as area's Latino population was expanding.
- The family pivoted during COVID-19 by adding digital ordering services.

Growing up in the 1980s in St. Paul's West Side neighborhood, Suzanne, Milissa and Tomas Silva would play "grocery store" in their parent's business, El Burrito Mercado. The kids would pretend to work the store: bagging groceries, stocking shelves, taking care of customers.

Suzanne, now 50, and her older sister Milissa, 54, have gone from playing store to owning it.

Founded in 1979, El Burrito Mercado is now a St. Paul landmark, operating a sit-down restaurant and bar as well as a specialty grocery and gift shop. The business also runs a catering service, a food truck and began selling food [at the Minnesota State Fair this year](#).

After their parents retired in 2016, the sisters took over the business with Suzanne's daughter, Analita Silva, 33. Milissa is CEO with 55% ownership, Suzanne is director of administration with 30% and Analita is director of food service with 15%. Tomas runs the food truck operations.



Image: Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal

The El Burrito Mercado food truck parked behind the market and restaurant.

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The new generation of Silvas have led El Burrito Mercado through ups and downs, combining new business strategies with old values – all the while keeping their roots in St. Paul’s West Side.

How El Burrito Mercado came to be

The sisters tell the story: Their parents, Tomas and Maria Silva, left their home in the central Mexican city of Aguascalientes with little education and plenty of faith. In 1979, the couple took over an 800-square-foot space in St. Paul’s historic West Side neighborhood. (Their current location, which opened in 1993, is just across the street.) With the help of a relative from their church, the Silvas got the \$10,000 they needed to start the business and began selling dry Mexican groceries and tortillas.

The debut was well-timed: In the 1980s, immigration to St. Paul from Mexico and Central America was picking up, and Latino-owned businesses were thriving,

especially in the area along Wabasha and Cesar Chavez Street, now called District del Sol.

Each year, Tomas would make fresh elote, the staple Mexican street corn for the District del Sol Cinco de Mayo celebration. The elote – along with the Silvas' fresh tamales, carnitas and other offerings – built a customer base hungry for authentic flavors.

“I missed [my culture] from back home, and I found that here,” said Eduardo Suarez, a customer of 20 years. Suarez’s mother is from Mexico, and he moved from San Jose, California, to Minnesota in the early 1990s. “It reminds me of home.”



Miguel Morales brings a plate of food to the pick up window at El Burrito Mercado. Morales has worked for El Burrito Mercado for 17 years.

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As popularity grew, the Silvas opened a store in Shakopee, a warehouse in southeast Minnesota and a small gift shop, Maria Imports, on Grand Avenue in St. Paul. For about 20 years, they had a private label, selling chips, tamales and other

food to Supervalu. For a time, their products were sold locally in Cub Foods, Kowalski's, Jerry's and SuperTargets nearly nationwide.

But as El Burrito Mercado continued expanding, a major business decision was on the line: Who would take over?

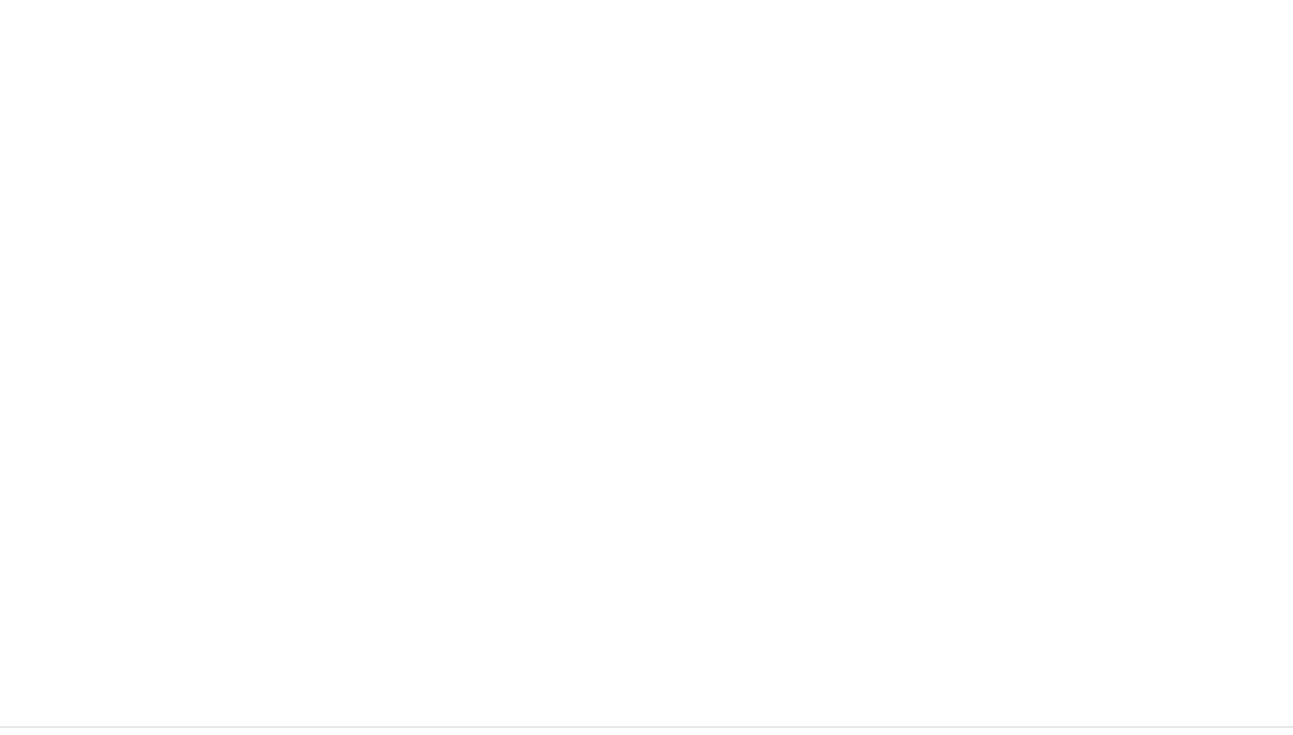
New generation, new adjustments

One of Analita Silva's earliest memories in her grandparents' business was when a customer gave her a \$5 bill after she rang them up on the old-fashioned, manual cash register. She was six years old at the time, in the late 1990s.

"I don't know if someone taught me [how] or if I was just paying attention," Analita recalled. "I did their whole transaction from start to finish, bagged it and everything. I will never forget how excited I was."

Analita was 13 when she "officially" started working at the business, and just 23 when she became a co-owner with her mother, Suzanne, and aunt, Milissa.

"I think my plan at some point was to be here, but not an owner at that age," Analita said. Her grandparents retired in 2016, about a year after she graduated college. "Now we're almost 10 years in, and I kind of got my groove."



A gift shop at El Burrito Mercado features gifts imported from Mexico.

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Tomas and Maria, now great-grandparents, spend their retirement gardening, tending their chickens and visiting Mexico in the winters.

The first couple years were comfortable, with the business [opening a second location in south Minneapolis](#). But when Covid-19 hit, the business –and family behind it – were strained. They closed their Minneapolis location and ended the private-label business when a key vendor shut down.

Instead, the Silvas turned their focus back to the West Side, while Analita implemented digital services like online ordering and curbside pickup.

Other changes, like having servers work as door attendants, meant nearly all the employees could keep working, Milissa said. Cinco de Mayo 2020 was an unexpected success: the line stretched down the block as their kitchen scrambled to meet the rush.

“I’m proud of us for how we handled Covid because I feel like we pivoted really quickly,” Analita said. “Our biggest thing was asking ourselves: ‘How do we keep everybody safe, and how do we keep as many people [as possible] employed?’”

During the pandemic especially, serving their community was something they took literally by [organizing food drives with the Minnesota Community Care clinics](#) to support low-income people of color and immigrants. In May 2020, El Burrito Mercado’s patio became a makeshift distribution hub for [a donation drive to support people in south Minneapolis following the murder of George Floyd](#).



Daleney Meyer from Oakdale shops for the first time at El Burrito Mercado.

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A new crisis

This year, the Silvas have noticed a drop in their Latino customers following the Trump administration’s immigration crackdown, which has raised fears of deportation. In the area surrounding El Burrito Mercado, 15% of people (85,447) were born outside the U.S., and St. Paul is home to over 40,000 Latinos, according to data from St. Paul-based Wilder Research.

"We're in a very diverse community, we serve a very diverse community and we employ a very diverse community, so it's our family and friends," Milissa said. "We all know people who are first-hand dealing with it."

The pandemic, Milissa said, was more manageable. "There were rules and policies put in place that gave us directions and [told us] how to operate a business safely and we took measures beyond that," Milissa said. "Right now, that doesn't exist – everything from inflation to all the immigration stuff that's happening."

The business has adjusted by tightening its budget, and while it doesn't plan on another brick-and-mortar location anytime soon, the family has diversified in other ways, Milissa said. Catering has been a large area of growth, along with concession stands at Target Center and Allianz Field and a marketing partnership with CHS Field in St. Paul.

"My hope is that our Latino community, or any community, feels safe enough to go out again and do things they enjoy," Suzanne said.

When they do, there's a table waiting for them.

Guests dine in the restaurant at El Burrito Mercado in St. Paul, Minn.

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Fast Facts

El Burrito Mercado

Founded: 1979

Address: 175 Cesar Chavez St., St. Paul

Leadership: Suzanne, Milissa and Analita Silva