**The Story of URBE – Street Foods of Mexico**

**from Tracy Vaught, owner**

URBE is the restaurant that stretched us in ways I did not realize that it would.  Hugo and Ruben wrote a book on street food after traveling throughout Mexico and re-discovering and experiencing the foods of each region.  After their trip, we all agreed that we would open a casual street food concept because it felt like the obvious next step for our team.  It turns out the actual next step was opening Caracol, a Mexican coastal kitchen, and Xochi, celebrating the food and culture of Oaxaca, but we never forgot our desire to open a street food concept.  We are excited to introduce you to URBE!

I imagined opening this concept would be less stressful and more fun than previous openings, but I didn’t realize how challenging it would be for each of our H Town employees. Naively, I didn’t fully understand the history behind street food and the amount of hard work and effort that goes into running a street stall. Hugo explained to me that many women hold onto street stalls for several generations and make the traditional foods they have known all their lives. In some cases, women take a bus long distances from their home in the mountains to be able to sell those foods in their street stall.  Honoring these women and their traditions is important to us. They are the keepers of these traditions and will pass down their knowledge to the next generations. We hope to do the same.

As a young boy, Hugo and his cousin, David, sold street foods.  From a neighborhood stand, they sold *gelatinas* and *flan* and on the streets, they sold Canels *chicle* (Mexico’s version of Chiclet gum) to motorists. Later, they traveled several hours by bus to the Merced Market to buy fruits and vegetables such as *nopales*, beets, oranges, celery, spinach and apples for their juice stand. When they got a bit older, their grandfather made them wooden shoeshine kits so they could go to town and sell shoeshines to pedestrians.

David knew more about how to sell and what to charge.  Hugo would ask, “Have we made enough to buy a *huarache*?” one of Hugo’s favorite street foods, a sandal-shaped masa boat topped with beans, meat and *queso*.  Patiently, David would say, “Not yet, soon we will have enough.”  For Hugo, it was all about the *huarache*! When Hugo was about 12 years old, the family moved to the country to live with his grandmother Delia, a revered *mole* maker, and her daughter Odelia, a bread baker. The family had a stall in the small town on weekends selling *guisados* and wood oven-baked bread.

Opening URBE is a natural progression of the life of Hugo and Ruben.  *Birria, Barbacoa, Tacos al Pastor, Conchas, Berlinesas, Huaraches, Tortas, Street Churros, Quesadillas, Carnitas*.  They are all on URBE’s menu, plus much more. For both brothers, it has been a journey of rediscovery, memories with a little self-doubt rolled in for good measure.

Hugo originally felt happy and confident to start this project, after all, he had street food experience.  He had a lot of ideas in his head, and was anxious to get started.  When the menu began to take shape more than a year ago, he realized that we needed to come to terms with how he could make some of the traditional dishes in a health department-approved way and still get a good result.  For example, there were a lot of arguments about *barbacoa*.  Hugo’s family always made *barbacoa* on their family farm for special occasions.  For a small group, they prepared goat and for large gatherings, they butchered a cow.  Usually it was made underground, over a smoldering fire, and covered for up to 20 hours.  When uncovered, it was falling-off-the-bone tender and had the flavor of the Azuchil tree leaves and branches used for smoking and imparting flavor into the meat.  This tradition continues with the family still on the family land in Mexico.

At Hugo’s, we had to adapt the recipe – we wrap the meat in banana leaves and use a smoky pepper marinade.  At URBE, we wanted more wood flavor.  After a lot of discussion, we decided to use a smoker for this important menu item.  It needed that flavor, but not too strong.  Surprisingly, this was Hugo’s moment of self-doubt.  For months, he practiced on a backyard smoker with a friend who had great smoker skills.  Of course, URBE’s smoker is a lot bigger with more features, but Hugo felt he needed to learn on a very simple smoker first.

Ruben, who oversees pastries, breads, and desserts, knew we needed a bakery at URBE. Over the years he has distinguished himself as a *pastelero* (pastry maker) but making breads was a bit afield for him.  A *panadero* (bread maker) he was not.  I took it for granted that he would rise to the challenge.  He traveled, studied and practiced.  Even the equipment was different than those with which he is familiar.  He began to have doubts whether he could bake breads at the quality level we were all expecting of him.  I didn’t have doubts, but I had to talk him off the cliff several times.  I have seen in my lifetime that often very talented people can be full of self-doubt.  It is a part of the process for them.

Carlos Neri, our Director of Operations, had his challenges as well.  He was a great dining room manager and could train servers and bartenders to provide welcoming and caring service, but he wasn’t sure about the quick-service model which we use for breakfast and lunch and how he could put his stamp on that.  He knew the value of quick-service to our on-the-go customers, but he wasn’t quite sure what form it would take.  He has built a career with H Town Restaurant Group from busser to expeditor to bartender to waiter to manager to GM and finally Director of Operations.  He decided we would provide a host to seat guests first so they would know they had a seat and provide them with menus so they could study them at their table then approach the counter when they knew their order. This provides a bit more security and comfort for each guest.  That is Carlos’ stamp.

Sean Beck, our Beverage Director, put himself to the test as well.  He is charting new territory for our team by offering several new products. The bar offerings are very different than those at our other restaurants, which are known for their extensive, award-winning wine lists. Instead, he will be concentrating on cocktails and beer.  URBE’s wine selection is smaller but will definitely satisfy the wine lover in your group. We have a “shots” section for fun celebrations and a selection of different *micheladas*.  And for the first time, there are some frozen drinks on the menu.  As many of you know, that is outside Sean’s comfort zone.  He oversees URBE’s coffee program, too, which will be expanded to offer nitro cold brew.

Beatriz Martines, our Corporate Chef, is overseeing the entire kitchen operation.  This is the most complicated buildout of a kitchen we have ever completed.  She has watched over it, questioned pieces of equipment, learned how to operate new machinery, selected plate ware, helped create menu items and added a few unique regional dishes of her own, including the stuffed *chilaquiles*. She is from the state of Jalisco and that means *birria* but she also makes a mean *trompo*!   She is the backbone of our kitchens.

Lastly, our daughter Sophia, is making her debut at URBE after graduating from the business school at Tulane University for undergraduate and now the University of Houston Hilton Hotel School Graduate Program.  She is nervous but excited to join our team and learn how things work in the “real world.” Our large corporate restaurant group would be daunting to any 24-year-old but I know she will rise to the challenge since she has been around restaurants her entire life. She wrote our training manuals, made key design decisions and set-up our reservation system and third-party delivery system.  As always in the restaurant business, she will be learning as she goes.  We are so proud to welcome her into the business.

Our most casual concept has turned into one of our biggest challenges, but we have risen to the occasion and created something truly special. We wanted to show a new side of our team and bring new ideas to the Houston food scene. We also wanted to embrace changes that have taken place in the restaurant industry post-COVID such as a bigger emphasis on to-go and delivery. As many restauranteurs know, you have to constantly evolve in this industry to stay relevant and successful, and that is what we have done with URBE.

With all the newness associated with this labor of love, all the learning we have done and continue to do, URBE brings together countless decades of restaurant experience from amongst our amazing team, and, of course, centuries of culinary tradition from our beloved Mexico.  It is our pleasure to share URBE with you.