

The Trail of Mole: From Oaxaca to Oregon

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We first met Oaxacan chef and future owner of Mixteca Catering, Doña Paula Asuncion, when she came to our micro-enterprise development program in 2012 seeking guidance to start her own culinary business. We recall our first impressions — the warmth of her smile and the sparkle in her eyes, which upon each subsequent interaction, slowly revealed the layers that line the fabric of this family's

manta, or blanket. Over time, we have become more and more inspired by her dedication to her family, her family's dedication to supporting her

dreams, and their desire to share their Latino culture with their new home, Oregon.

Immigrant entrepreneurs like Asuncion face systemic barriers, such as licensing that is in English or difficulty obtaining a small loan from a bank to buy equipment, which make it hard to start a business. "I've made handmade tamales and mole since I was a child and I had the desire to share this delicious food with others in my new town, Gresham, but I had no idea how to get started," describes Asuncion. These challenges bring Latino culinary micro-entrepreneurs like Asuncion to Micro Mercantes, a program of Hacienda CDC.

Since its beginning six years ago, Micro Mercantes has evolved from a small group of Latina women cooking tamales to a micro-enterprise incubator for small, culinary businesses. We expanded our program because we believe entrepreneurship empowers immigrants and their families through growth in assets, income and a sense of achievement. We work to address the systemic barriers these entrepreneurial families face by managing an affordable commissary kitchen, connecting folks to interest free micro-loans, partnering with the local health departments to facilitate culturally appropriate workshops in Spanish and more. Many of the entrepreneurs starting their business within Micro Mercantes will also have the opportunity to become vendors in the Portland Mercado, the first public Latino market in Portland, set to open during the summer of 2014 at SE 72nd and Foster.

When Asuncion joined our program, it quickly became apparent that no barrier would keep her from achieving her goals and supporting her family. Working since she was old enough to walk in a small town in Oaxaca as a cargadora, or transporter of goods, she married, became a widow raising six children, worked on farms in Oregon, found minimum wage jobs at fast-food restaurants and lived with other families until they were able to obtain section 8 housing. Now, a woman who had an elementary school education has supported all of her children as they went to college,



Doña Paula Asuncion and her niece.

bought a home with her family and is one of the most successful micro-entrepreneur's participating in our program. In return, Asuncion gives back to the community whenever she can.

Initially, coming to the United States from Mexico was an easy decision. Asuncion wanted the family to be together. Her husband had been traveling back and forth, leaving the family split between two countries. She also wanted to give her children the opportunities that she never received — a formal education, access to jobs and an end to the continuing struggle to access life's basic necessities, such as food and clothing.

Alejandrina Felipe, the oldest daughter, describes their first experiences moving to Oregon when she was a child:

It wasn't necessarily difficult being a family without money in Gresham, because that is all we knew. However, in the summers, we wouldn't have time off like the other kids. We worked hard in the fields, picking berries to support our large family that had recently lost our father. We are lucky because my mother always found ways to be resourceful and stay positive.

Similar to other immigrants who are a part of our program, we have been so impressed by the hard work and entrepreneurial spirit of this family. Asuncion's desire to give her children better access to education has led to Alejandrina becoming a registered nurse and her younger brother, Guadencio Felipe, received his associate's degree in accounting and currently has plans to get his Bachelor degree in business at Portland State University. Both children also work in the family business.

"We have always done everything as a family, from contributing our weekly earnings working odd-jobs to the household to buying our house together to starting a business," says Alejandrina. "Now that we

have our business Mixteca Catering, we are able to support our mother as she once supported us."

Like most micro-enterprises in Micro Mercantes, Asuncion started by selling food in the welcoming and vibrant atmosphere of the region's farmers markets. Mixteca Catering has grown from a tamale vendor in the St. John's farmers market to a full catering service that provides food for events all over the city, including street fairs, private weddings, Timbers games and cultural festivals.

As they expand, they have made the conscious decision to employ other immigrants, who are struggling to find consistent work. They also support the community by making an effort to share their food in creative ways, from donating food to gleaners who share food with those experiencing food insecurity to exchanging their handmade, corn-husked wrapped tamales and aguas frescas in the farmers markets for fresh, locally grown produce.

"If someone comes to us and doesn't have enough money to buy a tamale, my mother will never turn anyone down," says Alejandrina. "She supports the community that supported her through tough times."

What drives the family to work so hard? Dreams and tradition. Mixteca would love to have a little family restaurant in the future. More importantly, Mixteca hopes to keep their traditional Oaxacan food at the center of the family's bi-cultural identity for generations to come. Even now, Mia, Asuncion's three year old granddaughter, the future chef of the family, joins her in the kitchen to prepare handmade tamales and complex mole sauces on a regular basis. Her grandson, Anthony makes sure she keeps the house well-stocked with tamales, often exclaiming: "Si no tienes tamales, abuela, me muero!" — "If you don't have tamales, Grandma, I would die!"

Hacienda Community Development Corporation operates on the belief that for many low-income people, the path to an improved quality of life begins with a stable, safe and affordable home. With modest investments in asset building, from culturally specific inter-generational education, to bilingual homeownership counseling and workforce development, we strive to maximize the potential for upward mobility.

The Wall We Put Up

By Robert

When a person put all he or she has into
His feelings, words, actions, and still
Gets no reactions for what they have done
They will start to build walls around their hearts,
And souls.
That in time, even the builder can't overcome.
And when that happens, it is the most feared
Insight a person must face.
When this happened to me,
I fought for many years to study every

Brick, crack, and even
The shape, size, depths of the wall I built.
To find, even when,
with the hardest tool,
I had, would not chip a block.
In the wall, there was the biggest opening,
Right before my eyes,
To walk and the path was always there.
And that was open to everything.