

To them, togetherness means tortillas

By Nancy Barker
Staff Writer

The family that plays together stays together, but the family that works together has to be together. A lot! And, if they're the Ralph Curtises of Rhododendron, they'd better like tortillas.

Tortillas are the mainstay of Mexican cuisine, for which the Curtises' restaurant, Don Pablo's is known. The three Curtises sons, Alan, 18, Bruce, 13, and Tom, 11, are familiar to Don Pablo's customers. They fill the jobs of waiters, dishwashers, janitor, busboy, and in Alan's case, cook. They seem to thrive on it.

"I sometimes think, what in the world would I do if I didn't have jobs for them," exclaimed Juanita Curtises about her energetic boys. "We've never had our kids complain that they didn't have anything to do."

There is always plenty to do in any restaurant, and at Don Pablo's, most of it is done strictly by the Curtises family. Except for a dishwasher on the weekends, there is no outside hired help.

Do the boys resent the demands on their time? "They've never seemed to mind," replied Juanita. "There isn't much organized activity up here, and I think it's good for kids to keep busy."

Customers at Don Pablo's can see that the cheerful smiles on the three young faces are genuine, even if there is a little grumbling about chores.

"The kids do a lot," declared Juanita. "Alan works full time. Bruce and Tom wash dishes every other day. There's a couple of hours worth of dishes a night."

"We can arrange it in such a way that they rotate," she

continued. "That way, they just do a few hours at a time. In the summer, they each work two or three hours every day."

While some mothers dread summer vacations, and the onslaught of footloose children, Juanita appreciates them. Vacation means that the two younger boys will be able to work more during the busiest season.

Summer may be the busiest time now, but Juanita can remember when there was no busy time at all. When the Curtises bought it 11 years ago, Don Pablo's had a succession of owners, none too successful. The restaurant business was new to Ralph and Juanita; their only prior connection was her job at a Mexican eatery in Bend, where they previously lived.

"Knowing what I know now, I'd be hesitant," answered Juanita, when asked if she'd do the same thing again. "I was glad there wasn't much business in the area then. That gave us time."

Time was at a premium for the Curtises 11 years ago. Juanita ran the restaurant weekdays, while taking care of three boys aged six months to seven years. Ralph commuted on the weekends from Bend, where he still held his job as engineer at a radio station. It was two years before Ralph was able to give up his job and move to Rhododendron. They feel it was all worthwhile.

"We always loved this area. When we lived in Bend, we would drive through here often, and wish we could live here. The restaurant seemed like a good opportunity."

Although the Curtises liked the underpopulation of the Hoodland area, it was not especially helpful to a not-yet-established eatery, run by inexperienced owners. The odds weren't good, but in this case, what they didn't know didn't hurt them.

"I had a feeling we had a good product, and I knew somehow we'd make it," recalled Juanita. "About the time it looked like we weren't going to make it, it caught on. People came in to try the food, and spread the word."

The word was probably "delicious." Bad Mexican food does not sell, especially in a small mountain village, 50 miles from the urban market. Many Don Pablo's customers compare its product favorably with authentic Mexican meals. Some regular patrons skip menus all together, and order "the usual."

"The usual" might be a tostado, a super-size concoction of crisp tortillas, delicate frijoles, and ground beef, topped with cheese, lettuce, and tomatoes. Brave souls smother this with Don Pablo's hot sauce, made from real live (they bite) peppers. Other items on the menu range from Guacamole dip to multi-course Mexican dinners.

"People appreciate something a little special," commented Juanita.

The Mexican chef she worked with in Bend taught her how to prepare Mexican dishes. She in

turn, has taught husband Ralph, and recently son Alan. All three are equally proficient, she claims.

"Whoever is here does the cooking. Ralph does much of

the preparing, and Alan does some cooking."

Doesn't cooking get tiresome, especially after 11 years in the kitchen?

"Oh, it's been fun! It gets old

at times, but it's fun to cook Mexican food. I enjoy cooking very much."

"Ralph doesn't enjoy it as much as I do," she added. "It's more my thing. He'd rather be doing something outdoors."

One current outdoor project involves a recently purchased rototiller, with which he is establishing a backhoe business. Alan, who attends Mt. Hood Community College on top of his restaurant job, finds time to help with this too.

Another outdoor interest, shared by the male Curtises only is flying. Ralph, who once taught school, is teaching his sons to fly at Rich's Airport, where his two-seat plane is kept.

"It scares me to death! I like to have my feet on the ground," asserts Juanita. "The kids sure love it, though. They fight over whose turn it is to go up."

The two younger boys who attend Welches Grade School, have diverse interests. Tom, whom his mother describes as a "bookworm", is addicted to books on mythology. Bruce often creates a little

"background" music, practicing on his trumpet, which he plays in the school band.

One particular hobby was shared by all members of the Curtises family, long before it became the "in" thing to do. "We all enjoy chess. We replayed a lot of the Spassky-Fischer games during the championship matches."

Not surprisingly, favorite pastimes of the Curtises do not include eating Mexican food.

"We very seldom eat Mexican food. We've just been around it too long!"

Home cooking, even the kind other people pay for, often gets taken for granted. However, Bruce and Tom recently offered a piece of advice to their mother for improving her recipes.

"Mom, why don't you go down to school, and learn how they make tacos there?"



CASH REGISTER duty frequently falls to Alan, 18, who parts patrons from their "pesos" with a smile.

(Post photo)



SECTION TWO

SANDY, OREGON, THURSDAY, JUNE 21, 1973



RUNNING A family business can be "fun", according to Ralph and Juanita Curtises at Don Pablo's restaurant in Rhododendron. Behind them on the wall is "Aztec Calendar" made for them by Hoodlander Mert Wheeler.

(Post photo)



TESTING TOSTADAS is one of the fringe benefits reaped by the Curtises' middle son, Bruce, 13.

(Post photo)

DISHPAN HANDS can be a problem, even for an expert such as Tom Curtises!

(Post photo)



"IT ISN'T fancy," says Juanita Curtises of Don Pablo's restaurant. The small Rhododendron eatery is known for its special cuisine.

(Post photo)



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