



MARIA ELENA CANCHOLA, BERNARDO MENDEZ-CANCHOLA AND MANUEL MENDEZ

El Jaguar's Tale

SOUTH EUGENE'S NEW MEXICAN RESTAURANT IS A DREAM COME TRUE

BY HENRY HOUSTON

Growing up, El Jaguar owner Bernardo Mendez-Canchola remembers hearing his parents dreaming of owning a restaurant. He'd hear his parents, who have worked for decades in the restaurant industry, talk about opening a business.

"That kind of planted a seed in my head," Mendez-Canchola says.

More than 20 years ago, Mendez-Canchola and his family immigrated from Mexico. And in fall 2022 — with the help of the local restaurant community — he made his parents' dream come true when he opened El Jaguar, offering breakfast and lunch menu items similar to its predecessor, Burrito Amigos, but with some twists.

Mendez-Canchola had saved up cash to buy a house,

but facing a historically hot real estate market, he decided to go another route: opening a restaurant. But first he consulted his parents.

"We sat down, and I said, 'Hey, I got this finance — what do you think?'" he recalls, and his parents supported the decision. "It's a blessing."

Mendez-Canchola says his aunt had an acquaintance who was looking for someone to take over the empty kitchen where Burrito Amigos once was. That was Chad Fuhreck, owner of popular fine dining Seize the Cafe. He'd go on to have more meetings — he jokes that it felt like an episode of the investment reality TV show *Shark Tank*.

Having worked in the restaurant industry since he graduated high school, what the 32-year-old Mendez-

Canchola didn't have was experience in managing a business. But he's been able to lean on Fuhreck for advice, as well as other family and friends, to help him navigate the ins-and-outs of running a business.

The staff at El Jaguar is mostly family. Mendez-Canchola's parents work there, as does his cousin. And they've brought together some of the knowledge they've learned from what recipes sell at other restaurants and brought some menu items they've honed at home.

El Jaguar's menu has some differences compared to its predecessor. It has *tinga*, a shredded chicken served in a sauce of chipotle sauce and onions, which is popular in Mexico. It also serves vegetarian options, such as tofu burritos and potato tacos.

But what's important for his restaurant is to make good burritos. Mendez-Canchola recommends his spicy guacamole burrito with *carne asada*, thinly sliced beef.

The key to it is in the name: spicy guacamole. He first started making the restaurant's guacamole with jalapeños, but one day switched it up with serrano chilis. For the uninitiated, serranos are much thinner than their chunky jalapeño relatives. But the smaller pepper packs a lot more heat — about three- to four-times hotter on the Scoville rating.

"One day we put way too many in, and it was pretty much unbearable," Mendez-Canchola remembers. "So we toned it down."

The spicy guacamole burrito is wonderful in its simplicity. With just pinto beans, onions, cilantro, tomatoes, spicy guacamole and meat (in my case, *carne asada*), it's a fresh mix of ingredients. And there's ample room for the restaurant's *chili de arbol* salsa, a smoky and spicy boost to the burrito.

Mendez-Canchola has reverence for the work that Burrito Amigos did for Mexican restaurants throughout Eugene-Springfield. "They kind of opened the doors for everybody," he says. "That was the main go-to and it was sustainable, and that helped people see that there is a market here."

And since opening his kitchen several months ago, Mendez-Canchola says his business has been booming, unlike what he had braced himself for from conversations with friends and family about the gloomy nature of opening a restaurant.

"I have to sort of pinch myself. Is this real? Am I dreaming," he says. "I had a famine mentality, but it's been completely the opposite."

El Jaguar is at 2445 Hilyard Street. Hours are 8 am to 3 pm Monday, 7:30 am to 4:30 pm Tuesday through Friday and 8:30 am to 4:30 pm Saturday. Closed Sunday. Find on Facebook.



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