

Minority & Small Business Week

2005 special edition

SECTION B

'Little Mermaid' and 'Beautiful Girl'



Monica Moreno is owner of the Northeast Alberta Street taqueria La Sirenita.

Side by Side Eateries Fuel Economy

BY KATHERINE BLACKMORE
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Two quaint taquerias, La Sirenita and La Bonita, sit next to each other on Northeast Alberta Street between 28th and 29th Avenues. While the owners insist that competition between the restaurants doesn't exist, they noted that diners like to think there's a rivalry. Each place has its own devoted followers and with good reason.

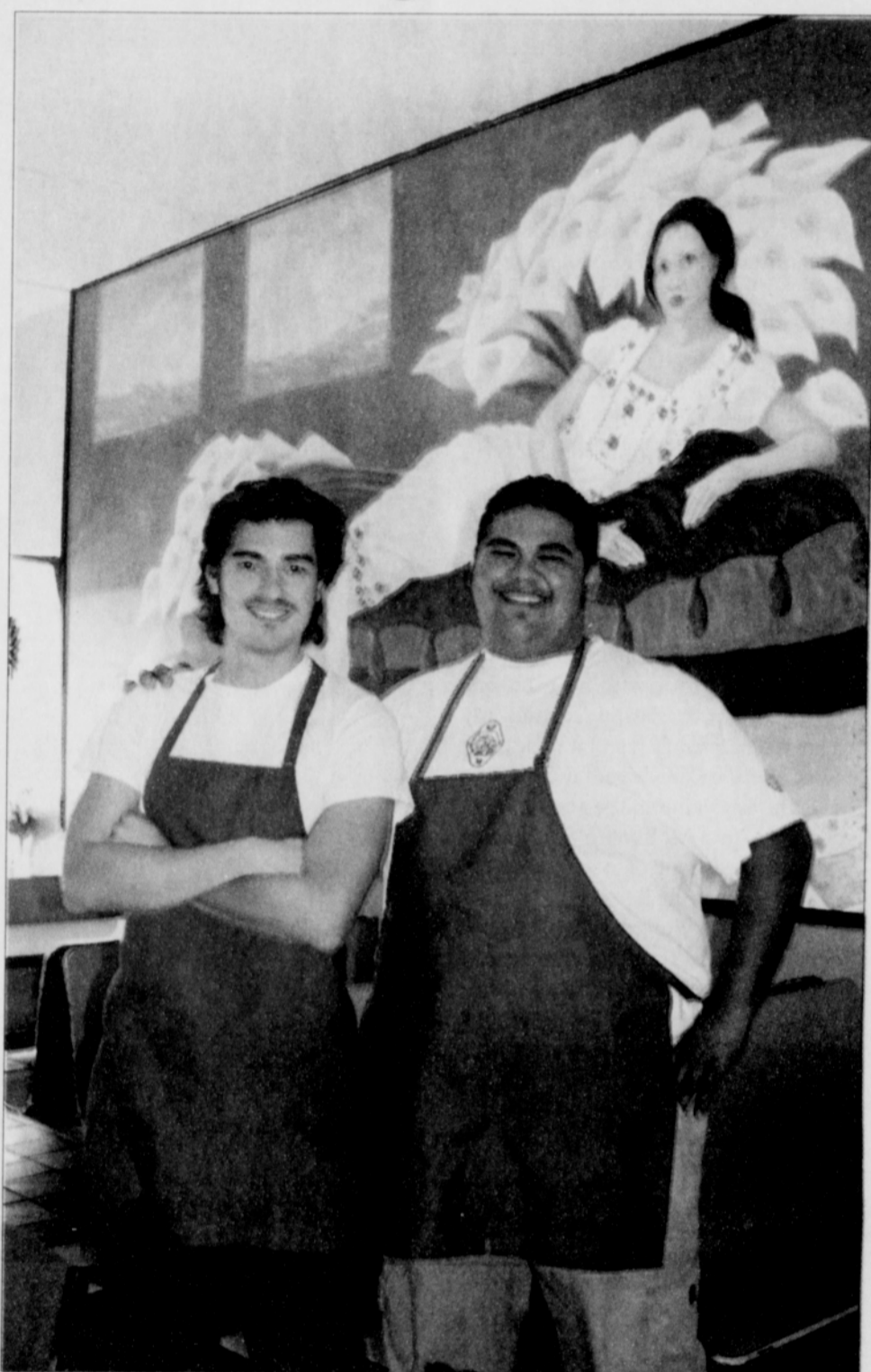
Both offer authentic Mexican foods and are family-run businesses. Their recipes are handed down from cook to cook, made with fresh ingredients and a hearty amount of Mexican gusto. Unlike some chain restaurants, each burrito and tamale is cooked with unique, individual flair. And they're both easy on the wallet.

So what makes a person hop from one taqueria to another? It's a question only answered by one's own tastebuds.

"We're pretty similar. Sometimes we run out of rice and run over and get it, or they need cheese and get it here. They're pretty good people," said Monica Moreno, owner of La Sirenita.

Next door, Checo Lopez, co-owner of La Bonita, said, "They're cool. They've been good neighbors. Everybody on this whole block — there's never been a competitive nature."

The same sense of community that surrounds the outside of the taquerias can be found on the inside.



Brothers Checo and Joaquin Lopez, are co-owners of the family restaurant La Bonita, which sits next to another Mexican restaurant on Northeast Alberta Street.

La Sirenita, which translates into "The Little Mermaid," was named back when the restaurant specialized in Mexican seafood dishes in the mid-'90s.

"Mom used to come here everyday and made a different plate," owner Monica Moreno said.

Although mom's specials aren't around anymore, the restaurant still keeps the family spirit alive with a variety of favorite Mexican and American foods.

Everyone employed at La Sirenita is either a relative or a close friend.

"We have really hard workers who love their job," Moreno said. "You have to like what you do if you want to do it right."

In the beginning, the dining room's décor consisted of just a bench and a wall, but tables and colorful paintings were added slowly over the years. Surprisingly, the business didn't do much to advertise itself — people just came, Moreno said.

Prices range from \$3.25 for a mouth-watering chimichanga stuffed with fresh rice, beans and cheese, generously topped with lettuce, tomato and sour cream, to \$9 for their infamous Seven Sea Soup or Camarones Ahogados, a flavorful, saucy shrimp dish. They've got everything from tacos, fajitas, chorizo, taquitos and of course, burritos, all for under \$4. The American menu includes hamburgers and cheeseburgers.

The restaurant accepts phone orders from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. for busy times. Their only catch: cash only. Call 503-335-8283 for more information.



La Sirenita owner Monica Moreno helps an employee attend to business at the Alberta Street taqueria.

La Bonita Grows Success

As the descendants of one of Hillsboro's first Mexican families, La Bonita's Lopez family knows what "real" Mexican food means. Although they didn't know much about starting a restaurant in the beginning, their delicious food, laid-back attitude and cheap prices have made the Alberta Street business successful.

Checo and his brother Joaquin agree that the taqueria's customer base has grown 200 percent since its opening five years ago.

"It was really slow at first, back when nobody was here. There was nothing on the street. It's changed. It's a good thing to see the area come up, as long as it's kept under control and remains affordable," Checo said.

"We learned everything the hard way," Joaquin said.

Like their neighbors, the employees at La Bonita (which translates to "beautiful girl") are family, or close to it. This helps, they said, when people need to be covered for one reason or another.

"I think that's the best way to fill in a spot. Every year you change, things get bigger," Checo said.

Joaquin noted that, "A lot of people like that we're a family. I've seen the same people with their kids growing up."

The brothers point to the regulars and the constant flow of new customers that keeps the place afloat.

"People are curious and came. People just checked us out — some really liked us and stuck around," Checo said.

During the day, a large part of La Bonita's clientele consists of local construction workers and engineers, simply because of all the structural change going on around Alberta Street lately. In the evening, the neighborhood comes out for dinner. And on the weekends, people are known to travel from Gresham and Vancouver just for a La Bonita burrito.

Prices here stay inexpensive as well, with crispy tostadas starting at \$2.50 and combo platters starting at \$7.50.

Favorites among the brothers include any dish made with their savory shredded beef, as well as chilaquiles huevos, a Mexican breakfast made with eggs with green chilies and shredded tortillas. Want a dozen white corn tamales? Pre-order them at \$18. La Bonita also holds a liquor license and accepts all forms of payment. Call 503-281-3662 for more information.



Doctor Helps Community

Naturopath uses alternative methods for healing
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Making Critical Business Choices

Author lends tips for successful career moves
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A Family Affair

Burnside's Bangkok Restaurant offers Thai, Vietnamese cuisine
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