

# New restaurants show meat-free Mexican is not a carne sin

By TERRY TANG  
Associated Press

PHOENIX — “That’s not real Mexican food,” “My grandma would slap you” and “sellout” are just some of comments Jose and Leticia Gamiz received when they started their pop-up vegan Mexican food business, Mi Vegana Madre, four years ago.

People saw them doing something new and took it personally, Jose Gamiz said. “We even had somebody write (online) in Spanish, ‘They’re probably not even Mexican.’”

Despite the haters, the couple’s meat- and dairy-free endeavor has built a following. It’s part of a growing vegan Mexican food industry in the U.S. that has seen Latinos take control of the kitchen and plant-based Mexican cuisine increasingly plant roots in areas with large Latino communities.

Las Vegas and Austin, Texas, each have at least a few eateries or food trucks that are exclusively vegan Mexican. Across Southern California, there are a slew of options, including a vegan panaderia peddling traditional pastries.

The vegan Mex wave now seems to be sweeping Arizona.

Mi Vegana Madre expanded into a brick-and-mortar restaurant in the Phoenix suburb of Glendale last year. It offers vegan takes on carne asada, al pastor and nachos with a cashew cream-based cheese sauce. Another restaurant offering vegan Mexican and Mediterranean dishes opened in January a one-half mile away. In September, a third place opened in Phoenix, also led by a Mexican American family.

Keren Aguilar, 19, and sister Keyla Aguilar, 22, launched Earth Plant Based Cuisine in Phoenix’s hipster Grand Avenue arts district. Other family members, including their mother, also work there. The menu includes fish tacos, churros and soy chorizo (Mexican sausage) — all made in-house. They also have a plant-based BBQ sandwich, burger and hot dog.

The sisters and their parents have been vegan for nearly five years, and it was Keren’s dream to open a vegan restaurant. It just so happened a space became available and a family friend was willing to be a financial partner.

While most American vegan restaurants offer a few basic Mexican-inspired items, the Gamiz and Aguilar families are trying to capture the array of recipes they grew up on.

“We didn’t want it to have a ‘vegan taste’ or be bland. We wanted it to have



Jose Gamiz, a co-owner at the Mi Vegana Madre restaurant, prepares fresh vegan tacos in Glendale, Ariz. No longer just a few items on a mainstream restaurant’s menu, vegan Mexican food has become a widening industry on its own with Latinos taking control of the kitchen.



Fresh tacos served up at the Mi Vegana Madre restaurant offering Mexican vegan food.

flavors, so our spices are very important to making it Mexican,” Keren Aguilar said.

Gustavo Arellano, a Los Angeles-based columnist and author of “Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America,” said restaurants like Earth Plant Based Cuisine are bringing a level of authenticity beyond the “hippy dippy white vegan stuff like tempeh, or they get a taco and put cubes of soy in it.”

Arellano believes vegan food in Mexican and Hispanic cultures has blossomed as younger generations became inspired by ways they can cut animal



Two of the taco selections at the Earth Plant Based Cuisine restaurant in Phoenix.

products from cooking.

“What blew up the vegan Mexican movement was these pop-up vegan food fairs where you have not

just Mexicans, but Central Americans,” Arellano said.

Since opening their sit-down locations, both family-owned restaurants have

also noticed Latinos of a certain age sampling the food. Jose Gamiz recalls wrongfully assuming a father and daughter, both Mexican, were frequent patrons because the girl was vegan.

“(The father) said, ‘I started doing it for my health,’ and he was like, ‘Nobody in my family will follow me except for my daughter,’” Gamiz said. “Usually the men in the family are the ones that are more resistant. I think there’s a misconception that you need meat to be manly.”

Adults in the U.S. have a 40% chance of getting type 2 diabetes, but Hispanic

and Latino adults have more than a 50% chance, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hispanics/Latinos also are at greater risk of developing diabetes at a younger age and getting complications like kidney failure and vision loss. The CDC says some of the factors contributing to this are genetics and the cultural value in eating meals high in fat and calories.

Yet for some Latinos, going sin carne can still feel like a sin. Linda Sepulveda, of Albuquerque, New Mexico, which has virtually no all-vegan Mexican restaurants, would find it hard to give up an omnivore’s life. Her house is always stocked with ground beef, tortillas and salsa.

“I’m intrigued by (vegan Mexican), but I think a part of me knows it won’t taste the same,” she said. “We are always trying to find where we can add veggies, but there always has to be a main meat and everything else dresses it up.”

While some may say veganizing is misappropriating Mexican food, the country’s indigenous natives actually ate mostly plant-based foods, according to Arellano. Colonizers from Spain irrevocably altered the food culture with introductions of beef, lamb and pork.

“They don’t realize, if you’re real Mexicans, you’re not supposed to be eating this meat in the first place because colonizers brought it over,” Arellano said. “I eat everything, but I’ll eat vegan Mex if it’s good.”

# Second Sesame Street Place park opening in San Diego

By MIKE SCHNEIDER  
Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — There are plenty of sunny days to sweep the clouds away where SeaWorld is opening its next theme park.

Officials with SeaWorld Entertainment and Sesame Workshop announced Monday that they are opening the country’s second Sesame Place park in San Diego in spring 2021. The first Sesame Place theme park opened almost 40 years ago outside Philadelphia.

The announcement continues a pivot by Orlando-based SeaWorld away from live animal shows.

The new 17-acre Sesame Street Place will be an adjacent park next to Sea World San Diego. The space is currently occupied by the water park, Aquatica San Diego, which will have its final season next year.

Monday’s announcement is part of an expanding partnership between SeaWorld and Sesame Street, which is celebrating its 50th birthday this year. SeaWorld’s Orlando



Tessa Meier puts some new paint on the sign outside Mr. Hooper’s Emporium to get ready for opening day at Sesame Place in Langhorne, Penn. Officials with SeaWorld Entertainment and Sesame Workshop announced that they are opening the country’s second Sesame Place park in San Diego in 2021. The first Sesame Place opened almost 40 years ago outside Philadelphia.

park opened a Sesame Street section earlier this year. Officials wouldn’t disclose the cost of the park.

Steve Youngwood, presi-

dent of media and education and chief operating officer of Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit behind Sesame Street, said the two brands have



The Sesame Street Big Bird balloon sways in the wind during the annual Thanksgiving Day Parade in Philadelphia.

common objectives.

“We want to engage and educate families. We mutually respect each side’s expertise and we collaborate together to make it work,” Youngwood said.

SeaWorld announced the end of its breeding program in March 2016, after years of pressure from animal rights advocates and shifting public opinion about orcas being held in captivity.

The protests intensified

after the release of the 2013 documentary “Blackfish,” which focused on the life of Tilikum, a killer whale responsible for killing trainer Dawn Brancheau when he dragged her into a pool in front of shocked visitors in 2010.

The company in the past year, though, has seen a reversal of fortune. Attendance was up 8.6% during the 2018 fiscal year, as was revenue. For the first half of

this year, attendance was up 1.7%.

In the past year, SeaWorld also has been offering specialized services at its parks for visitors with autism, and Sesame Street Place in San Diego will also offer those services.

The San Diego park will be slightly larger than the Sesame Street park outside Philadelphia. Construction will start in Aquatica’s off-season and resume after Aquatica closes for the season next year.

The park’s opening in San Diego will open the Sesame Street experience to the western United States, as well as to visitors from south of the border, said Marilyn Hannes, president of SeaWorld San Diego.

“I think we will pull a more international audience,” Hannes said.

Back to those sunny days sweeping the clouds away, per Sesame Street’s theme song, it is sunny in San Diego more than two-thirds of the time, according to data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.