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LIFESTYLES

Restaurant spices up Winter Springs

By Abraham Aboraya | November 24, 2009

WINTER SPRINGS - It's a quiet Sunday afternoon at Chilango's in Winter Springs, and Laila Silva takes the cornmeal masa dough and spreads it into the sandal-shaped mold.

Using a rolling pin and two well-place pieces of saran wrap, she forms the dough into a shell shaped like a thin football.

Then it's griddle cooked, quickly fried and topped with refried beans, slow-roasted pork, cilantro, cheese and sour cream.

Now you have a huarache (think a Mexican pizza, just not like Taco Bell). And this isn't a show for the man with the camera - every time one is ordered, Silva goes through the same ritual.

"If you order one, I'm going to roll it out and make it at that moment," Silva said. "It's fresh, good, made to order, so there's no such thing as 'can't do it' because it's made to order. However you want it is how we'll make it."

Laila Silva and her husband, Guillermo Silva, opened Chilango's in February 2008, and the small restaurant is garnering attention: Orlando Sentinel readers chose Chilango's as the second best Tex-Mex restaurant behind Tijuana Flats in the Best Bets 101 contests.

In recognition of being No. 2, they're running specials in the first week of December.

"We have very fanatical customers," Laila said. "They're fanatically devoted to us."

Chilango's features authentic Mexico City food, like huaraches and sopes, but also offers more Americanized dishes like chimichangas. Silva grew up in Chicago with a stepfather who was from Mexico.



TACOS TO GO: Guillermo and Laila Silva prepare food in their family-operated Mexican restaurant, Chilango's. The small Winter Springs restaurant offers inexpensive, authentic dishes from Mexico City, where Guillermo is from.

She visited her mom in Mexico and met and married Guillermo, living in Mexico for nearly 20 years. When they moved stateside again, the couple went to every hole in the wall place looking for authentic Mexican food.

"I've been dragged to every store front little Mexican restaurant to eat tacos in the city, and he could never find any place that had everything he liked," Laila said. "It's really hard to find authentic Mexican food."

Then they got a phone call from a friend: A small restaurant in Winter Springs had closed down and was for lease. They drove by it and liked the look, so they called the owner and asked to look at the shop the next Tuesday.

That Wednesday they signed the lease, and they've never looked back.

"We love Winter Springs," Laila said. "It's such a rich community. The people here are so community-oriented and so supportive, and they've embraced us since we came here in a way that I don't think we would have been embraced in a big city like Orlando."

The restaurant's name indicates which area of Mexico its food can be found; Chilango means someone from Mexico City.

"I'm Chilango," Guillermo said.

One reason Chilango's is gaining such a fan base is that the prices are cheap.

A Mexican style taco (with cilantro and onions) is \$1.50; the American style, with lettuce, tomato and cheese, a quarter more.

Spend more than \$5, and you're getting a plate full of food with some substance to it.

It's like Taco Bell prices, but with slow-cooked meat.

"Real Mexican food is not fast, flash-cooked on the griddle," Laila said. "It's slow-cooked. Our carnitas take four hours to cook."

"It's almost like comfort food. It's the kind of food you would traditionally eat on Sundays with your family."

The Silvas said they can keep prices low because they don't have to pay franchise fees, and the restaurant is family-run, with Laila and Guillermo and their children providing all the labor.

At the beginning of 2010, you'll also be able to buy beer and wine at the store. Silva said they'll never move out of their shop, although they may open another location by UCF two or three years down the line.

"Hasn't that happened to all of us?" Laila asked. "You love that little hole in the wall place, you go to eat and as they start making more money and getting more demand, they lose that personal touch. We don't want to lose that."

The best compliment she's ever gotten: Every Monday, a crew doing median maintenance stops in for lunch. One of the men said the only time they eat well at work is when they come to Chilango's.

"I want you to feel at home," Laila said. "I want people to linger. I'm not looking for people to eat and leave right away."

"I want you sit if you're comfortable and have a conversation and feel at home."

We're not about 'how many tables can I turn over at dinner.'

"It's just an extension of our family. So getting bigger, I think we'd lose that."

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