

Marta Carrillo considers herself 'blessed'

Owner of Marta's Cocina thankful for employees, community

By Elisa Claasen
For the Tribune

Marta's Cocina says at its website that it's goal isn't just to have the tastiest and most authentic Mexican cuisine in Whatcom. It's also important to have the healthiest.

Located in the Fairway Center at 1710 Front St., Marta's Cocina sources ingredients as close to home as possible, with selections prepared from scratch and hand-seasoned, according to Marta's recipes.

Marta Carrillo, owner of her namesake restaurant, started small 15 years ago, then expanded to offer a bar in an adjacent vacated space once occupied by Timekeepers.

Carrillo, from Uruapan in the Michoacán state in Western Mexico, had family in Whatcom County. One sister was working in farms around 25 years ago

Divorced and with two children ages 10 and 11, Carrillo needed more opportunities than what was available in Mexico. She said employers there see single mothers as unreliable and aren't as likely to offer them employment.

Once she arrived in Whatcom County, Carrillo worked as a nursing assistant for the elderly at several local care facilities where she worked for 11 years. However, the work was difficult physically and an injury led her to working with young children at a Montessori school.

She remarried, and has since divorced, and moved into Lynden. She started working part time for an existing restaurant, La Heradura Family Mexican Restaurant, which became Marta's. America, Carrillo said, is a "land of opportunity."

"You have to work hard and help others," she said. "(It's important) to be part of the community. The key is to give back."

The COVID-19 pandemic has not been easy for restaurants, and Carrillo said it hasn't been easy to get workers in her industry. Yet customers and other restaurant owners rallied to help her and each other. She is grateful.

"You can't have a better community with the pandemic," she said. "Serving is my pleasure, my joy. I do this with a lot of love."

Customers and employee are like fam-



Marta Carrillo with two of her employees, Joel Lopez and Sugye Carillo. (Elisa Claasen for Lynden Tribune)

ily to Carrillo. During the pandemic, a customer's son came to work for her during a difficult time of his own. In turn, he and his father gave of their time - Carrillo bought the supplies - and they remodeled her interior for free. She pointed to the vivid walls.

"I'm totally a product of the community," she said as she smiled at families walking in the door for dinner. She has seen customers and employees grow up, graduate, go into the military and marry. "I help them as they've helped me."

While she once spent more time in the kitchen, Carrillo now has freed herself up to focus directly on the customers. She enjoys talking to retirees and giving hugs. She plays with the children.

Carrillo's daughter talked to her about

her business.

"It's more of a community center than a business," she laughed. "I'm a human lover."

The top food sellers at Marta's Cocina are her carne asada, fajitas, and enchiladas, each made with family recipes. Raised in a farming region, Carrillo has incorporated in also being in the more upscale Mexico City and her time here. All of it has shaped the food she now prepares.

Marta's is open 11 a.m. until 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. until 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Happy hour is from 3 to 5 p.m. with a menu of cocktails and finger foods. Marta's Cocina is also available for catering for weddings, graduations, anniversaries, parties and other events. Visit martascocina.com for more information.



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