

## Off the Menu: It's a diner no more

Continued from E1

of dried chiles. It's the most famous dish from Puebla, and it's one of the most-requested items on the menu from both natives and non-native alike.

"Many Americans eat mole poblano. A lot have had it in Mexico," Fermín said in Spanish.

The tacos are also big sellers; filled with steak, chicken, pork or tongue, they come adorned with cilantro, avocado, onions, and a spicy salsa. On the side, Micaela includes spears of cooked nopal, a type of cactus, to add to the tacos.

The couple opened the restaurant in July, after spending several months cleaning and updating the long-vacant dining car. The old diner seems an odd place to serve traditional Mexican food, but Fermín and Micaela make it work by adding a few colorful decorations on the walls and displaying some of the more popular menu items in Spanish with photos above the counter. It's set apart from downtown, Fermín said, but he's noticed a good amount of foot traffic, because of people leaving their cars nearby and walking to parks or stores.

The business technically belongs to Micaela's sister; she and her husband, Fermín's brother, own another restaurant of the same name on Washington Street in Paterson. Micaela and Fermín, natives of a small town in Puebla called Axutla, worked there after arriving from Mexico four years ago. Now, they're running their own restaurant.

"It's a bit difficult, knowing what food to order, having to make deliveries," Fermín said. "I didn't have much experience."

The hectic restaurant business is a stark change from their slower-paced lives in Axutla, where they lived on a small farm and raised cows and grew crops. But the United States offered more opportunities, so they came to Paterson, where Fermín's brothers had settled. It's difficult leaving behind friends and family, he said, but he can make so much more money in this country. He sends his children back for at least two weeks each summer to stay

with their grandparents, and eventually, if he can save enough money, he'd like to retire to his small hometown.

"I really like the countryside," he said. "If I'm in good economical shape, I'll do it."

Micaela prepares the food in the kitchen, while Fermín is business manager, deliveryman, and prep cook if necessary. Their three children, ages 13, 16, and 19, help out after school and on the weekends. Three days per week – Thursday, Friday and Saturday – they open 24 hours, mainly to serve Mexican men who get out of late shifts in local factories and restaurants. At least one of them is always at the restaurant, no matter the hour.

"I sleep in doses," Fermín said. "If it's calm here, I'll go home and sleep for two or three hours. We don't have a day to rest."

Micaela does the same. Whenever she can get away to run an errand or take a nap, she leaves the kitchen in the hands of an assistant, whose regular task is to mold flour and corn into fresh tortillas. Buying tortillas from a local producer would be less time-consuming, but Micaela refuses to outsource any of the food production.

"It doesn't turn out the same," she said. "These come out fresh and soft, but the reheated tortillas get hard in the oven."

In addition to Mexican staples, Micaela also prepares lomo saltado and bandeja paisa, typical dishes of Peru and Colombia, respectively. These are nods to the varied clientele that drop by the restaurant. Micaela will even make a cheese steak sandwich or a hamburger, but it's not exactly how Americans make it.

The 1950s diner décor is fine for now, Fermín said, but eventually he'd like to replace the floor in the kitchen and repaint the dining area.

"I want to remodel everything," he said. "I want it to look newer. I want to make it more Mexican."

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LESLIE BARBARO / Herald News

Micaela Gutiérrez waves to a passer-by during a break from cooking at Antojitos Poblanos #2, which opened on Grand Street in Paterson in early July.