

After two decades, family realizes dream of restaurant ownership in downtown Willmar

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WILLMAR — Guillermina and Salvador Serrano always wanted to own a restaurant, and last summer they got their chance.

In July, the couple purchased the former Los Primos in downtown Willmar. They named it Azteca.

The name is deeply symbolic for the Serranos and was used to honor their hard-working, resourceful ancestors — “The things that inspire us,” Guillermina Serrano said.

When they bought the restaurant, they also assumed the former owner’s catering business at Jennie-O Turkey Store in Willmar.

The Serranos have worked in the restaurant business for more than 20 years, and both previously worked at Rositas and at The Oaks at Eagle Creek in Willmar.

Still, there’s been a learning curve in running a business for the first time, and there were some struggles at first, Guillermina Serrano said.

Lately, their customer base has been growing and includes a wide variety of people.

One of their specialties is Caldo de Res, a traditional Mexican beef stew with zucchini, cabbage, potatoes and carrots.

Salvador Serrano brought his recipe to Willmar when the family moved here 10 years ago.

While it sounds like a tasty treat for a cold winter day, “even when it’s hot, we sell a lot of it,” Guillermina Serrano said through an interpreter. She speaks some English but is more comfortable speaking in her native language.

The restaurant sells specialty meats and menudo on Saturdays. They have been open six days a week and closed on Sundays this winter but plan to expand to Sunday mornings in the spring.

The catering business kept them afloat sometimes in their early days, Guillermina Serrano said.

The couple’s son Guillermo Serrano, 21, takes the food to Jennie-O and sells it to workers.

They’ve made some changes since taking over. They’ve added some American foods and have removed pork from the menu, because Somali employees are Muslim and do not eat pork.

He learned some phrases in Somali, so he could tell customers in their language that he wasn’t serving pork. He has studied the Muslim calendar so he’ll know when Ramadan arrives, because Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset during that month.

“You’ve got to be respectful of the culture,” Guillermo Serrano said. “That’s the most important thing when you’re a business owner.”

The restaurant is next door to the Willmar Area Multicultural Business Center.

The restaurant is considered part of a business incubation program at WAM-BC, said Roberto Valdez, director of the business center. The restaurant has a separate entrance, but it is in the same building as the business center and uses its commercial kitchen.

The lease for Azteca requires that the Serranos participate in the business center’s programs, too.

The center offered assistance with incorporation and human resources issues, but when it came to obtaining financing and running the business, “they did it themselves.”

If other issues arise, “they have us two steps away,” he said.

Asked what she likes about owning her own business, Guillermina Serrano said, “Everything, I like everything.”

She continued, “It’s responsibility, but we’ve always had a dream to own our own place.”

The Serranos said they have enjoyed working for themselves.

“Obviously there’s more responsibility,” said Salvador Serrano. “It’s not that because you’re a worker you’re not responsible, but now you have to be responsible for yourself.”

The hardest part was “leaving the safety net of having a stable job,” Guillermo Serrano said.

Daughter, Ana, 17, is a high school senior and works as a waitress in the restaurant. “It’s been their dream to own a restaurant,” she said. “It’s fun to see my mom enjoy her dream; it makes me think my dream is possible.”