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The Venezuelan Connection

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Photo by Quentin Curtis Bacon.

Honoring Heritage in The City by the Bay

By Carime Lane

Adriana López Vermut never planned on opening a restaurant. In 2006, López Vermut was working at a venture capital firm in San Francisco and starting a family when her father, a restaurateur in Venezuela, asked how she planned to maintain a connection to her heritage – and to her family – who still lived in South America.

The solution: the father-daughter duo opened Pica Pica, a Venezuelan restaurant, in Napa in 2008.

While López Vermut had no prior restaurant experience, her work at the venture capital firm and entrepreneurial spirit lent themselves to her path as a restaurateur. Also crucial to the restaurant's success in those first years was the guidance of Pica Pica's co-founder – Vermut's father, Leopoldo López Gil.

"The first four years, I'd say, were very hard because it was a new business, it was a new concept and it was an economic downturn – all of that made it a slow start," López Vermut says. "If I had not had my dad as my business partner, I'm pretty sure I would have given up."

First hurdles

Although the restaurant now hums with satisfied customers, Pica Pica struggled in the beginning. López Vermut believes the economic downturn combined with a lack of familiarity with Venezuelan food and areas made it difficult for the small restaurant to build business.

"At the beginning, I did a ton of trade shows where I would just sample the arepas," López Vermut recalls.

When López Vermut looks back, commitment to the original concept of Pica Pica was instrumental in overcoming those initial challenges.

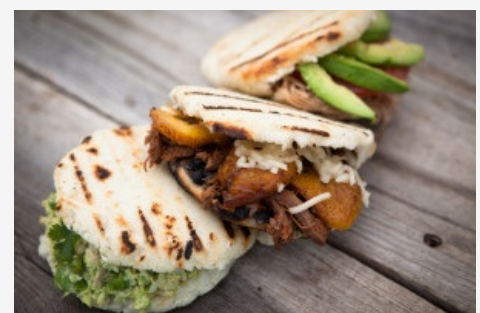
"We knew the concept of selling arepas and the way we were presenting them really had potential, and we stuck to that," she explains.

López Vermut also credits the restaurant's basis in her heritage with galvanizing her through the hard times, noting, "It has definitely been an anchor for me to have [my heritage] as the motivator and as something I always go back to."

Venezuelan flavor

Pica Pica is best known for the arepa, a grilled handmade corn pocket which holds a diner's choice of slow cooked meats, beans, plantains, cheese, or vegetables. Among their other menu items that keep customers returning are stuffed corn crepes called cachapas and sharable sides including yucca fries, sweet plantains, empanadas, and ceviche. An additional selling point is the restaurant's naturally gluten-free menu.

Of all the dishes on offer, it's the hallaca, a December feature dish, which makes López Vermut feel the deepest connection to her roots. As early as four years old, she recalls making this dish, which she describes as a "complex tamale", during the holidays with



her extended family.

Photo by Quentin Curtis Bacon.

“My daughter and my son (the older ones) absolutely cherish that moment in December when they come to the restaurant and make hallacas with me,” she says.

Each December, Pica Pica produces up to 3,000 hallacas to serve in the restaurant and ship to other cities.

Making modifications

Since 2008, Pica Pica has expanded to three locations in Napa, the Castro district, and Valencia Street, before López Vermut decided to consolidate operations into the current 28-seat location on Valencia Street in San Francisco in 2014. Throughout the years, the menu has also changed.

Among those tweaks to the menu was the introduction of sauces.

While Venezuelan cuisine does not traditionally contain sauces, López Vermut says that, for Californian diners accustomed to meals punctuated with condiments, Pica Pica adapted. They developed a selection of signature sauces, including a hot sauce created by López Vermut’s father.

The build-your-own style that Americans gravitate towards also precipitated a menu alteration. When Pica Pica first opened, the arepa could only be ordered with a beef stuffing and the cachapa with cheese. However, when customers consistently began asking to customize their fillings, López Vermut restructured the menu to accommodate.

Although these modifications may surprise Venezuelans, López Vermut maintains that the recipes at Pica Pica haven’t been altered.

“It’s just the presentation that’s different,” she says.

The family connection

López Vermut is now the main operational partner, as her father lives in Venezuela – he travels to San Francisco six times a year to develop the menu and visit his daughter/business partner and grandchildren.

“[The Pica Pica menu] are family recipes that we work on together,” says López Vermut.

Her daily conversations with her father to discuss the restaurant have also enriched their personal relationship.

“I think if I didn’t have this specific thing to touch base with him about, we wouldn’t have as close a relationship as we do,” says López Vermut.

Through Pica Pica, López Vermut’s four children have also been exposed to their Venezuelan heritage by visiting the restaurant, cooking there, and experiencing cooking demonstrations the restaurant holds at their schools.

“These are all small things that I think make them very aware of where I am from and that they’re part of that,” says López Vermut.

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