

## Four Corners Business Journal

As seen in the Four Corners Business Journal:

Cocina Linda: The eatery that Durango built

By Indiana Reed

Journal Correspondent

DURANGO – Three years ago Linda Illsley was at something of a crossroads. The bakery at which she'd been working had sold, and this high-energy, culinary school graduate from rural Mexico who had made food her life, cooking for others for some 20 years, thought it might just be time to launch a restaurant of her own.

Though she still marvels at how it all transpired, Illsley, who had no financial backing or credit in the U.S., today enjoys local celebrity as a popular restaurateur, owner of Cocina Linda, with fans throughout the country craving the tamales, chiles rellenos, salsas and more – all handmade daily from the finest, freshest ingredients, in the tradition of old Mexico – Illsley's Mexico, that is.

“We come from a region where food is a big deal,” said Illsley, who was born and raised in the town of Urapan, Michoacan, in south central Mexico. “We grew up with my parents driving an hour and a half to book a reservation in a restaurant. They did not have a phone. Then driving back and taking us to eat.”

Food was a social event, a part of the culture, with the people taking pride in the unique flavors and inspired dishes that incorporated the bounty of the land. Illsley, and her sister Sara, who now helps run Cocina Linda, cook from those memories. And the dishes enjoyed at Cocina Linda are based on family recipes inspired in their youth.

“I'll say, do you remember how so-and-so used to do this?” said Illsley of conversations with her sister as they developed their menu. “We need to achieve that flavor – taste this. Then we'll start tweaking it until we get what we want.”

For that reason, though the menu items at Cocina Linda may seem familiar by name, the flavors are quite unlike those found at chain Mexican restaurants. Illsley sells her salsas by the container, and ships tamales across the country – so unique is the result of the sisters' labor.

Cocina Linda began under a borrowed pop-up tent at the Durango Farmer's Market. The sisters had prepared 75 tamales to sell. Illsley had retained the idea of selling at this type of event from her experience in England, when she had momentarily considered offering fresh Mexican food at the Brighton flea market.

“I was so nervous,” said Illsley of the first day at the Durango Farmer's Market. “I set up the tamale cooker upside down... so we had started at 5 in the morning and by 8 they weren't cooked yet... But people were great, and they waited and they came back and they giggled. We sold out in one hour.”

Illsley had only planned on working the Farmer's Market through the summer, but members of the community had a vision, even if she didn't. Her first big supporters were Cookie and Joy Swanson, founders of Serious Texas Barbecue.

“He said, you're destined to have a restaurant,” said Illsley. “I looked at him and cracked up. I said, come on, Cookie. He said, yup.”

She learned of a strip of land in Albertson's parking lot, leased by Casey Lynch of Mountain Waters Rafting, where Swanson had set up one of his first Serious Texas carts. He loaned her a cart – saying he wanted rent when she made a profit, and not until – and Illsley struck a deal with Lynch, who only used the site during the summer rafting season. Linda and Sara Illsley survived the winter there, building a reputation and never compromising on the high quality of their food.

By February Illsley was, as she said, “calling the bluff” of a family friend, Frank Thomas, who'd offered to design a permanent cart for Cocina Linda. Thomas hailed from a family of inventors who had developed a soft ice cream machine, and to sell it, they had created the optimum cart.

“In five weeks he built that cart,” said Illsley, referencing the structure that has now been incorporated into her permanent restaurant. But city code wasn't with her. “I couldn't function year-round in a cart.”

She had a choice – operate seasonally or comply with the code by building a permanent restaurant. Though she could be flexible, her sister was raising a teenage daughter and needed the steady employment. It was then Illsley began exploring purchase of the land and fulltime restaurant management.

“I had never borrowed money and I was scared,” said Illsley, crediting Jim and Bill Carver, of Carver Brewing Co. for assistance during the process. She approached the larger banks in town, but it was Bank of the San Juans that came through. Meeting with Jim Bolen, who had witnessed her continued success at the Farmer's Market, she secured her first real estate and construction loans.

“It was scary,” she said, stressing that the city and many others in the community played key roles in helping Cocina Linda become a reality. “In all my life I've never put down roots because I knew I wasn't going to stay – and this is pretty big roots. You can't get more solid than this.”

Cocina Linda's small commercial kitchen with indoor and outdoor patio seating (though the food is prepared “to-go”) is now a bustling part of Albertson's parking lot. Sara Illsley's daughter, Bandy, has taken over management of the Farmer's Market, freeing the sisters up to oversee Cocina Linda's staff of three, plus a cadre of part-time, supportive teenagers.

All ingredients continue to be prepared and chopped by hand each morning. The organic corn, shipped in from Texas, is manually ground and fashioned into the fresh tortillas and tamales. The only semi-modern, automated appliance is a large blender that facilitates larger batches of the various salsas.

“Moneywise it would make sense to do a huge pot of rice and just microwave it,” said Illsley of ways she knows she could cut costs. “I don't like microwaves, and making a huge thing of rice, it loses its nutritional value. So we do small batches through the day. We have to run a little more, but so be it... The customers know it. We treat the customers with respect. If they're here, it's because they tasted the food and they like it, so I'm not going to start putting cans (canned ingredients) into it in order to cut corners. To me that just doesn't make sense.”

Illsley garnered her appreciation for the organic, whole foods movement while in England, working for an organic cooperative that catered to vegetarian and special diets. She also developed a profound respect for those with allergies or certain issues with various ingredients.

“It’s not just about conviction. It’s a physical issue,” she said, noting that in her kitchen, the meat entrees are prepared completely separate from the vegetarian dishes. The menu spells out particular ingredients to which people may have a sensitivity, and lard is not used. “There are a lot of people who just can’t eat certain things... You have to be respectful and you have to be careful.”

Special needs aside, Illsley does have some challenges with her food preparation. The ingredients available locally are rarely as rich as those of her homeland, and, simply put, tomatoes, pork, chicken – just about everything – tastes different from fresh-off-the-farm in Mexico. Many ingredients have been impossible to purchase locally – the food purveyors simply do not have them available. All has resulted in necessary creativity, utilizing different ingredients to achieve the flavors remembered from her youth.

As she begins her fourth year as an entrepreneur – and only a year and a half since she opened the permanent facility – Illsley assures, “It’s paying the bills. It’s gradually establishing itself.”

And as it does, Illsley does what she can to “give back” to the community that has made Cocina Linda a reality. Launching Sunday Brunch on Mother’s Day, she donated the proceeds to the budding Durango Discovery Museum, plus she actively participates in events that support community non-profits such as Taste of Durango and KSUT’s fundraising drive.

“This is my way of saying thank you to Durango,” said Illsley. “We exist basically because the community made it happen. We are a product of the community, completely.”