

Food Familiar
TYLER'S TRIFECTA OF MEXICAN EATERIES

Text by Randy Mallory

As a youngster growing up in Tyler, I didn't really know Mexican food. Only a few places served a bland imitation of the richly-spiced cuisine which, as an adult, I enjoyed on trips to interior Mexico. Tyler's different now. An influx of Hispanic families in recent decades spawned a variety of quality Mexican eateries. Three of my favorites--Don Juan Mexican Restaurant, Don Juan on the Square, and Mariscos DJs, all owned and operated by the Barron family--rekindle my love of interior Mexican cuisine and culture. The Barrons serve the foods they grew up with in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato.

Eating at their restaurants flashes me back to the summer I spent with my wife and kids in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato. Thick fried corn sopes topped with beans and meat and queso blanco. Spicy chicken enchiladas topped, not with Tex-Mex gravy, but with queso fresco. Milanese tortas and giant chilled shrimp cocktails. Made from scratch using fresh ingredients, these dishes--along with brightly-colored decor and hand-carved wooden furniture--remind me of our days in San Miguel. There's even wall art showing scenes of Guanajuato. And when I eat a soft corn taco filled with grilled steak, avocado, cilantro, and shredded cabbage, I recall the origins of the Barrons' true Texas success story.

Juan Barron first came to Texas in 1977 on a mission. He was determined to bring his oldest child, Arturo, who worked in a Tyler meat-packing plant, back home to Salamanca, Guanajuato. Once in Tyler, however, Juan liked what he saw. What he saw was a good place, good people, and opportunity. So he moved in with Arturo and began working with his son at the plant. Arturo played soccer every weekend at a field near downtown. For lunch he brought along tacos his dad made--spicy barbacoa (Mexican barbecue) meat wrapped in fresh corn tortillas in the style Juan knew growing up. Other players and fans sampled Juan's tacos and wanted their own. Juan obliged by

loading a five-quart pot with his tacos and selling them on weekends for \$1 each out of the back of his 1966 red Ford Falcon. Soon demand required a 40-gallon pot and eventually a concession trailer selling tacos at two soccer fields.

Taco customers began referring to him as “Don” Juan, a Spanish term of honor. By then, wife Prisca had moved to Tyler to cook at Juan’s side. Prisca grew up at her mother’s side learning to make traditional Mexican dishes and dreaming of running her own restaurant. “We worked three days a week at the soccer fields and liked it so much, that I wanted to work everyday,” Prisca recalls. “We had to have a restaurant.”

In 1997 the Barrons took the leap of faith and opened Don Juan Mexican Restaurant in a former neighborhood grocery on a hill a mile east of downtown. The small eatery had only 10 menu items and 10 employees, mostly family. Don Juan’s reputation spread by word of mouth through the downtown business district and the nearby medical district. Workers packed the place during lunch breaks and came back for more at dinnertime. The restaurant, now managed by daughter Juanita and her husband, Angel Alfaro, added tables and expanded the dining room and kitchen. Eventually the Barrons’ five sons and two daughters all moved to Tyler to join the growing family enterprise.

In 2002 the family opened Don Juan on the Square, managed by brother Carlos. It offers the same menu as the original Don Juan, a list now boasting 42 items--ranging from pungent tortilla soup and besitos (mozzarella-stuffed jalapeños), to chili rellenos and enmoladas (mole-topped enchiladas). The two eateries also serve breakfast dishes such as migas, huevos rancheros, and chilaquiles. In 2011 the Barrons opened a seafood restaurant and sports bar called Mariscos DJs, run by brother Alex. Its 50-item menu specializes in dishes from Mexico’s Pacific coast, ranging from various seafood cocktails and soups to Enpapelado de Mariscos (a saucy shrimp, octopus, and fish dish baked and served in foil wrap). I love dining at Mariscos DJs on Friday and Sunday nights when a six-piece Mariachi band entertains. (The music recalls Don Juan Barron’s early years in Mexico as a street singer and guitar maker. He still makes stringed instruments for family members.)

The Barrons also run a catering service that has handled private events for as many as 600 people. No wonder the Don Juan family of restaurants was named Tyler's Hispanic Business of the year in 2014. The three restaurants embody togetherness...literally. All sit within a mile of each other along East Erwin Street. Together, they boast 100 or so employees, roughly half of them family members, comprising a new generation of Barron restaurateurs in the making.

At 78, Juan monitors the goings-on at all three locations. Prisca, now 76, retired from the kitchen to oversee family operation finances. She and Juan also remind all who will listen of the real reason their restaurants flourish. Says Prisca, "Everything we make here, we make and serve with love."

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Don Juan Mexican Restaurant, Tyler

Don Juan Original is at 1313 E. Erwin St. Open daily 10-9. Call 903/526-2999. Mariscos DJs is at 1201 E Erwin St. Call 903/533-1220. Open Mon-Wed and Sat-Sun 11-11 and Thu-Fri 11-midnight. Don Juan on the Square is at 113 E. Erwin St. Open Mon-Thu and Sat 11-9 and Fri 11-10. Call 903/526-2999. For menus and details go to www.donjuantylor.com.

RESOURCES:

--Angel Alfaro (mng'r, Don Juan/original); (also contact for his wife Juanita and for Juan & Prisca Barron in order to translate)

--Carlos Barron (Don Juan/downtown)

--Alex Barron (DJ Mariscos)