

Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam

*The
Kerr County Historical Commission
presents*

An ORAL HISTORY

of

Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam

Kerrville, Texas 2019

Kerr County Historical Commission

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam

Interviewers: Francelle Robison Collins
Bonnie Pipes Flory

Date: November 20, 2018

Place: Kerr County Courthouse
Kerrville, Texas

*The Oral History Project is a project of
The Kerr County Historical Commission,
a volunteer organization. Oral History
Committee chair is Francelle Robison Collins.*

Transcribed and Edited by Rita Edington Odom

Kerr County Historical Commission

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Name: Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam

Date of Birth: April 30, 1958

Place of Birth: Tehran, Iran

Education: High School in Tehran
Schreiner College

Father: Reza Hagigholam

Mother: Khavar

Spouse: Ruth Hagigholam

Children: Roya Hagigholam
Nick Hagigholam

SUMMARY

Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam came to this country from Iran at the age of eighteen. He had saved money, took the English test, got an I-20 from Beville College (acceptance) and came to Houston with three other friends. He and his friends came to Schreiner College so they could become more proficient in the English language and Hagi has remained in Kerrville since then. He worked as a waiter for many years and had the opportunity presented to him to go into partnership with some businessmen in Kerrville to open a Mexican restaurant. He is the owner or Mamacitas restaurants in Kerrville, Fredericksburg, San Marcos and San Antonio. His restaurant in New Braunfels has been sold. He has a foundation with his family that provides support for divorced women with children in Iran to allow them to have a more comfortable life. Hagi is married to Ruth and they have two children, Roya and Nick.

An Oral History of

Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam

My name is Francelle Robison Collins and I am with the Kerr County Historical Commission, Oral History Project. Today is November 20, 2018, and I am here at the Kerr County Courthouse in Kerrville, Texas, with Bonnie Pipes Floury. We are talking with Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam who understands that we are making audio and video recordings of this interview and that a typewritten transcript of this interview will be provided so that changes can be made. The audio and video tapes, however, cannot be edited. This information along with copies of any family pictures and documents provided by you will then be turned over to the Kerr Regional History Center, Schreiner University, and the University of North Texas' Portals to Texas History, where they will be available to the public unless specific restrictions are placed on them by you. These restrictions will be noted in the Release form after you have had a chance to review your manuscript. Are you clear on what we are doing today?

HAGI: Yes ma'am.

FRANCELLE: What is your given name?

HAGI: Hossein Hagigholam

FRANCELLE: When and where were you born?

HAGI: I was born in Tehran, Iran.

FRANCELLE: And your birth date?

HAGI: I was born on April 30, 1958.

FRANCELLE: Is Hagi a nickname?

HAGI: Yes. In the 80's there was another friend of mine and his name was Hossein. So, every time they would say, "Hossein" we didn't know which one. "Hossein, your food is ready" and we didn't know so the wrong one would go. I said my family name was Hagi so why don't you call me Hagi and I'm glad because later Saddam Hussain came and I didn't want that name.

FRANCELLE: Were you born at home or in a hospital.

HAGI: I was born at home with a midwife.

FRANCELLE: Do you have any siblings?

HAGI: Yes. In the 80's there was another friend of mine and his name was Hossein. So every time they would say, "Hossein" we didn't know which one: "Hossein, your food is ready" so we didn't know who they were calling so the wrong one would go. I told them my family name was Hagi so why don't you call me Hagi and I'm glad because later on Saddam Hussain appeared and I didn't want that name.

FRANCELLE: Were you born at home or in a hospital?

HAGI: I was born at home with a midwife.

FRANCELLE: Do you have any siblings?

HAGI: Yes, as a matter of fact I have seventeen including me. My father's first wife, who was my mother, had fourteen kids. My mother passed away and my father remarried and had 3 more kids. They are all married and gone.

FRANCELLE: Are they all back in Tehran?

HAGI: Yes, except one of them who is in California and one of them is in France.

FRANCELLE: Didn't one of your brothers come here with you?

HAGI: No, no one came with me. Some friends but not a brother.

FRANCELLE: What was your father's name?

HAGI: Reza.

FRANCELLE: Is he still alive?

HAGI: No. He passed away about 9 years ago.

FRANCELLE: What was your father's occupation?

HAGI; My father was in the construction business, working for a company.

FANCELLE: Did you start school in Teheran?

HAGI: Yes. I went to elementary and then high school and in Tehran everyone had to go to the Army or Navy or Armed Forces for 2 years before you could leave the country. Or you could get accepted to a University. Now, coming to live in another country you have to take a most difficult English test. Also, you have to have a I-20 from the University or College. My father wasn't well off and at thirteen I told him I just had to go to America. He said, "son, you are thirteen; by the time you are eighteen, if you want my consent you save five thousand dollars". Five thousand dollars American money in the 70's was a lot. He thought I would never be able to do that so, he said "Sure". So, I got a job.

FRANCELLE: Did you take English in school?

HAGI: No. I took a job from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and then I went to night school from 5-9 or 10 o'clock because you had to have your diploma from high school. And there was the English test and the five thousand dollars that my father had said. Well, I reached the five thousand dollars in five years working jobs and working for my mom washing the carpet, curtain and cleaning home. The English test was multiple choice and if I didn't know I would just check "ding, ding, ding" and I got ninety! So, I had the three things and I gave them to my father and he said, "Okay. I believe in you. You will make it." I was eighteen and they were afraid to send an eighteen-year-old to a foreign country.

And I couldn't go back anymore because of the hostage situation and then the war with Iraq so I didn't see anybody from my family for sixteen years. It was the toughest time of my life. Except for one time my father and mother came after I had been here 9 years. But it was hard. It was good time and tough time. During the 1970's, Jimmy Carter said all the Iranians that don't have a visa have to go back - because of the hostages. I thought, "Oh my gosh, I don't have a visa, how am I going to stay here?" And I had a girlfriend I wanted to marry and her parents said, "Look, you are a foreigner. Don't mess up our daughter's life here. " And I'm nineteen by then and I said, "I do understand". Once I even slept outside of their house under the leaves and at 2 in the morning they said, "You are still here? They said "ok you get married. You get green card. You get divorced. So, everything gets solved, but you cannot have our daughter. Our daughter stays with us. You stay with yourself. It takes about 6 months to get a green card so you will not get deported. So, you get your green card and then we talk. But the odds are you will never marry our daughter. " So, I got my green card, I got some flowers and went to the house and said, " I don't need her anymore, but I love her and I have my green card so will you let me marry her now?" And they said, "Sure." We're still married. We adopted 2 kids when they were 1 day old at the hospital because my wife couldn't have babies.

FRANCELLE: Were they from the same family?

HAGI: No. One was from Corpus Christi and one was from New Braunfels.

FRANCELLE: Where was your wife from.

HAGI: From here. She was born in Kerrville. Her father and mother were from inside Mexico.

FRANCELLE: So, she is Hispanic?

HAGI: Yes.

FRANCELLE: What is her name?

HAGI: Ruth

FRANCELLE: Tell me the difference between a green card and a visa.

HAGI: Yes. A visa is temporary. The government says you can stay here 6 months, from this time to this time. A green card is permanent. It says permanent residence. It's not a citizenship. It's one step lower. If after 5 years you have your green card and you haven't broken any major law they will give you your citizenship. If you were a good boy or a good girl, then after 5 years they give you American citizenship.

FRANCELLE: Why did you choose America to come to?

HAGI: You know, America was "the" name in all of the countries. There is a joke my uncle use to tell me. He said, "When you go there, you tell them, do you know why we say "death to America". I said, "Why". He said, "Tell them it's because they don't let us go there. " There are a lot there who have been to America. Coming to America was like going to the most desired place in the world. Just the name of it. When we were watching TV in Iran we would watch movies that I don't forget like Starkey and Hutch and Mission Impossible, Chaparral, I Dream of Jeanie. And I thought American football was the craziest thing because I didn't know how it worked. I thought these people were crazy because if you don't know the rules you don't know what is going on. There were a lot of things. But America was the most

prestigious place to go. Farthest too. It takes thirty hours with a stop in a 3rd country.

FRANCELLE: Did you come by ship?

HAGI; No. By plane. Including, you have to go to another country like Europe and stay 5,6,7 hours to get your next plane to go to New York and from to New York to wherever you want to go. It's funny, in those times there was an airline called Braniff. I had to go from Iran to London to New York to Houston because there was an English as a Second Language that accepted me to come here- the I-20 remember. They told me New York to Houston was 4 hour flight. In our language Houston is pronounced Hoston. I didn't know English - well I knew "this is a book. This is an apple. " I go to the counter and say, "Hoston" and they sent me to Boston and it was forty-five minutes. I said, "excuse me, I'm not in the right place because it was supposed to be 4 hours. " SO, I was lost for a couple of days until I came to Houston. I had money because my mother sewed a pocket in my underwear because the movies about New York looked dangerous so she said I had better hide my money. So, I went to English as a Second Language for 4 months.

FRANCELLE; Where was that in Houston?

HAGI: It was across the street from the University of Houston. It was part of that university. In a class of thirty students , twenty-five of them are Iranian. The teacher learned how to speak our language. I didn't learn English because they were all talking our language. But if I was going to get somewhere I have got to learn the language. It's a must. So, with the little English I knew, with 3 friends we studied, living together in an apartment. We were eating sausage and eggs for lunch, sausage and eggs for dinner.

FRANCELLE: So, you had friends who came with you from Houston?

HAGI: Yes. Three friends. We didn't have jobs at that time. We didn't even know how to get a job. All of us pretty much the same age. You know the guy from Taco to go, Fred Malek, he was one of us. He was the oldest and he was the only one with a car. He charged us twenty dollar for the use of the car. So we studied what place in Texas had the fewest Iranian students so we could learn the language. Beeville College, three hundred. This college this many. In those times a lot of Iranians were sent here to learn and go back. One of the friends had a cousin at Schreiner College and he said his cousin was the only Iranian At Schreiner College. We said, "Where is it?" 4 hrs. I said, "Let's go." So we put everything we owned and, the 4 of us, in this car. It was just clothes, and we came to Kerrville, Texas to Schreiner College. I remember the first time I tasted a root Beer, it was so bad. It was the first day in the cafeteria and they asked what I wanted to drink and I pointed to what I though was a Coca-Cola and I drank it - it was nasty -. I have never touched root beer again. So, we took English for a semester and then we all got jobs; low paying jobs: busboys, dishwashers, cooks, whatever we could that did not require a lot of language. We learned some language at work, some at Schreiner and when we became waiters, we thought: "Oh my gosh, we are in the money because they were very good tips". I was a waiter for 6 or 7 years.

FRANCELLE: Were you living in the dorm at Schreiner?

HAGI: For the first semester, I was. After that, no. We got an apartment. And we all got married.

FRANCELLE: Where were you working?

HAGI: My very first job was Grandma House that does not exist anymore. I was a known dishwasher because that was the only job they would give you if you didn't know the language. Then I went to Gordo's and then to Acapulco and I was there for a long time and made some good money. Then I decided to go on my own and opened a burger place. And then, life just takes you where it wants to take you. There were 3 businessmen that wanted to open a Mexican restaurant. And I wanted to open a Mexican restaurant too because my background was Mexican restaurant. Of course I didn't know everything about that, but I worked there for so many years that I learned some. So, they came to me and said; "Look, we have the money and you have the knowledge so we'll be partners. We'll give you one fourth" and I **jumped** in it. It was very difficult. You have to get 60 people, no training, no manager and it was getting busy. And I said "God, you did this because it would be impossible for me". It's been proven to me that I didn't do that; there was some power behind it. Because it was BUSY and 60 people who were untrained. And the restaurant is the hardest business that there is.

FRANCELLE: I want to go back to a question because I always thought you came here because of Schreiner. But you came to the English as Second Language place in Houston.

HAGI: Yes, because I got the I-20 in Iran acceptance letter from this place in Houston. That was one of the requirements you had to have. But coming to Schrenier was because we wanted a place where there were not too many Iranians.

FRANCELLE: Were you college level at Schreiner?

HAGI: Yes, I had just finished high schools I was in college at Schreiner. But I wasn't a good student. That's why I didn't have a visa because I was such a bad student I dropped out after 1 year. It seemed a waste of money. I was working, paying the tuition and I am not a good student; I'm a dumb one. I am a worker.

FRANCELLE: What about the other 3 people that came with you?

HAGI: One is here, Fred from Taco To Go, and the other 2 are in San Antonio. We see each other.

FRANCELLE: So, after you got here, how long was it before you were able to go Back to Iran?

HAGI: I went back after 16 years.

FRANCELLE: How had it changed in those years?

HAGI: Gosh. It was a big change because it was after the war and nothing looked like what I used to see. Nothing was built because it was an 8- year war from 1981 to 1988 so the country wasn't what it was.

FRANCELLE: When was the last time you were back?

HAGI: I was back there 6 months ago. I go twice a year now.

FRANCELLE: If they are sick is there a hospital they can go to?

HAGI: Of course! Private and not Private.

FRANCELLE: What does your family do that live there to make a living?

HAGI: One of my brothers is a Mayor in a city. One of them is a doctor. Two or three are businessmen. The women stay home with the kids. You pretty much become servant or the man. That's just the way it is.

FRANCELLE: So, none of the women work?

HAGI: The new generation is getting that way but not as much as men. A man can marry 4 women ant the same time. A woman can't because the men made the rules for thousand of years. But thank God, it is going away. Freedom of speech that we have here is so important.

FRANCELLE: Tell us a little about your business. I know you have extended outside of Kerrville.

HAGI: In 1985 I opened in Kerrville and in 1988 I opened in Fredericksburg, I did it slow. Some companies go Fast, lease a place and open more. I told myself if I own the real estate and someday the business goes bad, I have the real estate. I've got to have something! So, '96 in San Marcos, '99 in New Braunfels, 2005 in San Antonio and 2006 remodeled Kerrville. Three of the restaurants got gutted out and and built brand new. People get bored with it, you know. Last year we got lucky because some people in New Braunfels wanted it so bad, the money was too good to say "no" so I sold the one in New Braunfels. So, nothing is for sale, everything is for sale. The guy owned the shopping center but we owned the corner of the shopping center. Some people bought the shopping center but they wanted the whole thing, so that is why the price was so high.

FRANCELLE: How do you find the people to run your business?

HAGI: Gosh. That is the hardest part. I always say if the restaurant business didn't need an employee it would be the best business in the world. But, unfortunately, it's not that way. Most of the managers have come up in the restaurant. I have managers that have been there twenty-five years. Average fifteen years and now they are running it pretty much themselves. I am more in the background now. I am sixty and have to live also, you can't just work, work, work. A magazine asked me how much was the average pay for my managers and I said 60 to 100 thousand. They said "what?" I said I have 26 managers. You have to spend money to hire managers and you know they are not going to leave you. The food stays the same, the service stays the same.

FRANCELLE: The restaurant here is very beautiful. Did you design it?

HAGI: Yes, I designed them pretty much. My favorite one is San Antonio. I wanted to use that plan here but the shape of the land was different. The food is the same but that one looks so much more like a village.

FRANCELLE: The restaurant is beautiful, the food is good, the service is good. It looks like you have everything covered.

HAGI: We still have a lot to learn but we are trying.

FRANCELLE: We moved back here after being in Houston for forty-two years and know that for a restaurant to succeed you have to have the consistency of good food and good service.

HAGI: I believe it takes 5 things to run a successful restaurant: Quality, service, atmosphere, location, and reasonable prices. If you have these 5, then you are in the good shape. Four out of five you make a living or less than that. Don't mess with restaurants because the amount of work and stress is not worth.

FRANCELLE: Tell us a little about your family.

HAGI: My family, they are all grown up. They have their life. When I go visit them it is, of course, a nice visit. My family here, my daughter graduated from St, Edwards University in Austin in Kinesiology but she has one step to het her masters. Right now she is working for a company called Airrosti that belongs to Blue Cross Blue Shield and they do preventive body injury and she is in Austin. My son graduated from high school last year and he said, "Daddy, you spent two hundred fifty thousand dollars on my sister to go to college "You spent all that money for her to go to school and I don't want to go to college. I am like you. I don't like to study. I want to work for you for so long and when you think I can do something with my life, give me that money. But it would be when I say he is ready. He makes some mistakes. He is nineteen. He likes the girls and all that but he will grow out of it. Let him make mistakes and learn like I did. So, he is working as a waiter in the restaurant.

FRANCELLE: Is it correct that you pay for the fireworks every 4th of July?

HAGI: Yes, ten years ago they were going to stop the fireworks because there were no funds. I said for the next ten years I'll give you a hundred thousand dollars and this is the last year. But I didn't want the fireworks to go away so I made sure.

FRANCELLE: That's so American.

HAGI: Well that's my belief in America. It's from the heart. You don't just give a hundred thousand dollars because you want to. it's something you believe, that this country gave you so much. I always say at the end of my speeches, "I thank God for sending me to America. And I thank America for the opportunity and I Thank you for making my dream come true.

FRANCELLE: Thank you. We've enjoyed it and are so happy you came here. You have made a big difference in Kerrville.

Hagi: I don't think so but thank you very much.

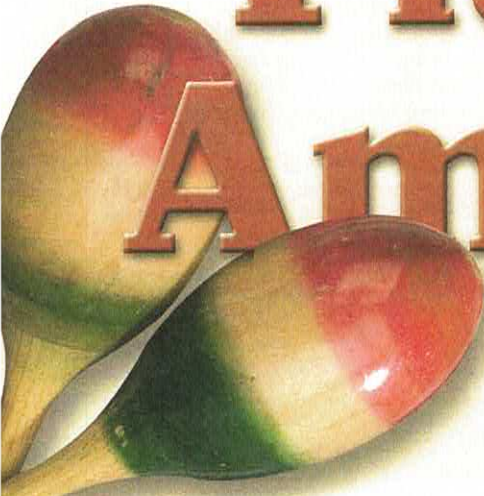


PROFILE • Mamacita's Mexican Restaurant



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Mexican- Flavored American Dream



WHEN YOU WISH UPON
A STAR, YOUR DREAMS
COME TRUE. IT SOUNDS
CORNY, BUT IT HAPPENS. ASK
HOSSEIN HAGIGHOLAM,
FOUNDER OF MAMACITA'S
MEXICAN RESTAURANTS. THE
IRANIAN IMMIGRANT BOUGHT
INTO THE "AMERICAN DREAM"
AND BECAME A SUCCESSFUL
ENTREPRENEUR. DAN HARVEY
SERVES UP THIS SOUTHWESTERN
DISH OF A STORY.

MAMACITA'S MEXICAN RESTAURANT demonstrates that the "American Dream" remains alive. Indeed, the history of the company and its founder relates the quintessential Melting Pot story: It involves the ambitions – and subsequent success – of an Iranian immigrant who fell in love with Mexican cuisine and then started a restaurant chain deep in the heart of Texas.

The central figure in the narrative is Hossein Hagigholam (or Hagi, as he prefers to be called by friends and associates), who came to the United States in 1976 with a headful of ambition but minimal grasp of the English language. Amazingly enough, about 30 years later, he owns a chain of the most popular Tex-Mex style of restaurants in his adopted state.

Initially, Hagi wanted to study engineering. "I came to the United States right out of high school and intended to become an engineer and then return to Iran," he recalls. But things didn't turn out as planned, much to his – and Mexican food lovers' – great fortune.

After a circuitous route that took him from Boston to Houston, he began studying English as a second language in Kerrville, Texas. It was no easy feat. As any bi-lingual world citizen will tell you, the English language (especially, the American version) contains so many nuances that involve slang and usage peculiarities. But Hagi picked up the lingo, which led him to perceive certain essential truths. "I understood American slang,





Pictured above: Dining room inside San Antonio Mamacita's.

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ingredients!

particularly the phrase “no pain, no gain,” he recalls, “and that relates to the enormous opportunities that still exist in the United States. People from other countries come here to seize available opportunities.”

And that involves another American colloquialism that Hagi came to embrace. “When opportunity knocks, you open the door,” he says. “True, success still involves some luck, as well as being positioned at the right place at the right time. But it comes down to seizing the opportunity. In my case, I grabbed my chance and didn’t let it slip through my hands. After you grasp the opportunity, you work hard to make it all happen.”

RESTAURANT BUSINESS EDUCATION

But we’re jumping ahead of the story. Let’s return to the beginning of Hagi’s international quest. To support himself while attending Kerrville’s Shriners College, he worked in the food service sector. He explains: “Many people who don’t understand English very well find work in restaurants, typically as a dishwasher or busboy or waiter, and that’s how I got my start,” Hagi relates.

He enjoyed the income; food service jobs provide a student with a relatively substantial income. “I thought I hit the jackpot,” he would later say.

A hard-working young man, he also was given more tasks — which allowed him to learn the restaurant business from the ground up as well as to carefully observe all that was going on around him. “When I worked as a waiter in Mexican-

style restaurants, far the busiest.”

So, Hagi picked this “internship.” He went into business for himself, away from his earnings to start his own business. He focused on Mexican cuisine.

His Texas shopping trips were a challenge. He couldn’t find what he needed. “In Texas, the Mexican food is the most customer-oriented,” he says.

By 1985, he opened his first restaurant, only 26 years old. He says, “I was simply states.”

It was a bold move. Texas seemed an unlikely place for his characteristic “no pain, no gain” attitude.

However, every publication called it “Restaurant.” Success led to expansion.

His Texas locations. A story comes back in Fredericksburg of adventurous G. Hagi’s amazing that restaurant in a Georgetown, Texas. Hagi. “It amazes me.”

Today, Mamacita’s has locations in San Antonio, San Marcos, San

UNIQUE OFFERINGS

Obviously, it takes a lot of Mexican restaurant to stand out quite well. Some of the most substantial offerings needed to attract the aficionados. It was a tightrope walker.

As such the favorites such as enchiladas and tamales. “I’ve been in restaurants that do Mexican cuisine,” Hagi reveals.

Coming up with new ideas is a matter of imagination. “Even the most creative of Mexican and Tex-Mex chefs.”

Still, Mamacita’s is part of the pack. “For me, it’s about the quality of the food. Monterrey that you can’t find in a Mexican restaurant,” says Hagi.

For the record, there are many options, but if you want to have to taste it for yourself.

“Further, about the quality of the food that we created our menu and our service. We offer items that



Mamacita's.

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style restaurants, I saw that these food establishments were by far the busiest."

So, Hagi picked up more than dishes and a paycheck during this "internship." When he felt he learned enough, he decided to go into business for himself. A frugal future gourmet, he socked away his earnings, and this enabled him to eventually open his own business. However, his initial enterprise didn't involve Mexican cuisine. Rather, he opened a hamburger restaurant in a Texas shopping center. This led to more savings and observations. He couldn't get the Mexican cuisine idea out of his mind. "In Texas, the Mexican restaurants were the ones that attracted the most customers," he says.

By 1985, he opened the first Mamacita's restaurant. He was only 26 years old. It took a lot of hard work, but through sheer force of will, he endured: "Persistence and determination," he simply states.

It was a bold move. To open yet another Mexican restaurant in Texas seemed an insane proposition, and the banks told him as much. Only an "idiot" would attempt it, he once remarked, with his characteristic self-deprecating humor.

However, everything worked out well. Recently, a San Antonio publication called Mamacita's "the mother of all Mexican Restaurants." Success with the first Mexican restaurant venture led to expansion. Eventually, the chain grew to include five Texas locations. And here's where the "melting pot" element of the story comes back into play. One of the restaurants is located in Fredericksburg, a city that arose from a 19th-century influx of adventurous German-American settlers. "People tell me that it's amazing that an Iranian immigrant can open a Mexican restaurant in a German community that's located in Texas," says Hagi. "It amazes me, too."

Today, Mamacita's other restaurants are located in Kerrville, San Marcos, San Antonio and New Braunfels.

UNIQUE OFFERINGS

Obviously, it takes more than a simple wish to make a go of a Mexican restaurant in Texas. This the perceptive Hagi understood quite well. He knew he had to differentiate his menu in some substantial way – yet, at the same time, he realized his offerings needed to satisfy the basic craving of Mexican food aficionados. It was a fine line to tread, but Hagi proved an adept tightrope walker.

As such the Mamacita's menu includes Mexican-food favorites such as nachos, chalupas, fajitas, quesadillas, tacos and enchiladas. "But we also offer dishes that don't even exist in restaurants that offer traditional Mexican food or Tex-Mex cuisine," Hagi reveals.

Coming up with these unique options required a broad leap of imagination. "Even in Texas, there are so many different versions of Mexican and Tex-Mex dishes," he points out.

Still, Mamacita's managed to distinguish its fare from the rest of the pack. "For example, we've created a dish called Guisado Monterrey that you will not see on the menu of any other Texas Mexican restaurant or even on the table of a Mexican family," says Hagi.

For the record, this unique dish comes in beef or chicken versions, but if you want to you get an idea what it truly is, you'll have to taste it for yourself.

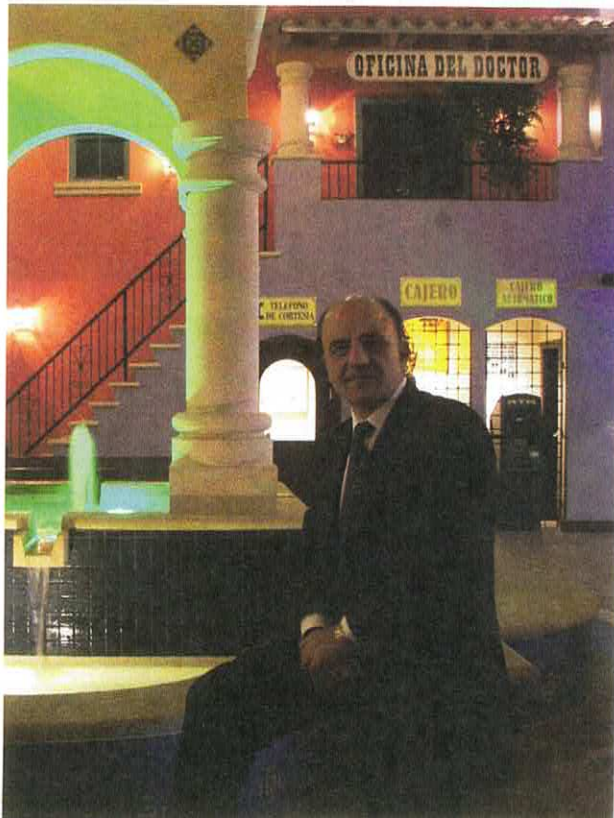
"Further, about 40 percent of our entire menu includes dishes that we created ourselves," adds Hagi. "All you have to do is look at our menu and compare it to other restaurants'. You'll see that we offer items that aren't available anywhere else. Also, we



Pictured above (from top): dining room inside San Antonio Mamacita's; fountain inside San Antonio Mamacita's; replica of the Alamo inside Kerrville Mamacita's.



Pictured above: Mural inside Fredericksburg Mamacita's; left: Hagi (Hossein Hagigholam), founder and owner of Mamacita's Mexican Restaurant.



strongly communicate to our customers that we offer the healthiest Mexican cuisine."

To make that boast possible, Mamacita's uses only the freshest ingredients and it eschews the use of animal fats in its dishes. This conscientiousness extends through every item. "Take our beans, for instance," says Hagi. "Mexican restaurants throughout the world put bacon into their bean preparations. We are the only restaurant that doesn't use bacon."

Also, Mamacita's only uses canola oil in one of its most popular items – tortilla chips – which translates into reduced saturated fats and, in turn, no cholesterol.

"Preparing our food in this fashion takes extra time and diligent care, but we want to take care of our customers," says Hagi. "We think it's worth it and so do our customers. That separates us from the competition."

KEYS TO SUCCESS

That indicates a main focus: customer service. "Many similar restaurants are misdirected when it comes to their business operations," says Hagi. "They focus on costs related to food and labor. But we focus on customer satisfaction. If you take care of that, everything else – including cost and labor issues – will take care of itself."

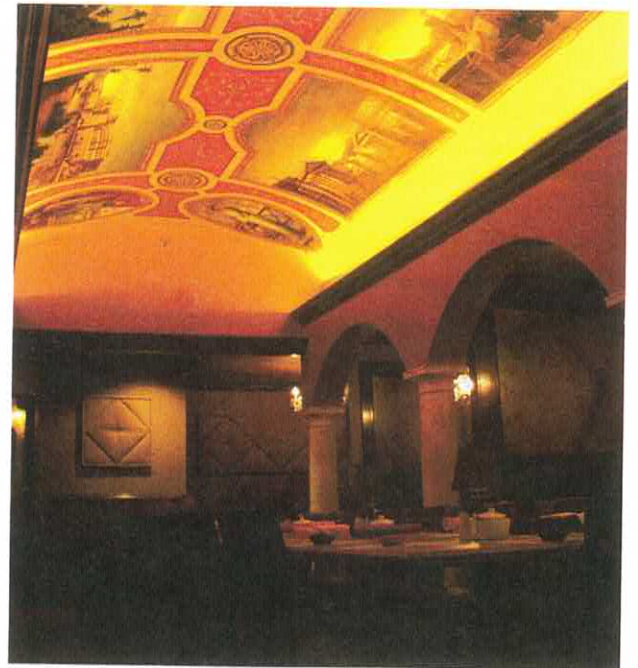
Customer service is but one of five elements that Hagi describes as "the keys to success." The others include food

quality, restaurant atmosphere, and customer service. "Anyone who wants to address those five elements, you're break even. If you get yourself into another business. If you focus on one out of five, you'll never get yourself into another business. If you focus on all five, you'll break even."

With its five local locations, Mamacita's serves as a small chain is so successful. "Companies want to continue working for me (action) and his company. Chains have experienced circumstances. The company each year, and the company's immediate objective is to expand. From there, the company and Dallas.

"We haven't been in the business for 10 years, but you believe in the company. Such as the economy, the company still holds true, no matter how hard you can come from. The American Dream is still very much alive. The American Dream is still very much alive."

Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam, Mamacita's Restaurants chain, is



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quality, restaurant atmosphere, location and reasonable prices. "Anyone who wants to run a successful business will need to address those five elements," he says. "It's a law of life and business. If you focus on all five, you'll succeed. If you focus on four out of five, you'll probably do okay. With three out of five, you're break even. If you'll focus on less than three, you better get yourself into another business."

With its five locations, which include about 500 employees, Mamacita's serves about 40,000 people each week. The small chain is so successful that several national food companies want to buy it. But Hagi isn't selling. He wants to continue working for himself (again, the American Dream in action) and his company remains solid while other restaurant chains have experienced trouble during the recent economic circumstances. The five locations bring in about \$20 million each year, and the company has a five-year growth plan. The immediate objective is to open a restaurant in Austin, Texas. From there, the company seeks to establish locations in Houston and Dallas.

"We haven't been impacted by the recession," reveals Hagi. "If you believe in the 'dream,' you can circumvent the negatives, such as the economy. The great thing about this country - and it still holds true, no matter what anyone might tell you - is that you can come from anywhere and, if you are willing to work hard, you can make it. Despite what you read in the news, this country is still very accepting of different cultures and attitudes. The American Dream still exists."

Hossein "Hagi" Hagigholam, and his Mamacita's Mexican Restaurants chain, is proof positive. ●

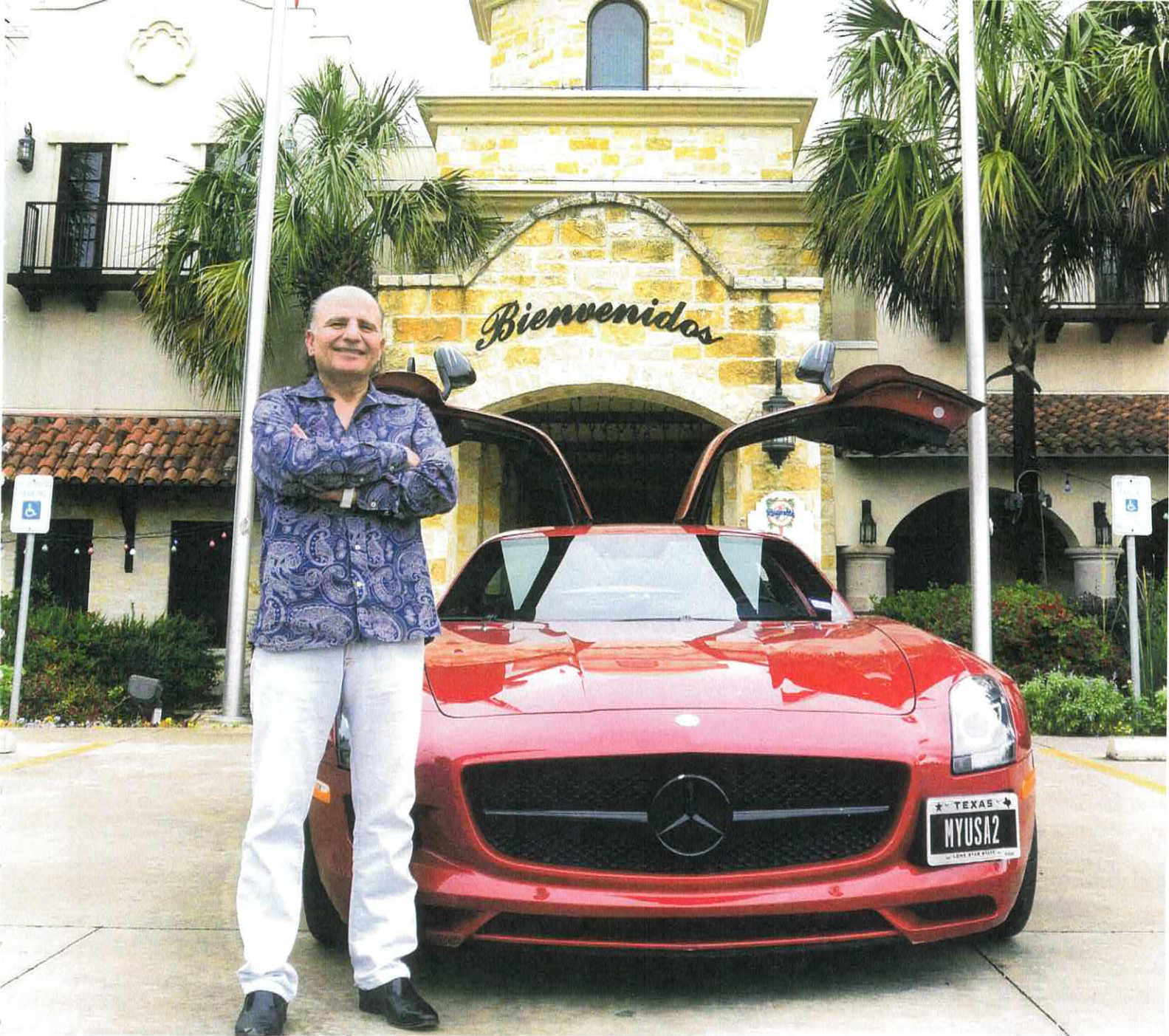
Pictured above (from top): Fredericksburg Mamacita's;
crystal chandelier in main entrance;
private dining room in Mamacita's Kerville.

Hossein 'Hagi' Hagigholam

Living the American dream

Photo and Story by Parastoo Nikravesh

- 1.** Hagi moved to the United States from Tehran, Iran in 1976. He originally moved to Houston but in an effort to surround himself with more native English speakers, to learn the language quickly, he came to Schreiner University in Kerrville where there were fewer Iranian students.
- 2.** His first job was as a dishwasher at a restaurant called Grandma's House. He worked his way up from dishwasher to busser and eventually up to a server. He worked at several other restaurants and at one point worked breakfasts in Kerrville, lunchtime in Boerne and dinner in San Antonio.
- 3.** At 24 he opened his own place called Burger Island, a small burger place in a shopping center. Although many said it was an achievement, he felt that he could do more.
- 4.** Hagi's work partner, Tom Myers, has been by his side for almost 30 years and said, "Someone said, 'If partnership was good, God would have a partner.' But in my case I think he made it different."
- 5.** Hagi knew the Mexican food business after working at several restaurants and saw that Texans loved it. He decided to open his own Mexican restaurant and that launched Mamacita's in the Hill Country. He opened the first Mamacita's in Kerrville in 1985. Then he opened a Mamacita's in Fredericksburg in '87, in San Marcos in '94, in New Braunfels in '99 and San Antonio in '04.
- 6.** People often ask Hagi how an Iranian can open a Mexican restaurant in a German community and to that he says, "Only in America."
- 7.** Hagi says that although an Iranian restaurant isn't likely in his future, he does have a passion for Italian food and has dreamed of opening an Italian restaurant one day. He says he could still do it.
- 8.** He has two kids: Roya and Nick. Roya is his first child and she works in Austin, and his son, Nick, is the youngest, now finishing high school. Roya's name is Iranian meaning "dream" and his son's name, Nick, is an American and Iranian name which in Iran has the historical meaning of "good." He and his wife, Ruth, will be married for 40 years next year. They have two pets, a cat named Spade and a dog named Molly.
- 9.** Hagi travels often and tries to visit his hometown of Tehran at least twice a year. His favorite things to do in Iran are relax, enjoy the cuisine and be surrounded by family. Most of his family still lives there except a brother who lives in California.
- 10.** Hagi loves movies, especially Westerns. Although he doesn't have a favorite movie, his favorite action actor is Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tom Hanks is his favorite dramatic actor.
- 11.** A restaurateur and food lover, he says his favorite food overall is seafood, but he has a fondness for Italian and Chinese food as well. His favorite Iranian dish is ghormeh sabzi, an Iranian herb stew served with saffron rice.
- 12.** The longtime sports fan says, if he wasn't running Mamacita's, his dream career would be professional sports gambling. He enjoys betting on games to make them more interesting (but not



too much money, he said laughing) and although he says his favorite team is whoever he is betting on that night, his all time-favorite athlete is Michael Jordan.

13. His top three favorite sports are soccer, basketball and football and soccer. If there is a game in the Middle East for the World Cup or Asian Cup, he will wake up at 2 a.m., due to the eight-hour time difference, to watch it on satellite TV.

14. He has lived in Kerrville since 1977. When asked what he likes about Kerrville, he said people are lucky to live here because it is just five minutes to go anywhere, be it the grocery store, gym, library or park. Everything is close and he loves

living somewhere without traffic compared to Houston, Tehran or San Antonio.

15. Another hobby of Hagi's is car collecting. He says having a lot of cars is a headache and that he has had many cars that weren't keepers, but feels that the eight he has now are good to stay. Some of his cars include the 2005 Ford GT, 1971 Convertible Mercedes, a Rolls Royce and a BMW I8. You can spot any of his cars by their license plate which are MYUSA1 or MYUSA2 and so on. He has all the numbers until 15 reserved with the intention of future use. MYUSA, he explained, is to show is his pride of living in this country.

"People here, they say, 'How could an Iranian come to the United States and build a Mexican restaurant in a German community and make it?' My answer to that is, 'Only in America, of course.'"

HOSSEIN "HAGI" HAGIGHOLAM



Despite many early challenges as an Iranian entering the foodservice industry in 1976, Hossein Hagigholam worked his way up the ladder and today owns Mamacita's Mexican Restaurant, a successful chain of restaurants in Texas.

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MEXICAN RESTAURANT

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HQ: KERRVILLE, TEXAS

EMPLOYEES: 450

SPECIALTY: TEX-MEX CUISINE

HOSSEIN "HAGI" HAGIGHOLAM,

OWNER: "WHOEVER DOESN'T

MAKE IT IN THIS COUNTRY,

IT IS THEIR OWN

FAULT."

Oh Mama!

Mamacita's Mexican Restaurant's founder tells the story of an immigrant dishwasher turned franchise owner. BY KATHRYN JONES

KNOWN TO MOST AS SIMPLY "HAGI," HOSSEIN HAGIGHOLAM LEFT Iran for the United States in 1976 with a dream to make it big in the land of opportunity.

His initial plan was to study civil engineering. But, as fate should have it, he now owns and operates Mamacita's Mexican Restaurant in Kerrville, Texas, with four other locations in Fredericksburg, New Braunfels, San Marcos and San Antonio, Texas. The smallest location seats 250 people and the largest seats 400 people.

In an interview with *Food and Drink*, Hagi reveals how he transitioned from a lonely dishwasher who could barely speak English to a successful entrepreneur with plans to turn his Tex-Mex restaurant into a nationally recognized franchise.

The ride has not been an easy one, he adds, but with a little faith and hard work, dreams really can come true.

FOOD AND DRINK: What brought you to the United States?

HOSSEIN HAGIGHOLAM: From the time I was a boy, I wanted to come to America. Before the revolution in Iran, lots of Iranians came to the United States to become engineers and doctors, and then they went back home.

Without any knowledge of English, my first place to go was Houston. There was a school for English as a second language called ESL Houston.

If there were 40 students, 35 of them were Iranians, so the teachers learned how to speak our language instead of us learning English.

I knew in order to make it in the United States I had to learn

the language, so I researched which college in Texas had less Iranians. Shreiner College had only one Iranian student, so that's how I ended up in Kerrville. While I studied, I found a job in the restaurants.

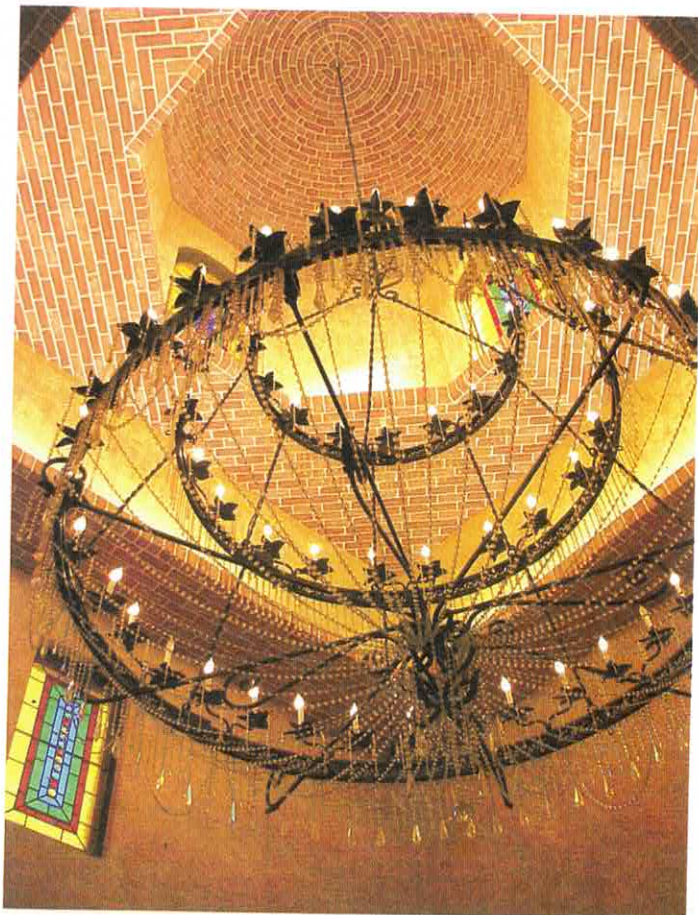
If you are a foreigner and don't know any English, the only job you have is washing dishes. I later became a bus boy and then a waiter.

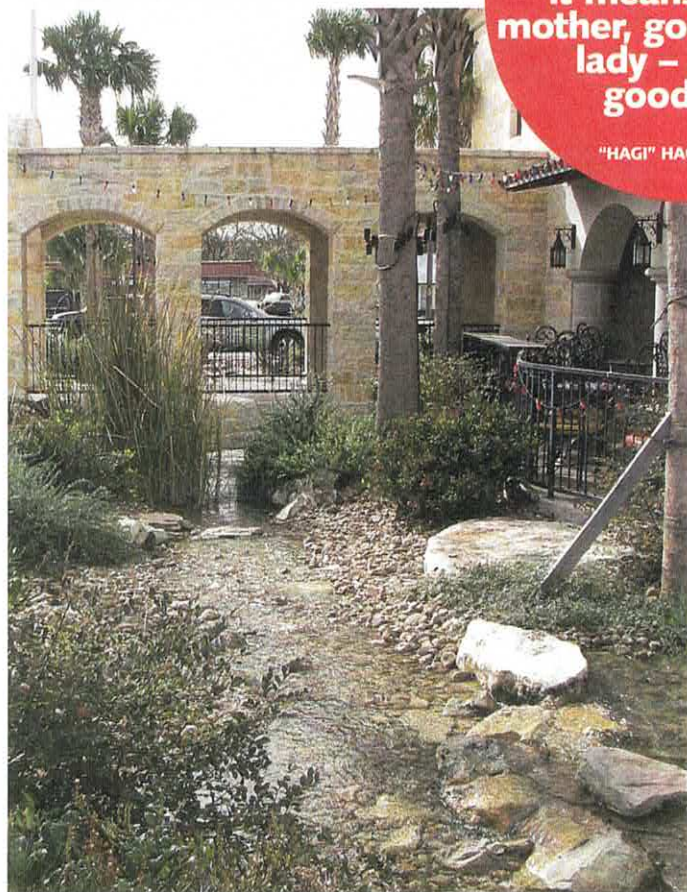
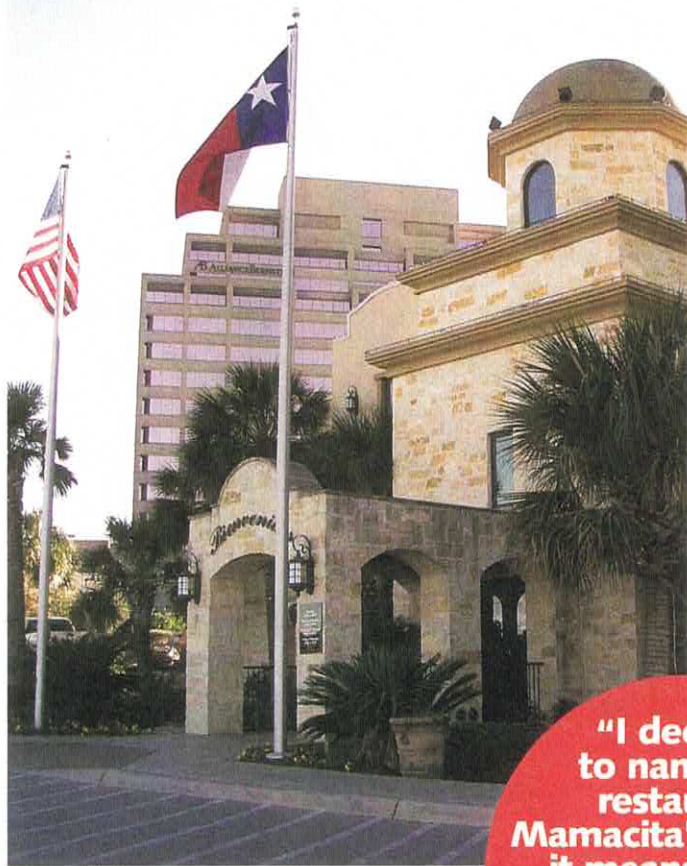
As a waiter, that's when you really make it big. I was so happy about how much money I was making as a waiter that I took three jobs: the breakfast shift in one restaurant, the lunch shift in another and the dinner shift in the third.

I remember one time a customer asked me if we took Visa, and I thought they were asking me if I had a visa. I thought I was in trouble somehow, so I ran home as fast as I could.

My manager called me the next day and asked, "What happened?" I said, "Someone wanted me to show him my visa." He said, "No, you idiot! They were asking you if we accept Visa - the credit card."

FAD: I can see how you would feel anxious about that. In 1979, ▶





"I decided to name the restaurant Mamacita's because it means grandmother, good-looking lady – all the goodies."

"HAGI" HAGIGHOLAM

► American hostages were taken at the embassy in Tehran and President Jimmy Carter called for all Iranian students in the U.S. whose visas had expired to leave the country by the spring of 1980. You must have been devastated.

HH: The world just shattered on me, because now I had to go back. I had learned English, started earning money and I was dating Ruth.

The only way I could stay in the country was if she married me, and she wouldn't marry me. She said, "Look, I'm 20 and you're 21. We're young and you come from another country and my parents won't let me."

I finally talked Ruth into marrying me. You talk about begging! Her parents gave their permission because of the difficult situation, but it was on the condition that we live apart for six months.

I tell people I really got married for the green card, but we're still married after 25 years and we adopted two wonderful children. I think that says a lot.

FAD: Is it true you named the restaurant after Ruth?

HH: She is Spanish and I used to call her "Mamacita" when I was a waiter. I decided to name the restaurant Mamacita's because it means grandmother, good-looking lady – all the goodies.

FAD: In 1985, you and a business partner opened the first Mamacita's in Kerrville. Was it challenging to get it off the ground?

HH: Not really. We opened the second restaurant in Fredericksburg in 1988, followed by one in San Marcos in 1996, and then the biggest location, which is in San Antonio, in 2003.

And then, in 2005, we tore our original restaurant down and built a new restaurant. If there were a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for most expensive restaurant ever built per capita, it would be this restaurant, because we spent \$10 million in a city with a population of only 25,000 people.

It is very tough to make money when you open a \$10 million restaurant, but because of our confidence and if you treat people the way you want to be treated, anything can work. In fact, Kerrville is a German town. People say, "How could an Iranian come to the United States and build a Mexican restaurant in a German community and make it?" My answer to that is, "Only in America, of course."

FAD: Can you share some tips in how to go about running a successful restaurant?

HH: If a restaurant has five elements, the owner will hit the jackpot in this business. If he has four out of five, he will make a living out of it. And if he has less than that, it is better not to mess with the restaurant business.

These elements are quality, service, location, atmosphere and reasonable prices.

Of course quality and service are always important, but I wanted to give an atmosphere that not every casual restaurant can do. In our Kerrville location, we have a third of the actual size of the Alamo inside of our restaurant.

A mechanical Davy Crockett sits on top of the roof that plays

the music like the movie "Alamo." Also, in our San Antonio location, we created a village that makes you feel like you are outside even though you are inside. It has fiber-optic stars and village shops and bakeries in it.

FAD: Having worked in restaurants when you were in college, would you say that makes you a more empathetic boss?

HH: Many casual restaurants have just one general manager that takes care of the quality of food and the service.

When I used to work in the bottom line myself, I found that it was difficult to put all of this work on the shoulder of one person and expect him to control costs and increase sales.

So, this is why each of our locations has two general managers - one for back of house and one for front of house. We also took away any administrative work for them. Each of our locations has at least six managers.

This is what makes us different. I believe in spending money to make money when it comes to [hiring good employees.] We have a good 4 percent budgeted to training at all times.

We talk to them about the golden rule [of the restaurant business.] If you treat someone the way you want to be treated, it will increase the sales.

FAD: What is Mamacita's perspective on providing customers with exceptional service?

HH: All of our customers can testify that no customer can walk out unless a manager has visited their table. We believe if a customer is unhappy, they will tell us when they leave.

Usually, if they are unhappy, they don't say anything and just don't come back.

But by having a manager shake hands and talk to them, they will feel comfortable enough to tell us what we did wrong.

We appreciate the compliments, but what we really want to hear is if there are any complaints.

I tell my management that when people go out to eat, they are in a good mood.

You never see a husband tell his wife, "Let's go out to eat," and the wife gets upset about it. Everybody is happy when they go out to eat, and if they choose your restaurant, you should feel honored. So, do whatever it takes to please them. They like attention.

You know, lots of Middle Eastern people that have businesses complain because they say we lost business because of the 9/11 terrorist action.

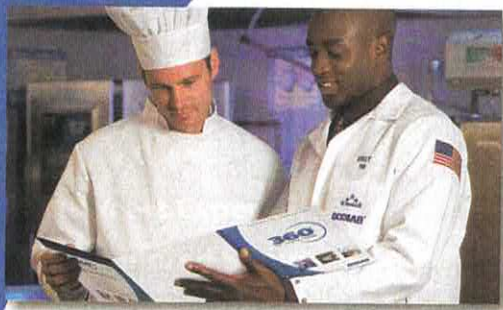
I disagree on that because my business has been doing well and I think it is because of how we treat people.

I make a lot of speeches about America, the land of opportunity. What I always emphasize at the end is this: Whoever doesn't make it in this country, it is their own fault. I am one of those guys that really appreciate the country for what it has done for me.

FAD: What's next for Mamacita's?

HH: We would like to open locations in Austin, Houston and Dallas in the near future. We'll do it one at a time. I don't open a restaurant until I have its general managers ready. I have no plan after that yet. You never know.

Maybe a successful, nationally recognized chain will discover us and we could make a deal to take this nationwide. ☺



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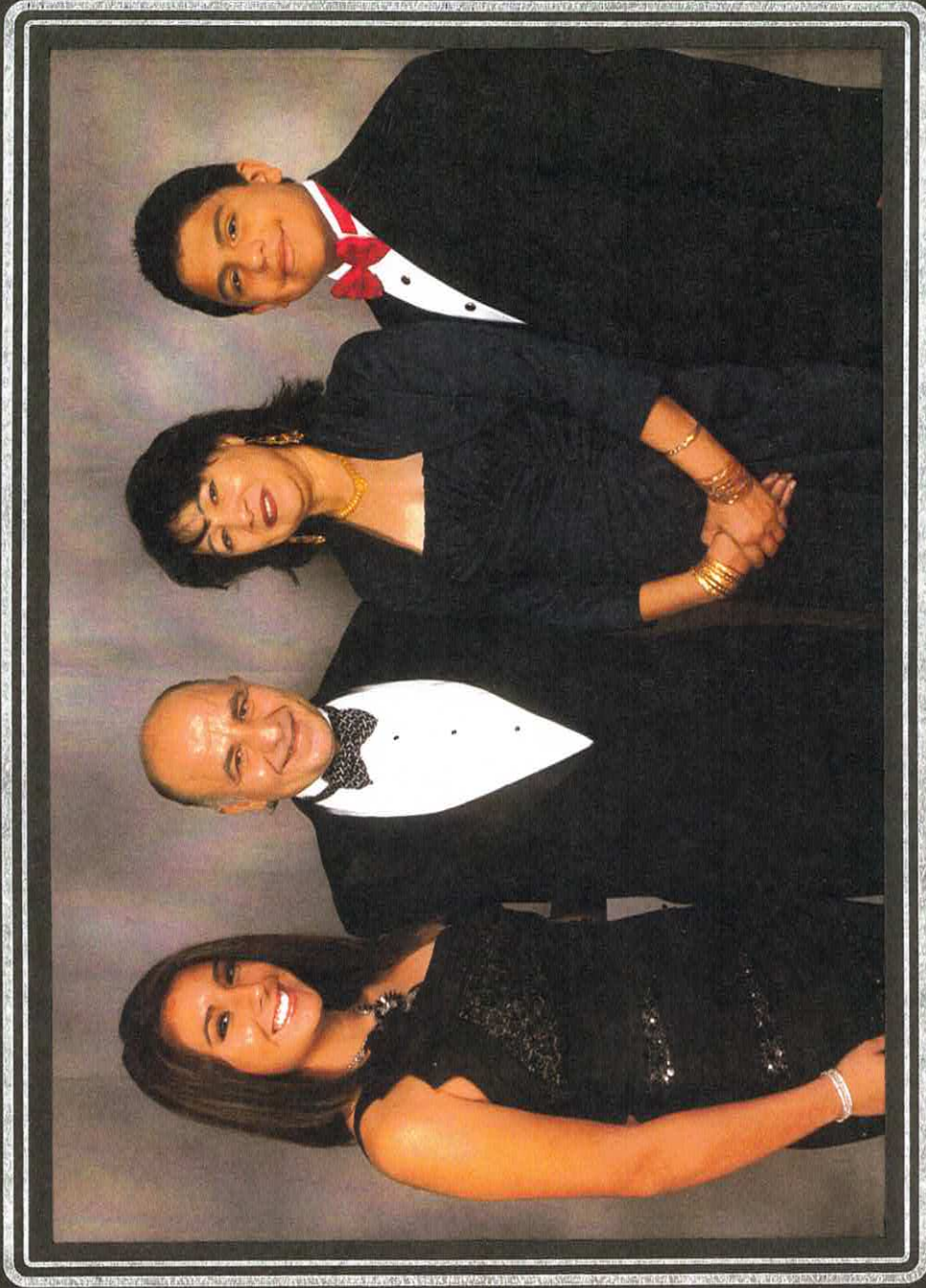


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