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Chef Chat

Antigua Latin Restaurant mixes local with Latin



Chef Nicolas Ramos is co-owner of Antigua Latin Restaurant in West Allis.

By Kristine M. Kierzek, Special to the Journal Sentinel

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Nicolas Ramos may be the chef in his restaurant, but he considers his wife the brains behind the business.

Following a path set by his wife, Citlali Mendiota-Ramos, and her family, the couple opened [Antigua Latin Restaurant](#) at 5823 W. Burnham Ave.

Though the couple's culinary journey began in central Mexico, their cooking influences cover regions and flavors from throughout Latin America. Typically the menu includes dishes from seven to 10 countries, while Ramos consciously crafts menus to reflect the seasons. Local ingredients are used whenever possible, from the cucumber, rhubarb or cantaloupe flavoring margaritas and mojitos to corn and local varieties of peppers.

Through May, Antigua will offer monthly hands-on cooking classes led by Ramos, including cooking with spirits, salsas, tailgating and paella. For information, go to [antiguamilwaukee.com](#)

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Ramos and his wife live in West Allis with their children, Nicole and José.

Q. What got you started cooking?

A. I am from a central part of Mexico. I lived in Mexico for the first 18 years of my life. I've lived in Wisconsin for 16 years. I got married about 13 years ago. My wife grew up in the restaurant business. Her parents, they were in the industry. Her grandma was in the business, too. She grew up in the business, so I married into the business. We decided to open the restaurant.

We give it 100%. It has been our lives for about eight years. I did cooking and going to classes and experimenting with different ingredients to get a feel for how to cook with new ingredients. Also, my wife is a big inspiration. My wife's family is also from central Mexico. Her dad owned at least four restaurants.

Q. Did you cook at home in Mexico?

A. No. This is what is funny. I remember my grandma making mole. I'm the youngest of five, so usually my sisters would cook for me.

Q. You co-own the restaurant with your wife. How do you balance your roles?

A. She's the brains behind the operation. She has a master's degree in business from Alverno. ... I'm more involved in preparation of menus and getting our ingredients from local sources.

Q. Who are your mentors and inspiration?

A. My mother-in-law, she is my first mentor. But I'm also a very curious person, looking for new ideas and techniques.

I'm now in the (culinary management) program at MATC. I'm getting really inspired by what is going on here. There are great talents and chefs in Milwaukee. Somebody I talk to for inspiration is chef Peter Gebauer.

Q. What defines your approach?

A. We always try to use local ingredients. It can be a challenge for us. It can be difficult to get mangoes in the middle of winter, or a good guava. There is no way I can get a Key lime from Beloit or avocado from Cedarburg, but that doesn't stop us from doing good things. We try to take a different approach to pairing local ingredients with Latin American ingredients.

Q. Your menu covers various areas of Latin America?

A. There are a lot of things to cover in Latin America, all very different from each other. In Mexico, we were conquered by Spaniards, but in Spain there is influence from Arabs and the Morocco culture. There is a lot of fusion between cuisines. In Mexico and Central America we get more of the Spanish culture. Go south, you get Italians in Argentina. In Peru you get a lot of Japanese influence. There's also a big African influence in Caribbean communities. We try to take different dishes from those parts and use local ingredients from Wisconsin.

Q. How has interest and awareness of Latin American regions changed?

A. TV shows are a big influence. The Internet has been a big factor in awareness. Now people know what is more regional and not.

You can tell when you talk to my customers. "I'm so happy you don't sell burritos!" I've come across a lot of people who ask, "How come when I went to Mexico they don't make burritos?" Well, we don't have those in some areas. Maybe in the northern areas, but not as much as here.

Q. Tell me about the classes you offer.

A. We do have classes during the fall and winter. We also offer classes for big companies — like team building for Harley-Davidson and General Electric. These are all hands-on classes, 10 to 14 people. We set up a station for each individual.

Q. Tell me about your drinks. You've embraced some unique flavors over the years?

A. We have a Mojito Madness festival in August. We go crazy with creativity. We do a cucumber mojito made with local cucumbers. Earlier in the season, we'll have a hibiscus margarita. We're going to prepare one with rhubarb from an organic farm in West Bend. We've also done a watermelon mojito, cantaloupe mojito. We've used guava.

When I was younger in Mexico, we had a pomegranate tree at our house. I wouldn't ever have believed I would be all the way in Wisconsin making pomegranate margaritas.

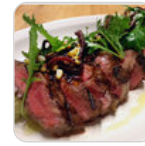
Q. How many different kinds of chiles do you work with?



Carrot Pistachio Pesto with Quinoa and Chickpeas



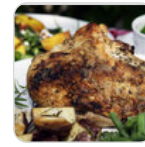
Sandy D'Amato's Steak & Potatoes



Peach, Arugula and Goat Cheese Salad



Rosemary Chicken Basted with Garlic and Butter



Panna Cotta



Fool's Gold Loaf



- Sunflower Seed Oatmeal Cookies

WHAT'S NO. 5?

Our list starts with:

1. Mac 'n' cheese
2. Grilled cheese sandwich
3. Cheese soup (especially the beer variety)
4. Pizza

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What's no. 5 on your list of ways you love cheese?

- Melted on a cheeseburger
- Fondue
- Cheesy dip (nacho or other)
- Assorted-cheese platter
- Cheese soufflé

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A. Right now, in my pantry I have about seven kinds. But it all depends on the time of year. I really like a lot of local ingredients, so at the end of July, August and September we get a lot of good peppers from Wisconsin. We get one called Mayan pepper, very similar to habaneros.

Q. What are your comfort foods?

A. We hardly ever cook at home. We're mostly at the restaurant, but at home I have pickled jalapeños. I often make a nice sandwich and use my own pickled jalapeños.

I like to cook a mole, not too spicy. It is something to do with my kids that will take time. The kids help me prepare the ingredients.

Q. How do the kids help in the kitchen?

A. I have a 5-year-old, Nicole, and a 12-year-old, José. My oldest is learning to use the knife. I'm teaching him the right techniques. The first thing is how to dice an onion, a pepper or tomato. My youngest helps clean peppers, seed them. Of course, she has to wear her gloves.

Q. You have gift baskets with salsas. Do you can your own salsas?

A. We've been canning our salsas for more than a year, and my family does the gift baskets. This year we decided to do different salsas: a tomatillo/salsa verde, a traditional salsa made with signature spices and a spicy one called Diabla.

Q. What's next?

A. Making our own margarita mix. We're going to try to take a more natural approach to a margarita mix.

We'd like to go to Brazil and visit more Central American countries.

I would like to have a greenhouse across the street. We have a lot of plans. Burnham Point Neighborhood and Business Association, that association has been alive for about three years; in conjunction with the community, we're trying to change the image of the area.

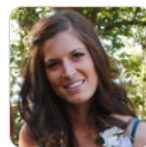
Q. What are the must-haves in your kitchen?

A. Of course, the tortilla maker and press. A good knife is a must.

We do make our own masa (dough). This year we're going to take another step and start looking for a new local provider of cornmeal flour. We're looking at farmers in Wisconsin.

Q. What class is most popular?

A. Paella. Making paella is really simple. I think the stories surrounding how to make paella are more than what it really is.... You don't necessarily need a paella pan to make good paella. You need good rice. Paella is all about timing.



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