



## ***The History of La Familia Cortez***

### **Culture, Cuisine, Community and Family Combine to Make American Dream Come True**

#### ***75 Years of Familia, Comida y Cultura***

A treasure of sights, sounds and smells, Mi Tierra Café y Panadería is a beacon in San Antonio's Historic Market Square, its "We Never Close" sign lighting the way and welcoming hungry guests to enjoy its famous food, fabulous margaritas and unparalleled ambiance any time of day. As familiar to San Antonio as The Alamo and River Walk, the cornerstone restaurant of La Familia Cortez Restaurants has been serving its loyal guests and newcomers alike for 75 years.

But few who know the restaurant and its sister properties La Margarita Restaurant & Oyster Bar, Restaurante Pico de Gallo and Viva Villa Taquería would recognize the roots of the restaurant that today fills almost an entire city block in Historic Market Square. The 578-seat restaurant that hums with activity 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and its bustling sister properties all started with the dreams of founder and family patriarch Pedro Cortez, \$150 and a quaint three-table café sitting in an abandoned market area.

#### **A Humble Start**

The restaurants of La Familia Cortez are where both San Antonians and tourists go to celebrate with family and friends. It's a family tradition for many, fitting for a company that started with family and continues today with second, third and fourth generations working together to follow Pedro's vision and further build the dream.

Pedro's mother died when he was two, making his childhood difficult. His father thought that San Antonio would be good for him, so Pedro moved to the city from his hometown of Guadalajara, Mexico, in the early 1930s. The young mechanic moved in with his aunt and uncle, Valentin Larios and Justina Cortez, who gave him a job as a butcher at Villa del Carmen, their small grocery on Frio Street where Pedro learned how to buy, process and sell meats. He came to know the city by making deliveries to customers and enjoyed the bustling Market Square area. He met a charming San Antonio girl, Cruz Llanes, who lived and worked just a few blocks away from Market Square. They married and together began a journey to fulfill their dreams.

While on a meat delivery in Market Square in 1941, Pedro's entrepreneurial spirit seized the opportunity to turn his dreams into a reality. With \$150, Pedro and Cruz Cortez started their family of restaurants by purchasing the Jamaica No. 5 café, the small, three-table café that started it all. Pedro was 23 and the couple was expecting their first child.

At first, he kept his day job at the grocery store while operating the restaurant, but by 1947 the operation had grown enough that he dedicated himself to it full-time. The country was going through a post-WWII recession, times were tough and many people thought Pedro was crazy for all of the time



and money he was investing into the café. But driven by a mission to give the best service he possibly could to his customers, Pedro was undeterred, even replacing the cigar boxes he used for cash with an actual cash register and adding air conditioning to the café—a true rarity in that time. As economic difficulties forced other businesses to abandon the market area, little Jamaica No. 5 stood strong in Market Square.

### **Building on the Dream**

Looking to grow his business, Pedro quickly responded to a second offer from the landlords of Market Square in 1951. It was then he purchased another restaurant location called Toyo Café, which was a Japanese restaurant formerly known as the “Tokyo Café”, but after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the “k” was dropped due to anti-Japanese sentiment. Pedro changed his new restaurant’s name to Mi Tierra Café.

Mi Tierra’s name is a personal connection to Pedro and his love of his adopted country. Growing up, Pedro was deeply affected by the sacrifices so many had made during the Mexican Revolution, and was especially influenced by the mentality of leading revolutionary, Emiliano Zapata. His famous phrase, “The land belongs to those who work it,” (La Tierra es para quien la trabaja) inspired Pedro to name the restaurant “Mi Tierra”, which meaningfully stands for “my land, my country, my home”. That original 26-by-50-foot restaurant is the heart of Mi Tierra today: its footprint sits where Mi Tierra’s middle dining room is now.

Pedro’s goal was to create a restaurant the Latino community could be proud of. From day one, he kept Mi Tierra’s doors open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to cater to the various needs of the community, including the farmers that rose before the sun, the workers who labored late into the evening and the night owls who partied into the night. At the time, hungry diners could enjoy tacos and Caldo de Res (beef soup) for 25 cents each and coffee for just 5 cents. Neighboring business owners chided him about going broke if he continued to keep his prices so low, but he did it anyway. His mission was to give his guests the opportunity to experience Mi Tierra while indulging in the magic of his wife’s authentic Mexican cuisine at any hour of the day or night.

Four years after opening Mi Tierra, Pedro purchased the property next door and doubled the size of the restaurant, growing it from 60 tables to 120. During this time, he also added a panadería inside Mi Tierra after his cousin Maruca firmly suggested he add one so she no longer had to go to other bakeries for her pan dulces. Flash forward to today and those Mexican sweet treats and an array of other made-from-scratch pastries and candies greet guests in gleaming bakery cases. Delicious pan dulces, pecan pralines and orange peel candies, all hand made entirely from scratch with old-world recipes, colorfully fill the bakery area that serves as the restaurant’s lobby.

While adding the panadería, Pedro decided to take renovations into his own hands, bringing a bobcat onsite to tackle the project. With his machinery, he dug out an entire basement so he could happily have an in-house butcher shop and a space for restaurant storage. To this day, engineers are dumbfounded as to how he was able to accomplish such a huge project by himself and the basement still serves as a home for La Familia Cortez Restaurants’ butcher shop and food commissary.

### **Investing in El Mercado**

Never forgetting the beauty and vibrancy of the San Juan de Dios market in his home of Guadalajara, Pedro had a vision of Market Square’s potential. He believed the market was vital to San Antonio and he was committed to seeing it grow, despite the area falling into disrepair after the local farmers moved to



a new terminal produce market on San Antonio's West Zarzamora Street. When the produce brokers moved away, the emptied El Mercado neighborhood went into recession. As their restaurant defied the odds and flourished, Pedro and Cruz chose to expand their business by purchasing an entire block of Market Square land surrounding Mi Tierra.

While his family and business prospered, Pedro began to question, "What is my life about?" He began to focus on what he should do—what his family could do. With memories of San Juan de Dios in his heart, his vision was to turn Market Square and its surroundings into a cultural zone that would protect the heritage of the old neighborhood. Eager, energetic and full of vision, Pedro became a passionate advocate for the area.

A year later, San Antonio began to prepare for HemisFair '68. This six-month-long international exposition would ultimately welcome more than 6 million visitors to indulge in exhibits from more than 30 countries in celebration of the various ethnic groups which settled in the Western Hemisphere. However, the planning and construction required uprooted businesses and homeowners. As a local business owner, Pedro served on the HemisFair organizing committee with well-known businessman Red McCombs.

The Urban Renewal Agency notified Pedro of its plans to completely tear down and reconstruct the Market Square area. He stubbornly disagreed to lift his roots and move the restaurant. McCombs, a long-time fan of Mi Tierra, knew that El Mercado could not exist without Mi Tierra, and offered to represent Pedro through a number of meetings with the City of San Antonio.

Pedro's strong belief in the need to preserve the roots of San Antonio's Mexican culture influenced him to become an activist to fight for all he had accomplished in El Mercado. He created the slogan "The last frontier of the Mexican way of life in San Antonio," and started a political action committee called Cor-Pac with his neighbor businesses. Together they spoke to numerous politicians as representatives of Market Square. For Pedro, the beauty of this area stemmed from its strong resemblance to his hometown in Mexico through its sights, smells, food, passion, hospitality, art, folklore and music. His perseverance and resilience kept him strong in his fight to preserve the Market Square area. His visionary efforts and hard work proved successful when the city decided to renovate the area instead of demolish it. McCombs was correct: El Mercado could not exist without Mi Tierra and Pedro's passionate advocacy protected the area and allowed Mi Tierra to stay in its home.

HemisFair opened in 1968, taking much of the labor that was available in town. Pedro decided to close down the Jamaica No. 5 Café due to the lack of proper staffing for both restaurants, and brought many of the Jamaica employees over to Mi Tierra. As the restaurant continued to flourish, Pedro continued his community activism and service to San Antonio.

### **Growing the Family and the Family Business**

In 1979, Pedro and Cruz opened La Carreta Mexican Steakhouse in a former restaurant situated two blocks west of Mi Tierra. As his two businesses were growing, he urged his sons to consider opening their own restaurant in Market Square, but they feared a new business so close to Mi Tierra would falter in comparison to the "mother" restaurant.

The sons suggested if their restaurant was to compete they would need a completely new approach. Jorge Cortez traveled Mexico, exploring Monterrey, Laredo and Guadalajara in search of unique and different cuisine to bring to San Antonio. Coming upon a regional specialty that was once only familiar to



vaqueros, butchers and their families, Jorge thought a dish of sizzling skirt-steak served on cast-iron plates would be popular. Although skeptical at first of the now-famous “Sizzling Fajitas”, Pedro was extremely proud to see his sons taking initiative and expanding the family business. In 1981, Jorge created and opened La Margarita Restaurant & Oyster Bar, which is still going strong today.

After Pedro’s passing in 1984, the family worked to stay united as they consoled one another through their grief. Pedro was not only the head of their family businesses, but more importantly the leader of their family. Without him, they were unsure of what direction to go. The family decided to honor its patriarch by continuing to operate the family business and dedicating time to the preservation of the family’s Latino roots. The second generation stepped up to lead the business and further grow the family’s commitment to the San Antonio community, including the growth and redevelopment of downtown’s near west side. Under their leadership, La Familia Cortez Restaurants has supported the renovation and restoration of San Antonio’s Milam Park, the Alameda Theater, Centro de Artes, San Fernando Cathedral, Main Plaza, Casa Navarro, San Pedro Creek and public art projects in the area.

Years after La Margarita’s opening, the family re turned its focus to La Carreta, choosing to renovate and rebrand the restaurant to meet San Antonio’s growing culinary demands. The newly renamed Restaurante Pico de Gallo, located two blocks west of Mi Tierra, quickly became another success story for La Familia Cortez Restaurants, developing into a popular spot for locals and famous for its Parrilladas—assorted charbroiled meats.

### **Third Generation Takes the Reigns**

Although proud of his Mexican heritage, Pedro was also proud to be an American citizen, commenting “I’m an American by choice, not by chance,” something he said so often that it is memorialized on his tombstone. America was the land of opportunities and the place where he turned his dreams into reality.

A self-made man, Pedro always looked for ways to express his gratitude to the community for everything it had done for him, a role that his children and grandchildren have now assumed. Over the last several decades, the Cortez family has not only worked tirelessly to improve Market Square, but also to support the renovation and restoration of a unique district on the west side of San Antonio, the home of many community projects that the family has supported over the years and the unofficial center of Latino culture in San Antonio. Seeking to further contribute to San Antonio’s vibrant urban environment and continued economic development, La Familia Cortez is committed to reinvigorating downtown, particularly the area now designated as “Zona Cultural” by the City of San Antonio and the Texas Commission on the Arts.

The family has also continued to grow Pedro’s culinary legacy, expanding in 2015 with a new fast, casual concept, Viva Villa Taquería. Viva Villa features revolutionary tacos that are traditional, yet modernized, while offering many other tempting dishes reflecting flavors from interior Mexico. The restaurant is housed in a 110-year-old brick building in Historic Market Square and features art and décor that honor the restaurant’s namesake, Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa.

Statistics show that less than 12 percent of family-owned businesses survive the transition from founder to second and third generation, and only 3 percent survive the transition to fourth generation. As La Familia Cortez Restaurants celebrates 75 years of proud service to San Antonio with multiple generations of family members working together, Pedro’s legacy continues to live on through his children, grandchildren and more than 600 loyal team members united to provide the highest quality



food, authentic culture and sincere hospitality while robustly supporting the San Antonio community. For La Familia Cortez Restaurants, its restaurants are far more than food establishments. The new generations pride themselves in being in the business of making memories while keeping their culture alive through family and food. Each time you taste their authentic Mexican dishes, they hope that moment stays with you for years to come and keeps you returning for more.

***About La Familia Cortez Restaurants***

Established in 1941, La Familia Cortez Restaurants proudly provides the highest quality food, authentic culture, sincere hospitality and dedicated community patronage through four restaurants in San Antonio's Historic Market Square area. Mi Tierra Café y Panadería and its adjacent Mariachi Bar, La Margarita Restaurant & Oyster Bar, Restaurante Pico de Gallo and Viva Villa Taquería include more than 600 team members working alongside the second, third and fourth generations of the Cortez family to preserve and grow the traditions, flavors and culture that make San Antonio such a unique and vibrant city. For more information, visit [www.lafamiliacortez.com](http://www.lafamiliacortez.com).

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