

Laura Patricia Ramírez
Tortillería y Taquería Ramírez—Louisville, KY

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[00:00:00]

Gustavo Arellano: What's the day today? Today is February 12. I'm Gustavo Arellano with the Southern Foodways Alliance, and we are here at Tortillería y Taquería Ramírez in Lexington, Kentucky.

Tell me your name his name, and what you do.

[00:00:15]

Laura Patricia Ramírez: My name is Laura Patricia Ramírez and I work here at Taquería—Tortillería y Taquería Ramírez

[00:00:23]

GA: And what is your date of birth?

[00:00:26]

PR: It's the third of December, 1968.

[00:00:30]

GA: And where you born?

[00:00:32]

PR: In Guadalajara, Jalisco.

[00:00:34]

GA: *Tapatía!* [nickname for someone from Guadalajara]

[00:00:35]

PR: Tapatía. One hundred percent (*laughs*)

[00:00:38]

GA: What are your first memories of food at home?

[00:00:42]

PR: Oh, my mom cooked us delicious food all the time. She always tried to make us what we liked the most. Um, tortillas, because [my parents] were villagers, and she made us freshly made tortillas over there—there, in Guadalajara, where we lived.

[00:01:02]

GA: And what other dishes that your mom made did you love? Or also from your aunts, your grandmother.

[00:01:08]

PR: I really liked the tamales that she made us, tamales they called ash tamales, that are from Michoacán. That only have beans inside, or chile. She would make me some delicious albóndigas [meatballs]. And I liked it a lot when she'd make us huevos rancheros for breakfast. And Mexican eggs, too. That's what we loved from her.

[00:01:32]

GA: What was your dad and mom's work?

[00:01:35]

PR: My dad was a mason for a long time, and then he and my mom started — how do they say — their own business selling clothes. And they'd go out to the villages to sell clothes. Now, when we [children] were a little bit older, they would go out daily in the morning from Monday—from Monday to Monday, they'd go out to sell a bit from seven in the morning until four in the afternoon. And that's what they did.

[00:02:06]

GA: And you as a child, you'd helped them?

[00:02:09]

PR: I do. I'd help all the time—well, when I started as a — girl, and when I started “middle school,” I also started. I'd go in the mornings to help [my mom], and return in the evening to study. Because she'd—there are two shifts, in the morning and afternoon. So I was studying in the afternoon. And I liked the business. I've always liked it. I sold jellies. I'd sell everything that my sisters made so I could sell them. To earn money for us.

[00:02:40]

GA: What was it that you liked about business?

[00:02:46]

PR: I liked to carry my own money (*laughs*)—my own money, and my mother was always very—how should I tell you—she tried to teach us that to have something, we had to work. Then, that's what I always liked about her — she told us how to do things so that someday we could do them, and we wouldn't have to depend on anyone.

[00:03:12]

GA: How many siblings do you have?

[00:03:15]

PR: We're nine women—we were nine women and four men. Right now, we're only nine women and three men. One of [my brothers] died, but we are many.

[00:03:29]

GA: And are you the eldest or the “baby” of the family?

[00:03:31]

PR: I'm the “baby.” (*Laughs*). I'm the “baby.” I'm the youngest. Mm-hmm.

[00:03:36]

GA: And which of your sisters or brothers were the first to move to the United States? Or were you the first?

[00:03:45]

PR: Uh, no. I was the first. From my family, I was the first. That is, after me, a brother, then another brother—and a sister. We're the ones who are here on this side. Another part [of the family] is in Tijuana. We're all scrambled around everywhere, but I was the first in my family. From my husband's family, no. They were here before us.

[00:04:13]

GA: What year did he move to the United States?

[00:04:16]

PR: In '85.

[00:04:18]

GA: Why did he move—why did he immigrate?

[00:04:21]

PR: Um, because one of my brothers-in-law—the dad of Naxi [her niece]—he was here. And he brought my husband. We said that we were coming for one year, because my brother-in-law was alone here. And he wanted to be here. And so, we said, “Let's go for one year,” and we didn't go back [to Mexico]. But we didn't go back (laughs). We liked it, and [my husband] started working in the horse [industry]—always working with the horses until we decided to go into business.

[00:04:50]

GA: And when you moved for the first time to the United States, where did you move?

[00:04:54]

PR: We lived in Paris, Kentucky. We lived there one year. After that, we went to Versailles, from Versailles, we returned again to Paris. And then, we returned again to Versailles. And from there, no more—we have not moved, from Versailles.

[00:05:12]

GA: And your husband also began working with horses when he came?

[00:05:15]

PR: He was the one that was working with the horses. He worked with horses. I, for a long time, did not work until I started cleaning houses. First, I'd go one day a week, then two days. Then, I continued taking care of some children. And I lasted, fourteen, fourteen years here in Versailles, cleaning—well, I started by caring for the child, ironing, and then, I started cleaning the house. And I lasted fourteen years here in Versailles on a ranch. Monday to Friday.

[00:05:49]

GA: In those years, were there many Mexicans in Kentucky?

[00:05:52]

PR: No. In the eighties—I remember in '85 or '86, I think that about thirty of us would get together here in Lexington. I remember we'd get together in an apartment. Then, a friend had a trailer. And then, that's where we got together. But we were between thirty and forty people. No, we weren't many, those of us who were here.

[00:06:16]

GA: In those years, where there Mexican restaurants? Or you, as a Mexican, did you try to eat or cook your Mexican food here in Kentucky?

[00:06:25]

PR: Okay, the interesting thing was that there was nothing Mexican. We had nothing. What happened was, my husband once went to Chicago for work. He started to work in horse racing. And he arrived there in Chicago, and *there* was [Mexican] food. So he brought something back. And then, we were going once a month to buy food to have for the whole month. And then, people began to know that we were going (laughs). And we were bringing them stuff, and sold it to them.

Like that because here, especially when we lived in Paris, we'd go all the way to Lexington for errands, but there was nothing. We wouldn't find anything, anything Mexican. I remember that in Kroeger was where occasionally, there was tortillas or something like that. But no—there was nothing. And we started to go to Chicago, and Chicago was from where we'd bring the, tortillas. We started with tortillas, meat. Dried chiles, because here, we couldn't find any. We'd find jalapeños here [in Kentucky], but dry. We could not find anything [Mexican] until he went to Chicago, and from there, that's how we began to bring those products in.

[00:07:37]

GA: You never ate in those years in Tex-Mex restaurants?

[00:07:41]

PR: I ate it. I remember there was—Chichi's. It was there by that time. — yes, but it was not (laughs) nothing, nothing Mexican. The taste was very, very different; the salsa—no. But it was a little bit closer [to Mexican food] to what — what was around the area.

[00:08:02]

GA: To you, why is food so important to the Mexican?

[00:08:10]

PR: Well, because — well, I think that many of us try to eat well because we are all hard-working. So we tried to eat a bit more—so that it makes us remember. Of Mexico. That we may remember the food of our mothers, our families. And I think that's what Mexicans like most about Mexican food. Also, because of the tortilla. Because you—other people go to a restaurant—other restaurants. Say, a Mexican [restaurant], but they don't eat tortillas. To a Tex-Mex [restaurant]. On the other hand, people come to a *Mexican* Mexican restaurant—they eat the tortilla. In the Tex-Mex [restaurant], they give you a flour tortilla. Not all of us are used to a flour tortilla. We are more used to the corn than the flour. So that's why think that—Mexican restaurants are more for us.

[00:09:07]

GA: And in those years—the Mexicans that you knew around the 1980s. All were from Jalisco? Like what other parts of Mexico?

[00:09:15]

PR: No. We met people who were from the state of Mexico. They were from Michoacán. I didn't know anyone from Jalisco. Some from—what's it called? No, neither from Aguascalientes in the '80s either. Those that were here were more from Michoacán, and from the state of Mexico. In those times. In the '80s. I think that those — during the '90s, that's when a lot of people began coming from Zacatecas and Aguascalientes. But from Mexico—from Jalisco, I didn't know many from there — we were basically the only ones that were here. From Jalisco.

[00:10:05]

GA: And in those years, was there a lot of discrimination against Mexicans? Or not so

much? How did the Americans treat y'all?

[00:10:14]

PR: Check this out: no. I, uh, I had great experiences in Paris when we were living in Paris. Because there wasn't much—much discrimination. Was it because we were fewer in numbers? There weren't that many problems. The same when we moved to Versailles. I did not notice much discrimination between us. Now, as I say, when the '90s [came], that's when a little more [discrimination] started. But before? No. The truth of it is I—we had very good luck. We were in Paris—many people helped us because they knew we didn't speak English. They helped us. I had some neighbors that always helped me—she didn't speak Spanish, I didn't speak English. But she was the one who helped me. I'm very grateful to them because she was the one who helped me learn the language. And the plain truth, I didn't feel discrimination. No.

[00:11:12]

GA: Before coming here to Kentucky, did you know of the state, in Mexico?

[00:11:16]

PR: Nothing. (*Laughs*) Nothing. There was nothing—I knew nothing. On his part, he knew there were many horse ranches. But about [Kentucky], I knew nothing. It was very—it was hard for me. I had never left my family. Never—I'd cry, because yes: in I missed them. A ton. Not having any of my family here, it was—and to speak to someone in Spanish, we have to come to Lexington. So it was something hard, but thank God, everything, everything is going well.

[00:11:51]

GA: And in those years, how did Mexicans have parties remember Mexican culture?

Where there weddings or quinceañeras, or baptisms?

[00:12:01]

PR: Rather, they were — at first, they were just get-togethers to make friends. Then, the birthdays. Later on, we started with Christmas. We also started celebrating Thanksgiving. Later on were the quinceañeras—yes, the quinceañeras. The First Communions. We started to have someone, let's say, someone who'd give us the Catholic Mass in Spanish. All of us here would go, I think, there were 40 of us—I think thirty, forty—we'd go all the way to Springfield, Kentucky to hear a Mass in Spanish. And just once a month. It was like, like us — but if there were more parties, if it was—birthdays, or get-togethers.

It was a beautiful thing, because in those days, we all got together and there was no — how should I tell you? Rancor—things like that. All of us—we'd all get together very beautifully. I vividly remember one Christmas we were together, yes. The men said they were going to make a pit-fire barbecue. They got so drunk (Laughs) that the barbecue went to waste. That's how we had to—we ended up with pizza. Eating pizza for Christmas. But it was very—before, it was wonderful. Right now, it's a little different. But before, it was very wonderful to get together—we'd get together here in Carnival Park so the children could play. And then we'd go to Versailles, so the adults could play soccer. Because in those times, there weren't—they were few. They playing against some men from—they were Irish, those who were here. And that's how we started to make relationship [with Americans], so we could go play. But everything was very beautiful back then.

[00:13:59]

GA: And what do you remember about those soccer games? Did y'all have a taco cart there, or someone selling food so people could enjoy the game?

[00:14:08]

PR: Um, we started [to sell food], yes. We started to take—say, popcorn, or things like that. We began to make, make food so that everyone could take something so that we'd keep ourselves entertained. So after the game, they'd stay around— a while, an activity apart from the game. And yes: that was how we got together. We'd eat—someone would bring a—daily, we'd agree that one woman bring one thing, another woman another, and that's how we'd entertain ourselves.

[00:14:37]

GA: What was the first market or restaurant you remember that opened here in Lexington?

[00:14:46]

PR: The simple truth — um, the restaurant, I do not remember very well. But I think that there was here, a year before I opened, I believe that La Única sold [products]. Then, we opened the restaurant in Versailles. We had a restaurant that was Tex-Mex. That one definitely wasn't Mexican. And then, that's when it started—a man also came that would come, I remember that he was from San Pancho, the taquería—Taquería San Pancho. They sold—they'd come and they'd sell, but in a produce truck. Then, like I said, La Única opened. Then, we opened. Then, La Favorita opened. And that's when it started to grow more—the Hispanic market.

Then, we opened the other restaurant, that was called Amigos, here in Lexington. And then we opened the tortillería, and then in 2000? I think it was in 2000 when we opened the taquería here. It was when we started to—see more Hispanics, yes.

[00:16:01]

GA: Tell me more about your first restaurant in Versailles. What was the name of that restaurant?

[00:16:07]

Okay, the restaurant was called Amigos. And the name—my husband worked at the ranch of Three Chimneys Farms. And everyone was calling him, “amigo.” And “amigo.” And then, when he said “Let's open a restaurant, but I don't know what to call it.” That's when all the girls, everyone told him, “Why don't you call it Amigos?” He said, “Good idea.” That's what we called it. The idea began—he always wanted to make a business. My employers that I had—they always told me, “You have to do something for you. We love you very much, but you should do”—let's say—“You work for us, but you always have to do something for you.” And when he said, “We're going to open a, a restaurant,” I was a little bit scared because—I had two young children. I was pregnant with my third child And I said, “How are we going to do it?”

But no. We opened in '97. We opened the restaurant. We opened December 12—May 12. No, I'm sorry: May 7. On May 12, I gave birth. I had my boy. And when I left the hospital, when I returned, this, I saw that the restaurant had *a lot* of people. I put my child below the counter, and I got to work, because it was crazy. That's why we opened it;

some nieces of my husband—they began to help. They told him, “Look, we’ll work,” because at that time there was—as I said, a—it was Tex-Mex. And they told him, “We worked there. Let’s start it. “

And they helped us. And, let me tell you, I had a very good response from the whole community of Versailles. They loved it, but it was the “chips.” It was, let’s say, the burritos, which, they were the ones [popular in the United States], with the salsa on top. The fajitas. That’s how everything—started. And we were very good, thank God, very good clientele. Until that — I then had three restaurants—I had four. And then, six more restaurants came to Versailles. The restaurant was not—[Versailles] wasn’t big enough for so many. Then, I was affected me a little bit because [my restaurant] wasn’t very visible. I didn’t have much parking. Then, business started falling.. But I noticed that it was going good for me here [at Taquería y Tortillería Ramírez]. So then I said, “I have to close over there to take care of matters here.” To be able to be here—because I was not here. Then, it really wasn’t good what was happening. So I said, “Better to close over there [in Versailles], and I’ll come here to pay attention.”

But — was very nice, everything. Different — we’d hang Mexican dresses and everything, everything to make it look a little more Mexican. What people loved was—the salsa. They knew when I made it because they liked more, I don’t know why. Later, later they tell me, they told me, “This is the salsa that you made, Patty.” Yes. And they liked it a lot that I’d make them tomatillo salsa. Spicy salsa. And so, that’s when they began to eat the—*real* spicy salsa, right? And, yes—we had 14 years there. There, in the

restaurant in Versailles.

[00:19:29]

GA: How did you learn to make Tex-Mex dishes?

[00:19:33]

PR: Um, let me tell you that we learned by going out to eat, how should we put it. We'd go to eat and, we started to notice us the ingredients that [the restaurants] used. And that's how—that is, just by seeing, just by tasting, you know a little bit more what to put. And, also by the help of the family [of her husband], that they already worked in other Tex-Mex [places]. And they'd tell us, "Okay, this dish, let's put in this. Let's put in this. We messed up a lot of food, but we were able to teach ourselves well how to do things—we know how to make, because my husband is the one who cooks, we know how to cook all Tex-Mex. All of it. (*Laughs*)

[00:20:12]

GA: And why in those years did y'all not try to open a restaurant like here, the taquería? Why a Tex-Mex restaurant?

[00:20:20]

PR: Over there [in Versailles]— we wanted to make it more Mexican. But apart from that, we didn't know why there weren't many Mexicans. Then, we didn't know how our restaurant would be received. We put on the menu carne asada tacos, tacos al pastor. We started to introduce tacos over there [in Versailles]. And that when [more Mexican migration] started, because there was many ranches over there. Then, that's when they started to make them, and that's when we said, "Let's open the other one, but we'll make it—*Mexican-Mexican* Mexican. And that's how we were able to—over there, there was

no room. I wanted to open—stay in Versailles, but there was no place where you could have—visibility, so people could see you. That was, let’s say, more people, but have a lot of parking: there aren’t many—many spots there in Versailles to this day, still.

[00:21:15]

GA: And what were the other restaurants that y’all opened?

[00:21:20]

PR: Okay, we opened the next one, called Amigos 2. Then, we opened Tortillería Ramirez. And my husband—he—first, he partnered with someone to open Las Palmas. Upstairs, they started making the food—that is, the restaurant. Then, below it was a “nightclub.” And then, the man lasted less than a year, and he didn’t want to continue it. And then, my husband continued it. We continued—continued with the, uh, the nightclub and all that. But we ended up closing it because my husband was sick. It was that, he’d leave at nine in the morning, and wouldn’t return until five, six in the morning. Then, he got sick, and I told him, “Either we close it, or you sell it. Do what you want. But we can’t continue like this”—it was a lot of work for everything. He still worked it for a while — he continued working in the horse industry until 2001, 2002. We already had three restaurants. We already had the children. And it was that—it was a lot. A lot of pressure. That’s why we left the—the other restaurant.

About Amigos 2, we just left it about—exactly three months ago—two months. I closed it in December. We said, “Let’s—focus here. Let’s try to expand a little more. And to relax a—” not relax, because we come daily. But from Paris to—be able to serve the people. As they deserve it, because I have a lot of American clientele right now, and a lot

of Mexican. So, I would like—we would like to better serve over here.

[00:23:06]

GA: What was it about the restaurant business that you liked? Because you said earlier that business delighted you. But what is it about restaurants?

[00:23:15]

PR: Look, I really like interacting with people. That's my passion. Like my parents sold clothes, they were selling clothes, then I was always with people. I like it a lot. About restaurants, it was a bit hard for me because—it was his idea, the idea of the restaurant. And it was difficult for me because I said, “It’s that, it’s not about involving ourselves down, it’s about not being able to succeed.” But we said, “Well, let's do it.”

And maybe that's why. And I like food, because—you can give people—flavor. And, let’s say, that American know that—sometimes, it’s like when they see a woman cook, or they see that a woman makes the food, it’s as if they like it more. So I think that's why I liked more—I stayed with the idea of the restaurant that—they’ve offered me work with Merry Maid, in other things. And like I don’t—I like to see different faces. I like to be able to serve—people. That's what I like.

[00:24:20]

GA: In what year did y’all open the tortillería?

[00:24:23]

PR: We opened the tortillería in—'99. No—'86, the two—in 2000? Before 2000, because my son was born in 2000. In '99. In '99, we opened the tortillería. Well, we open the tortillería; it was just a tortillería. We let a lot of tortillas go to waste. I remember that we

would come—we'd make the tortilla. And, we'd come in the morning. We would make them. They wouldn't sell. People—they still didn't, they didn't know us. No—we had to take off, expand. Sometimes, we had to throw them away because—we'd let them go bad. It took us about three months to teach ourselves *well*—to make tortillas well. We brought the machine from Mexico. A man came one day and told us, “Okay, this is how you do this and that. I'm leaving.” He went, and we were like, “Uh-oh!”

But we opened it, and we later said, “With just a tortillería, won't be able to make it” to pay rent. To pay everything. So we then put in a store. We began running a store, and then afterwards, we said, “No. This is not, this is not working. “And that's when we said, “Okay, let's put in a taquería here, too.” We started with four booths. “And there! That's how we continued it. But it was hard times. In those—in 2000, it was, it was difficult because, let's say—we didn't have that many people. We had to work, and like I told you, I was in the Versailles restaurant. I had to be at Versailles. I had to be here. I had to be in the Lexington restaurant. My husband had to attend to the other. But it was—it was all day. All day. And because I didn't like to have others take care of my children, my children—I'd carry the smallest one. The others, my two other big ones, they—they've always worked with us. The oldest one just left three years ago. The second, he just left in November. But they have always helped me—they have always helped us. So then, if I wasn't with the children, then with the business.

And—like I was saying, that's how continued with the taquería. Because it wouldn't succeed with only a tortillería.

[00:26:57]

GA: Why a tortillería? Why not initially a restaurant? And also, are y'all the only tortillería in these parts?

[00:27:05]

PR: Look, we're the only one here in Ver—here. I don't know because my husband and his brother started it. They started saying, "A tortillería. And a tortillería. "After us, one, two, three tortillerías opened. One was very big. They didn't hit. But the thing was that they put a lot of preservatives—I don't know why what they sold didn't sell better, also in those times. Then, they started splitting the sales—because they sold tortillas much cheaper than us. But we, we—it's about how to cook the corn, stir it. So our tortilla tastes different. Also, when my husband decided on the tortillería, I said, "You're crazy. How are we going to make it with the tortillería? We know nothing!" He says, "We knew nothing about restaurants and look, we continue succeeding." I say, "Well, yes." So that's why, that's why we decided on the tortillería. Because he also, he got into a partnership with a brother. But four months in, the brother also said, "This is not working."

And what I see, most people think that one opens a business, and you get rich overnight. And I tell then, "It's that you have to put in time. A lot of time, a lot of patience to have something." I not going to tell you that—I'm not rich because otherwise, I wouldn't be working. But the little that's succeeding, it's that you say, "You're winning with your sweat. You're winning it by making people happy." So it isn't easy. To open a place, you have to fight for it. One fights it, but if you already have the people, if you make really

good food, you do come out ahead. You do.

[00:28:58]

GA: Explain how you make the tortillas. Where do you get the corn, nixtamal—where?

[00:29:04]

PR: Okay, here we buy the maize locally. The company is called Weisenber[ger] Mills.

[00:29:13]

GA: We just went there.

[00:29:13]

PR: Okay. That's where we buy corn. We bring it. Every week, we buy twelve sacks. We come. We cook it two, twice a week. The corn is cooked. You leave it overnight. The following day, you start taking it out to grind the corn. We mix it with a package of Maseca. We mix it fifty-fifty. For the reason that the tortilla lasts a little because—we tried with just maize, and the tortilla didn't work. So we put it fifty-fifty, and that's how we make the tortilla.

Then, they, they grind it, they mix it. And then, you cook it. And we make tortillas daily. We don't make much. We'll make about—sixty to seventy packs for us. We deliver to another store. On weekends, we make a lot because the parties—no one wants to warm tortillas. You make them—there's a lot of parties, and that's how, how we make the tortilla. But we intended to use another corn, but it didn't turn out well. So that's how Weisenberger is what, what we use.

[00:30:30]

GA: And do you make masa differently for tamales than you do tortillas?

[00:30:35]

PR: Yes. Many people like that masa more short crust, that it may come out with, like, “chunkitos” of corn. But we don’t prepare it. We only sell the masa. We make the tamales with the masa, but I like it a little bit more, more ground up, to sell them. Lot of people ask for the masa more short crust for, for the tamales.

[00:31:01]

GA: In which year did you notice that a lot of Mexicans were moving here to Lexington and the areas around here?

[00:31:08]

PR: I say it was in 2000. In 2000. In 2005, there began to be many. When we opened here, there weren’t many at first, it wasn’t much. And in—soon after, that’s when you started to see more than what we used to see in this area. But now there’s—that is, there began to be, more and more began to be seen. We were going to Wal-Mart, and you’d see more. You’d say, “One, you used to not see so many.” But I think that between 2000 and 2005, that’s when more, more the Hispanics—Hispanic families began coming here.

[00:31:50]

GA: And why do you think so many moved to Louisville—to Kentucky, and specifically to Lexington? Why not places like Chicago, Los Angeles, other areas that have a history of Mexicans there?

[00:32:02]

GA: Ah, I think there were many for—perhaps for the horse industry, that were—that is, they started hearing a lot about, about the horses. Because in reality, in that time, it was almost the only thing that was here for—*everyone* worked in the horse industry. I think

that, that's why they began to hear—let's say, one brother came, and they began to hear about horses. And then, that's how, how it started. That's why, in reality, I think that's why: it's because of the horses that more, more people arrived. There are a lot of people, ah, from Aguascalientes and Zacatecas. There are many people who I have not seen—I *never* thought that there would be *so many* people, but you ask, and it's all people from Aguascalientes and Zacatecas. (*Laughs*)

[00:32:51]

GA: Do you remember the first quinceañera that you went to here?

[00:32:58]

PR: Gosh—it was of a—precisely, it was a girl from the state of Mexico. That's when we went to—where we went to the Mass in Springfield, and there in Springfield was the quinceañera. That's where we went to the party, there. It was very nice. They did give her the Mass in Spanish, because it was—that is, the priest, Father José, he was the one who gave it. But there weren't so many (*laughs*), there weren't so many people like, like there is today, right? But it was, like I told you, the parties were nicer, more—you felt more, more closer. Now—not anymore, but yes: before, everything was more familial. Everything was done like a family, then.

[00:33:50]

GA: Then, when y'all opened the tortilla, why did you—you told your—did you tell your husband, "Okay, now we are going to cook Mexican dishes. It's now time"?

[00:34:01]

PR: Yes—well, he's the one who said, "Let's start." And I told him (*laughs*), "You're

crazy. We won't—we're not going to make it." But yes, let me tell you, thank God he said, "No. We're going to do it."

He started with the recipes. Every time we went to Mexico, we asked, "And what do you put in this? And what does this do?" And they told us. And, yes, we started cooking beef head, which was something different here. We started cooking tongue. Barbacoa. All the strange things that we ate. But we started having a lot of—how can I tell you, a lot of feedback from customers. Because they did—they said, "Oh! That is what tastes like Mexico!" Many people say, "This stuff is just like the stuff in Mexico! Because they heat the tortilla like they do in Mexico." "They said, "They don't heat it in the microwave." So, I don't know if that, that is, the — the way we cook, if that's what the people have liked so much.

And afterwards, [my husband] tells me, "You see? I told you! "And I said," I didn't believe!" I really didn't think—I thought it was crazy. I'd say, "Oh, my God! What are we going to do! And if it doesn't—" But no! The day we opened, we started to open, we took fliers wherever. We'd put in the ad, "It's two-for-one." And yes! It started—just Mexicans. Just Mexicans.

Sometimes, he says, "Let's put chips [on the menu]." I say, "No, because, we are already — what is authentic." And when people come, that's what they ask me. "You don't have chips?" "It's that chips aren't Mexican." They say, "Really?" "No, really." And they have little things that I tell them. "These are chimichangas." I tell them, "That's not, that's not

Mexican. “

So yes—we had a good response—from people. With Mexican food. With the authentic stuff! Authentic, authentic (laughs). Yes. The beef head, as I told you. The tongue, which many people haven’t tasted. But you’d be surprised *how many* Americans likes to eat this food, as well. Because they just don’t come for the burritos, or—no! They come for, authentic. They say, “Give it to me, the way you eat it.” So that’s how—their response has shaken out.

[00:36:26]

GA: Explain to me how you cook beef head.

[00:36:30]

PR: Okay, I can explain it to you, but I can’t give you the recipe (*laughs*). Well, beef head takes a long time. Head takes around five hours. You have to put on low heat, and we put what’s the seasonings—I’ll tell you only one. Salt. Garlic. The head has to be, that is, very clean, and it needs to be cooked for many hours. Because, really, the head doesn’t have—before, when there weren’t any Hispanics, they’d sell you a head, but they sold it full of—everything. With all the flesh, with everything. Nowadays, no, because they know that they can sell the cheek on the side. That is, in parts, the head. But I tell you, the head has to last—four, between four and five hours, depends on, how many we cook. But we put five heads. Five, six heads per hour. And it does lasts for five, six hours—it has to stay. You have to let it cool slightly, and you take out what you have. Because you can’t eat everything. And inside, we take out what’s the brains. Because they still do come with brains. Then—it does take a long time. But it comes out very delicious, too.

[00:37:51]

GA: And you put it in burritos, tacos? How do you offer it?

[00:37:56]

PR: Okay, the people like it in all ways. So we put it in tacos. People eat it in the burritos. Surprise, but in tortas, too. In gorditas. In sopas. And in combo plates. We make the combo plate, which is rice, beans, salad, and beef head. We chop it up—so that it's minced—and that's the—we give the dish tortillas, and people eat it. Tasty, like that. What we also make a lot is chicharrones. And many people like it, but that also takes long. And many Americans eat it. It's the pork skin that comes with meat. But that also takes five hours, and you need to keep it moving, and moving, and moving so it won't stick. But its lard—that is, we make chicharrón for the reason that we can use the lard. We sell it for the tamales. Because a lot people, they like it because it comes with, um, with the grease of chicharrones. In other words, everything just comes undone, and the meat comes off, too. And — and we sell it by the pound for tacos and we sell it in dishes. Like, however the people ask for it.

[00:39:09]

GA: Do you call it *chicharrón prensado* [pressed chicharrón], or what do you call it?

[00:39:12]

No, this is not pressed. There is a pressed chicharrón, but no. This is not pressed chicharrón. This is chicharrón—let's say. Imagine if—if you'd eat bacon that's not skinny. It's like when you put it in soups, so you cook it. It's just cooked. They call it—here, many people call it *longa*. It just has meat and has — the, the *chamorritos* [pork hocks] that is. But many people love it. You can cook it in beans. Many people take it by

the pound because, well, they're cooking their beans. They throw in their, their pieces of chicharrón. So it comes out — the flavor of the lard of the pig, and the meat comes out.

[00:40:02]

GA: What other dishes are popular here?

[00:40:06]

PR: Look, what sells well right now is—lamb consommé. Lamb consommé is also another thing—the consommé takes a long time to cook, the lamb. We cook it—we put it on the stove, and we cook it. Then, we shred it. And—we stew it with red chile, let's say, and it has garbanzos. So, people are used to eating it elsewhere call it consommé, but give them a cup of it. We don't. Us, in a plate. It has its meat. It has its garbanzos. You eat it like a, like a soup, let's say. And we give your tortilla with onion and cilantro. And it sells *a lot*.

The seafood soup, beef soup — all that sells, we sell a lot of it. Beef soup—I don't know maybe, it reminds them of Mom when she'd make it for them. But that's it, those are the soups. The burritos. The burritos right now are selling like crazy. And like I told you, of everything. Tongue burritos are sold. Burritos are sold of—cheek, which is barbacoa, and of beef head. We sell—we sell a lot. Soups and gorditas, too. Because, how we make it. That is, nothing—what we also have a little bit special here is that everything we make here is—as they say, “from scratch.” Because—everything, that is, here we don't buy shredded lettuce. We don't buy chopped onions. We don't—everything, everything we chop ourselves. So it takes time. And to make good food, it needs to take—that is, time to cook it. And time to prepare it. And with care, because if you do it with a bad attitude,

it's as if the food doesn't come out good.

[00:42:01]

GA: It doesn't hit. It doesn't hit.

[00:42:01]

PR: It doesn't hit.

[00:42:02]

GA: When did you start offering birria?

[00:42:05]

PR: Look, we've only offered birria for a bit. We've had it for, say, two months? The birria is another thing. It made from goat. My husband—since we're in Guadalajara, we've always wanted—introduce a little bit more. Because birria is *very* well known in Guadalajara. So he says, "It'll hit, it'll hit," and I'm sometimes, half-"opposite." Like I say, "No, is that maybe people—you see that they didn't like it. Maybe—"

But no. Yes, look, birria [became popular], too. He is—birria, only he makes it. Because the ingredients—I don't know how to make birria for people. He puts in the ingredients, and makes it from goat. We have to have goat because he says it comes out tastier. And he also started it because nephews have had parties—birthday parties or something—they've asked him to make birria. With us, we sometimes make it for parties, so many people have eaten it and have asked, "Who made the birria?"

So he tells them, and a lot of people came. "And why don't you make birria. Why don't you do make birria?" "And we said," Well, we'll start doing it." And yes—people do like

birria. And here we are, selling (laughing) again, let's see, how long people continue with that, with birria.

[00:43:28]

GA: Without giving me the recipe, how do y'all prepare the birria?

[00:43:31]

PR: Without giving you the recipe. You have to— let the meat rest with all the ingredients you put it. Let it rest. And, you can make it in two ways, we have done it two ways. You can make it on the stove, or you can make in the oven. But whether on the stove in the oven, it'll take you hours. Because you have to leave it so the meat becomes soft so you can shred the meat, and not give the—bones. Then, it has—everything has its time, and you have to let it rest with the chile rub, all the birria. Because we make the birria red. So it all has to be spiced, you let stand, and then you can it put in the oven, or—stove.

[00:44:23]

GA: One more—just a couple more questions. When was the first time you heard someone “describe” this place as Mexington?

[00:45:34]

PR: Mexicantown? (*Laughs*) They started—I started to hear it like around 2006. 2005, 2006, that they'd say, “We're going to, to Little Mexico. And we're—” And that's when we started to hear—but it's that, it was an amazing thing. Let's say that from forty— “See, now it's fifty”—when all of a sudden you started seeing *a lot* of people. Here, sometimes while walking. That is, here you are—it does appear that you're in Mexico. By the tortillería. By the stores. I mean, everything, everything is—I think that's why they,

they began to say Little Mexico, Mexicantown here. But it was in—between 2005, 2006 around there, that it happened—like I’m telling you, it expanded by a lot of people. Yes, why—

[00:45:30]

GA: This past year, ESPN said the burritos that you sell are the best, best burritos in the South. You. How did you learn about that?

[00:45:40]

PR: See, the funny thing was (*laughs*) we did *not* know any of this. I have an American customer—I’ll tell you that he comes three or four times a week. He talked a lot with my son, he, he tells him—he comes, and tells me, “Hey, congratulations!” And I, “Congratulations? Why?” I said. He says, “You’re in the—” In the first round, we were in first, in first place the South. And he told me, “You’re in the best burrito.” I tell him, “But where you see it? I didn’t—” He tells me, “Do you have a computer?” I tell him, “Yes.” He says, “Come on. Let’s go.”

And he started. He went to FiveThirtyEight, put it on. And that’s when I realized. I said, “Oh, look!” Then, from there, we continued to follow it. That’s when my son says, “Mom!” He says, “Now”—but in the second, in the second round—um, I can’t remember the girl’s name. She [FiveThirtyEight correspondent Anna Maria Barry-Jester called me for an interview because she had come and I wasn’t there. So she interviewed me by phone. And then, and later on, they told me, “Mom, we placed second.” San Francisco [restaurant La Taquería] won it.

But the funny thing was that that people laughed. Until one day, this, I got an hour of rest because I start at ten in the morning and go until ten, eleven at night. I got my stuff and I left, and lay down for a bit. And my son tells me, he tells me “Mom, mom, come!” He says, “The news is here.” And I’m, “What do you mean the—“ “Yes!” he says. “It’s [WLEX-TV] Channel 18.” Then, they came. They interviewed us, because it was—that is, for them. And I thank you. For them, they say that it’s, it’s the best. The best burrito. They did that interview. Then, [WKYT-TV] Channel 27 calls. They say, “Can we go do an interview?” I say, “Sure!” They came. I’m not kidding, by that same afternoon, I had a *packed* restaurant. Full, full until I said, “Wow!” That was a Thursday.

Friday—the funny thing was that I had my cook—he was on vacation. That was on Wednesday, when they interviewed us. On Thursday, we had a bunch people. There were people in line. On Friday—Thursday night, I call the cook. I say, “Do me a little favor. I know you’re on vacation,” I say, “but give me a hand.” “I had to call my daughter-in-law—in other words, I had to call everyone. He told me, “You know, yes, I’ll return.” That’s how—he returned from vacations so he could help us. Because I had to—I had to put in this table [where we’re seated for the interview]. I had to put more new tables because of the *response* that I’m getting from people.

And what I always like—especially when they are new. To ask them, “How was it?” I mean, “Did you like it?” And I assure you that I’ve never had one person tell me, “I did not like it.” So when I pick up the dishes, I like to see them cleaned off. And that’s what I’ve seen—that you pick up the plate and you say—oh, it gives you this satisfaction to see

the plate empty that you say, “They liked it.” But I’ve always liked to ask customers.

Always. And so, I tell them, “Tell me whether it’s good or bad news.” That is, I prefer to hear both, because if you tell me that something is wrong, I can correct it. But if you don’t tell me, you leave, and don’t come back. And I don’t know why. So, I prefer you tell me, the good and the bad.

But, yes: *many* people thanks to who started this, and like you say, how you helped me for that, that big push. Because my sales rose like crazy. And, you want to talk about funny, we ran out of tortillas (laughs). I was not prepared for that. I order on Monday, and [the television interviews] were midweek. So that was something that I had to keep getting tortillas. I had to—the tortillas. The rest? I could easily get meat, but I had to keep getting tortillas, from where ever. Because of all the people that we had those days tha—I thank you very much. And let me tell you, I’m also pleased because I say, “My work has paid off.” Because we, as I told you, we’re family here. I only have one cook, and one waitress. And everyone else is—my husband, my sons, that come and work. And I say, “All this hard work has paid off.” I mean, it’s been noticed. And right now, yes—I give great thanks for that, and also for your help that, you helped me a lot in that.

[00:50:28]

GA: Oh no. It's my pleasure. Two more questions. Why do you think that Americans love Mexican food so much?

[00:50:40]

PR: I don’t know. Maybe because—let’s say, the spice. Or it’s that—I don’t want to speak ill of Americans—but often, they are very simple. Or rather, you eat something

[American], and it has no taste. And I imagine that, since Mexican food has flavor, I think that—that is, they try to identify a bit with us. I think that right now, Americans tries your food because they want to involve themselves with you. I mean, they—that’s why I say that sometimes, there are bad, discriminatory people, but there many, many good people. I think that they—with them, they, they let us know that, that they’re with us, yes? That they love the food, that has, has flavor—our food.

Because that’s what many people have told me. “It has flavor!” It’s that this has something special. So I think that it’s the flavor that they like. Like I tell you, it’s not as “plain,” so simple. There are [American] things that one eats and you say, “Oy, what is this?” But I think that’s why, for the—for the flavor, that they start liking— because many people, they at first don’t want to taste it.

And sometimes, they ask me, “Okay, I want to try the beef head.” Can you believe a burrito of beef head? I say, “No. Begin with a taco. If you like the meat, then order something bigger. But start with something small that, that—that you think you—that is, that you’re not going to throw away. So I think that they also like that. That’s what many people have said to me here, because they tell me, “I want to try. But I want to try different things.” “Okay, then, try—let’s say a taco. Try a sope. And try a small burrito. “

Then, that’s how you try everything. And that’s what the people say—Americans, that’s what they like. That they don’t try—that is, I don’t try to sell them, say, the most expensive stuff. Or—well, it’s not expensive, either. But them, that is, I think that’s also

why they come back and come back. Because they like how, how we treat them, and the flavor that we have.

[00:52:54]

GA: What do you think about life here in Kentucky? Do you like it? You want to move to another place? How has it been for you?

[00:53:01]

PR: No. I really love it here. And I'll be sincere. I live on the ranch. I live in the country. No, I love—I love my Hispanics. But I like to have my space. So I live in Versailles, but I live *outside* Versailles. At first, as I told you, I felt bad because I'd say, "Oh, I want to return [to Mexico]." But then the children grew up—and right now, I have a granddaughter. Now I say, "To return to Mexico, no." I really like the schools of Versailles. My husband wants to move—here, to Lexington. But the Versailles school—the youngest just entered high school—so no. I tell my husband, "If we moved [to Lexington], it will be until he graduates high school."

But, no. I love. It. Let me tell you, I really like the peace that's here. There's not much violence. You do hear about some, but—it's funny. Because I'm from the big city. But maybe it's because I have my children and now I like it—I like the smaller life. It looks nice. The weather is crazy, in Kentucky. But it's calm. Life is lived—poorly, but calmly. Calmly.

[00:54:24]

GA: You have the last word. You—you can say what you want right now.

[00:54:29]

PR: No, well—I don’t know what. I thank you very much for all your help. For your “support” that you have given us. I hope that we move forward. Which, thank God, that is, I’m taking another step. That is, from renting, I’m trying to—I’m trying to buy [this building]. So, you are, you’re giving me a lot by having all these customers. All of it, and you [the press] in supporting us. And to make sure that it’s not “fancy.” It’s not an elegant place. But it’s somewhere where we’re going to receive you with—humility. That none of us are mightier, none of us are lower here. Here, we are all equal. And well—I do not really know how to thank you for everything, for all this you have—you have helped me to succeed. Because of you, I’ve been able to keep moving forward.

[00:55:34]

GA: Thank you for this interview.

[00:55:36]

PR: Much thanks to you. And I hope that [this oral history series] is a big project, and that we be able to do more projects in the future.