

The tiny southwest Detroit taqueria that sparked a movement

By Louis Aguilar

The Detroit News

In this season of giving thanks, Metro Detroit owes a huge debt to the tiny taqueria in southwest Detroit that sparked a movement: putting traditional tacos on a menu.

Today, scores of restaurants, taco trucks, grocers, party stores, bars and even a few gas stations in Metro Detroit offer "street tacos": usually a soft, corn tortilla filled with meat and topped with onions and cilantro. Many say the first eatery to do so, at least in recent history, was Taqueria Lupita's, which opened in 1994.

Taqueria Lupita's introduced the street-style taco — a soft, corn tortilla filled with meat and topped with onions and cilantro — to southwest Detroit at a time when dishes smothered with cheese and stiff margaritas typified the fare.

Lupita's and its owners are also part of the '90s-era wave of Mexican immigrants that infused southwest Detroit, the heart of the Latino community, with new people and a host of small businesses, from restaurants to beauty salons to construction to auto repair, many of which still exist. Various city economic studies show it's those businesses that kept commercial corridors on West Vernor, Bagley and Springwells robust even as many neighborhood corridors in the city

declined. Soon, the owners of the family-run Lupita's may join the Latino-fueled revival happening in Lincoln Park.

Lupita's is set up in a touristy strip of Bagley Avenue a few blocks from the Ambassador Bridge. The strip is where several popular restaurants that have long served Mexican food shaped by the tastes of Midwesterners, and to some extent, Canadians. Think lots of cheese and stiff margaritas.

Lupita's was opened by Adan Lopez, who longed to make the tacos he grew up with in his native state of Jalisco in west-central Mexico. "To me, the restaurants that were here, they were serving kind of Tex-Mex food," Lopez said. "I'm not saying that is bad but I could not get the food I used to eat back in Mexico." At the time, Lopez was a cook at a nearby Mexican restaurant. He immigrated to Detroit, like many Mexicans during the '90s, because of a booming economy and an inexpensive cost of living. Lopez kept his full-time job for at least two years while spending his off hours fixing up the empty storefront that still houses the small eatery — the place feels packed with 20 people.

Lupita's was a game changer as soon as it debuted, recalled some longtime southwest Detroiters. "There was actual joy," recalled Raymond Lozano, executive director of Mexicantown Community Development Corp. "I remember from the start, many people started to go there all the time. I still do." Lozano and others go for tacos that are not in hard shells or smothered in cheese, but soft four-inch corn tortillas Lopez initially made from scratch. The meat isn't

seasoned ground beef but marinated steak (carne asada) or marinated pork (al pastor). Other options include cow tongue (lengua) and intestines (tripas) for the meat or simply rice and beans,

The beans are different, too. They are not refried and made with lard. Lupita's offers frijoles charros, whole pinto beans with bits of bacon, onion and jalapeno. "They were the first" to offer such fare, said Vito Valdez, an artist who is a longtime southwest Detroit resident and community activist. "I've been a fan ever since they opened."

Lupita's menu has expanded through the years. It offers soups, tortas and other dishes, but tacos are "the star of the menu," said Serena Maria Daniels, editor of Detroit Eater and founder of Tostada Magazine. When Daniels first moved to Detroit to 2011, she was taken to Lupita's by a colleague who wanted to show her a Mexican eatery that tried to adhere to a traditional, regional cuisine. More than a decade later, Daniels, like many others, is still a customer.

Plenty of restaurants in Metro Detroit now offer Mexican fare using traditional cuisine as its base. There are establishments offering vegan, seafood and halal-based Mexican dishes. There's the TikTok trend birria — traditionally a stew that is now prominently featured in mash-ups from tacos to ramen — that's popping up all over town. Other restaurants offer a more upscale atmosphere and dishes from different regions of Mexico than the area that shapes Lupita's menu.

Lopez didn't intend to start a trend. His style of "street taco" was so new at the time that he had to convince local tortilla maker, La Michoacana, to make the four-inch soft corn tortilla that many restaurants now use. It's also sold in various grocery stores.

While some foodies are dismissive of the North American influence of the more popular Mexican restaurants around Lupita's, Lopez has nothing but praise. He is grateful to the years of advice and support from Rudy Morales, the owner of Xochimilco Restaurant.

"This guy I respect like my father," Lopez said of Morales. "I still talk to him every week." Lopez said he admires the ability to survive and adapt in this northern city, in a neighborhood that practically borders Canada. Xochimilco's and other southwest Detroit restaurants have operated for close to 50 years now.

It was Xochimilco's as well others southwest Detroit restaurants such as Los Galanes, Armando's and Mexican Village that popularized the Detroit-version of nachos called botana. It's, of course, loaded with cheese, specifically Muenster, and includes chorizo, beans, onion and other ingredients piled onto corn chips. Even Lupita's serves botanas.

Daniels say describing the menus of some longtime restaurants as Tex-Mex or not authentic is wrong. "I would characterize it as Mexican-American cuisine," Daniels said. "Authenticity can vary from household to household. If you have been in the U.S. generations, maybe our moms cooked in a way that is authentic to us, but not everyone."

Lopez now owns three restaurants in Southwest Detroit. Two of his sons operate a tire store in the neighborhood owned by the family. His daughter, Valeria Lopez, who started as a server waiting on tables when she was 15, now manages Lupita's.

The family's hard work has paid off. Lopez owns horses, both in Metro Detroit and in Mexico. Now he's ready to join the dozens of Mexican restaurants and other small businesses that are increasingly filling empty storefronts Downriver.

Many Downriver communities are experiencing an infusion of Latino residents moving into the small municipalities south and west of Detroit. The result is that Downriver experienced a small population growth for the first time in 40 years, according to an analysis of 2020 census data by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

Lincoln Park is the epicenter of this change, where one out of every four residents is Latino. The city of nearly 40,000 residents has two Mexican grocery stores; apanaderia (bakery); bilingual real estate agents, immigration attorneys, a drive-thru ice cream and coffee shop offering Mexican fruit-based drinks; a restaurant that serves Peruvian-style rotisserie chicken and Salvadoran pupusas; and a new Mexican restaurant whose most popular dish is the TikTok-inspired birria ramen.

Lopez recently bought a tire store in Lincoln Park. He also is considering opening a Mexican restaurant in the city.

"I'm not going to change the menu," of his potential Downriver eatery, he said. "I like what I serve. A lot of people seem to like it too."

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