

Talking about immigration

Owners of Mexican restaurants discuss how Trump's policies have affected them

By LOUISA CHU
Chicago Tribune

Mexican-owned restaurants like Birrieria Zaragoza, La Chaparrita, L'Patron and countless more are daily destinations for a diverse community and crucial to Chicago's restaurant scene. But since President Donald Trump took office in January, these restaurants, and their workers and customers, have faced concerns — and, in some cases, dwindling business — because of the new administration's promises of a Mexico border wall and the executive order to cut off federal funding to so-called sanctuary cities (which a federal judge blocked April 25, after these interviews were conducted).

I visited five Mexican restaurants to talk to the owners about the current political climate. The conversations were peppered with concerns about ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement), DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and what would happen to families, friends and businesses.

“We have customers (who) have been taking, little by little, their clothes and their stuff, (shipping) it back to Mexico.”

“Mexican people are scared to come out, especially around this area, because it's a Latino community, and they're scared that ICE could just be around the corner. We started seeing this right when Mr. President Trump was elected. A lot of people have been trying to save up money for anything that would come up. Some have actually left to Mexico already permanently. They say, 'I don't want to be kicked out so I'm just going to leave.'”

“My mom, right now, she's on vacation in Mexico. I say she's part-owner here because I borrowed money from her. She had to refinance her home so she could loan me the money to start the business. The news is really scaring the people out there, and she was a little frightened (to travel) because of the whole commotion of not letting (Mexicans returning to the U.S.) come back. But at the same time, she had nothing to hide, so she just went for it.”

“We actually have a packaging company right here we work with, and we send things to Mexico and from. We have customers that have been taking, little by little, their clothes and their stuff, taking it back to Mexico. And then they leave.”

— Angela Mendez, owner of La Chaparrita #1 in Little Village
2500 S. Whipple St., 773-247-1402, www.facebook.com/lachaparritagrocery

“If they get deported and their families are separated, what would happen to the kids?”

“My dad passed away a couple of years ago, but my mom is still here. She has friends that are illegal immigrants, and they have kids who are U.S. citizens. If they get deported, and their families are separated, what would happen to the kids? My mom just reassures (her friends) that their kids would be OK, that she would take responsibility for them. She raised us, me and my three older brothers, and now for my mom to go under that stress again, you know, it's like wow.”

“When I closed down for A Day Without Immigrants, I explained to my staff why I was doing it. It was out of respect for them, out of respect for my mom and dad and everybody in the world that's here illegally or legally, whatever that is. We can go all the way back to Christopher Columbus and the Native Americans if they want to get into detail. We'll see who the real illegals are (laughs).”

“I have 12 employees, two shifts; about 80 percent have an immigrant background. My employees were all very happy that I (closed for the day). I put the sign up in the window, then we stayed an hour talking about it. Fifty years ago, my dad came to Chicago illegally to start a new life, and that's why I accomplished what I accomplished. My mom is a U.S. citizen. She became a citizen in '86.”

“I posted the sign on Facebook, and I leave the comments up there. I don't delete anything. One commenter confronted me right here. He actually pointed out I didn't put the word 'illegal' on the sign on my door. He



ABEL ARCINIEGA/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Angelina Mendez, owner of La Chaparrita, says some Mexicans have left Chicago to return permanently to Mexico.



KRISTAN LIEB/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Cemitas Puebla owner Tony Anteliz, left, with his father, Antonio, who has been in the U.S. for almost 50 years.



ALYSSA POINTER/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

John Zaragoza, owner of Birrieria Zaragoza, in Archer Heights, says he has seen a drop in business since the presidential election.



JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

L'Patron owner Cesar Gonzalez says about 80 percent of his employees are immigrants. He closed for A Day Without Immigrants.



KRISTAN LIEB/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Antique Taco owner Rick Ortiz says he knows people who didn't go to Mexico for funerals because they weren't sure they'd be able to return.

caught me right in the middle of the dining room. We were full of people. But he ate here (laughs).”

“In all three of (my) businesses (L'Patron, G & G Auto Repair and L'Flamingo liquor store, all nearby on Fullerton Avenue), we've seen business drop a little bit. At the auto repair shop, one of the customers commented, 'Why am I going to put so much money into the car if I don't know what's going to happen to me in a couple of months?'”

— Cesar Gonzalez, owner of L'Patron in Logan Square
3749 W. Fullerton Ave., 773-252-6335, www.facebook.com/lpatrontacos

“I'm for laws, rules and regulations, but there's got to be somewhat of a happy medium.”

“The customer base that we have is predominantly Latinos. I saw a significant drop in the amount of people that come in to eat. And I'm a very curious person, so I ask my own family and relatives and friends, 'What are you guys hearing, what are you seeing?' And I hear a lot about discouragement. They're saying they're afraid to go out, especially when they hear that parents, undocumented people, are just being lifted up, and that's it, you're away from your family.”

“I do hear customers say, 'Hey, where do I get a certified letter that says, in case I end up in Mexico, that I can give custody to my neighbor or some family member to take care of my son?' So to hear that is kind of heart-breaking too.”

“I was going to head out to Mexico about two months ago, but there was something going on

there, too, because they jacked up the gas prices out there, so (citizens) had a little bit of a demonstration. (Editor's note: Zaragoza is referring to recent protests, known as *gasolinazo*, in response to gas prices that shot up 20 percent overnight, fueled in part by economic uncertainty after the U.S. election.)

“Not that I would have an issue, but I thought it would be best if I stayed here. I am planning to go soon. I always go out there for new recipes and techniques. My daughter invited me. She works for American Airlines, so I hitch a ride with her.”

“It's important to widen the scope of concern. Even though I'm Mexican, I don't just look at Mexicans, but (also) other nationalities and races. Just to let people know we're in this together. I'm for laws, rules and regulations, but there's got to be somewhat of a happy medium where you say let's not just wash away everything. (Let's) do something that's going to be good for everybody.”

— John Zaragoza, owner of Birrieria Zaragoza in Archer Heights
4854 S. Pulaski Road, 773-523-3700, www.birrieriazaragoza.com

“I've got buddies (who) speak English better than me and are better educated than me, but they weren't born here ... and they have that fear.”

“I'm first-generation Ameri-

can. My parents are immigrants from Mexico, been in this country almost 50 years. People that work for me are from Mexico. Some have been here a couple of years; some have been here for 20 years. Either working with my cooks or the front of the house, we constantly hear about (Trump's immigration policy plans). We have the radio on in our prep area with Spanish stations.”

“Am I OK? Yeah, because nothing's going to happen to me, but it affects people I love. Some cousins, aunts and uncles, maybe they feel threatened.”

“(ICE) is kind of like a bogeyman thing now, so that's maybe making people stay inside, but it's always a slow time of the year (at the restaurant). I still see the same amount of people showing up, but you worry.”

“It's easy for me to say (I'm OK), and that's where I feel bad, because I was lucky enough that I was born here. I have my passport. I have my Social Security. I have my driver's license, where at the drop of a hat I can show someone. But I've got buddies that grew up with me and speak English better than me and are better educated than me, but they weren't born here, and their parents came over here a different way, and they have that fear.”

— Tony Anteliz, owner of Cemitas Puebla in the West Loop, Logan Square and Hyde Park
Three locations, www.cemitaspuebla.com

“There were some tears and concerns (after the election), but things are OK.”

“I was born in Bridgeport, but I know someone who has a green

card whose brother died recently; he was 65. The siblings decided not to go back to Mexico City (for the funeral) and just stay here because the doubt, of knowing all the responsibilities here, and being detained or causing complications for other people too. So they ended up having services here for him.”

“I know someone else who has all his documentation whose mother passed away (in Mexico), too, and he decided to stay here, just not knowing the terms about being detained.”

“We operate three restaurants, my wife and I. We're responsible. We are very adamant about hiring people with documentation, but it's hard (because) they have family members (to worry about). It's the uncertainty and feeling unsure of what's going to happen. We had a few people that took off A Day Without Immigrants. There were some tears and concerns (after the election), but things are OK.”

“We personally have not experienced any issues (related to immigration policy) thus far, but I know friends (who) are also in the industry, and I think it's all just the unknown at this point. We're definitely trying to find out what's next and what steps that everyone's taking (so we can) prepare ourselves. As much as this is our family, we're also trying to run a business.”

— Rick Ortiz, chef and owner of Antique Taco in Wicker Park, Bridgeport, and the Loop
Three locations, www.antiquetaco.com.

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