

MARIA & JOSE - Resturanters

Maria Batiz and Jose Carlos de la Macorra first came to New Zealand eleven years ago on their honeymoon, with the intention of visiting Australia afterwards. They never made it. "I liked it better here!" exclaims Maria. They bought a truck with a motorcycle motor; it had a little wooden house built into the back of it. Then, for six months, they traveled the length of this country, stopping only for a spell to pick kiwifruit in Keri Keri.

Back in Mexico City, Maria finished her degree in art restoration and began teaching, while Jose worked between the corporate world and a business he started, exporting religious iconography to the United States. But their imagination had been captured. "We could see that in New Zealand, it's really easy to do what you like. It's possible. You can survive with a small business," says Maria. They had a plan. Jose had studied hotel management in England, and had found while working in hotel kitchens that he enjoyed cooking. He wanted his own establishment, he wrote in his thesis. It would be a place to promote Mexican culture; he would be an informal agent for his country.

They returned to New Zealand – Maria found work in her field while Jose turned the basement of their apartment building into a kitchen, and Mexican Specialties was born. Initially trading as a sandwich delivery service to office buildings, it's now a small yet bustling slice of Mexico tucked away in an anonymous block of shops in one of Auckland's outer suburbs. Its reputation has grown primarily from word of mouth, and its whereabouts are passed rapturously from person to person.

Maria can be found up front most days, serving customers while sole cook Jose keeps the most authentic Mexican food in New Zealand coming out of the kitchen. Regular customers know to be patient as Jose, ever the perfectionist, detests any kind of culinary shortcuts – he sources and chooses all meat and produce himself, cooking everything dish by dish to ensure it meets his high standards. They had a chance to expand but decided to forgo extra space and more customers. "Sometimes you try to do more, but it changes, the atmosphere changes. So we decided to shrink!" says Jose gleefully. "If you put in 10 more tables, then you have to put another fridge, another cook. You start relying on other people, you can't check on the quality".

“Say with sex,” he continues, “Imagine you do it morning, afternoon, and night – it becomes quite dull. The thing with this is, if you do it too much, then that’s your life – it stops being enjoyable.” Which accounts for their abbreviated opening hours; the doors are open from Thursday through Saturday each week, even then, only from mid to late afternoon. It hasn’t deterred their ardent clientele, most who have supported them from the day they opened shop.

The business is shaping up to be all they hoped it would be.

“Personally, for us, it was our best chance to open up with the local people, it was a good opportunity to socialise. We have customers that come every day. Not even to eat! Just to talk for five minutes and go!”

“There is an Englishman who has come every Saturday since we opened,” says Maria, smiling. “He’s missed two Saturdays, because he went to England. He came, knocked on the door and said, ‘I’m not coming his week, so don’t worry about me!’”

“It’s not just a taco, you know? It’s really deep,” says Jose, “We talk to them about Mexico. We plan trips for them, and of course they can meet the parents, go for lunch with them.” In fact, four different customers have stayed with their parents since Mexican Specialties opened its doors.

The freedom that Maria and Jose feel they have in this country is not to be understated. “In Mexico he would probably never have had a shop like this. The social expectations are really different. You have to live in a certain house, drive a certain car and have a certain job – not making tacos and talking to people,” explains Jose. “You have to live on a level that is in accordance with your social status.” Would they consider moving back at some point? “We didn’t come here forever, we came here for a couple of years – but now it’s been 10,” says Jose, with a shrug. “There’s never been a reason to leave. Here we have our own life, our thing, and it reflects who we are 100 percent.”

Interview Rebekah Davies

