



Jumburrito owner Jose Cuevas started it all in one third of this building in 1979. He hand painted his first sign by tracing around the logo as it was displayed on the building by an overhead projector.

Cuevas started in the Valley; now he's on top of the hill

By Paul Wiseman
Your Business correspondent

Jumburrito owner José Cuevas was born in Kingsville, spent many of his growing-up years near Denver, Colorado, then moved to McAllen in 1975. It was at this stop in the Rio Grande Valley that he took his first restaurant job.

Today, after 30 years in the restaurant business, Cuevas has been told that his current home sits on the highest point in Midland County — a sort of parallel to his rise in the business world.

In that first job, the 15-year-old Cuevas was a dishwasher at a sit-down restaurant. As the third of eight children in a family of very modest means, he said he watched people in the restaurant eating steaks and lobster and it made a real impression on him. This teenage boy dreamed of having his own restaurant where people ate food he had prepared.

A few years later, Cuevas had come to

Midland and moved up to the job of fine dining waiter at the Midland Hilton — where he noticed Diane, a waitress in the hotel's café.

"I must've asked her out a thousand times," he recalled. "Finally, she said yes."

Before long, they were married and the young newlyweds — he was 22, she was 20 — decided to open a restaurant. The year was 1979.

"Across from the Hilton there was an old pharmacy that was being torn down to make way for the city to build the Midland Center," Cuevas said. "Their restaurant equipment was for sale for \$2,500." The couple used money they had saved toward buying a house to instead invest in the restaurant equipment.

Next they needed a location. Cuevas' father owned a building that had once housed a gas station on Lamesa Road. The elder Cuevas rented his son 600 square feet of that space, all that was available at the time, to start a restaurant called

Jumburrito. That original Jumburrito is still there.

Armed with a location, restaurant equipment, an Opel Kadette and a \$5,000 bank loan from the old First National Bank, the Cuevases were ready to sell burritos.

"Our first menu was on school poster board. It had 20 items on it," Cuevas said.

Getting an attractive sign was important to Cuevas, but being on a tight budget, he had to be really creative to make that work. He put the Jumburrito logo on an overhead projector transparency and waited for the sun to go down.

"I set the overhead projector on my car and pointed it (the projector) at the front of the building. Then I climbed up and traced the logo out. The next day, in the daylight, I finished painting the sign," he said.

He admits that his dreams started out pretty small.

"I thought if I made \$21,000 a year, I'd be happy. I never ever dreamed gross sales would top \$5 million."

In those early days keeping up with the tortilla demand was a challenge. They'd run out of product and Cuevas would announce the fact to people waiting in line — who would reply that they would be willing to wait the 15 minutes it would take to get more tortillas made.

Realizing his 600 square foot space limited the amount of tortillas he could ever produce there, the young entrepreneur again got creative in order to increase production.

"I went through the neighborhood knocking on doors, asking people who I had heard made good tortillas. I'd talk to those people and offer to buy all their ingredients and pay them something for their time if they would make tortillas I could bring in to the restaurant," Cuevas said. "At one time, I had five ladies making tortillas for us."

Over the next five years, Jumburrito expanded to fill the entire building — first,

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CUEVAS

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the record store in the next stall moved, then the ice cream parlor in the final third of the building went out of business.

In 1983 Cuevas opened his second location on South Midkiff near Wall. With two locations, his management dynamic changed. He had to delegate more duties and standardize recipes and ingredients.

"I found a company to package the spices so all you had to do was to open the package and dump it in," he said. "We also standardized how we answer the phone. It's important for me to stay on top of these things."

With four restaurants in Midland and two in Odessa, he now has an area manager to handle the daily operations issues that come up and to make sure restaurant and health department requirements are adhered to.

Cuevas has also standardized the hiring process. They use what's called the Predictive Index System, which uses the answers to 100 personality questions to help employers properly place new employees.

"If we hire someone who likes to be around people, we'll put them up front. Someone who's less outgoing can work in the kitchen. This system has reduced our turnover from 250 percent to 75 percent."

With 115 total employees, proper placement is considered vital.

It was in 2000 or 2001, after he already had several locations in place, that Cuevas began to feel he had a responsibility to open more restaurants in order to give his employees room for advancement. It was one reason he opened his second location in the early 80s, but that goal began to take preeminence almost 20 years later.

"It became more of a challenge and a game," he noted. "It was no longer about the money. It was, 'Can I expand and create more opportunities for people to move up the company ladder?' I began to take a greater responsibility in this area in 2000."

This realization has Cuevas looking at further expansion in areas that include Lubbock, Abilene, San Angelo and others — although he notes that Lubbock real estate is "pricey."

The next step, on which Cuevas has been working for many months, will be franchising. He wants to begin by having owner-operator franchisees, where the owner is required to work directly in the restaurant.

"We'll have motivated owners, who have money invested," he pointed out. There will be six weeks of training in Midland for new franchisees.

His goal is to use this method to open 50 stores in five years in locations such as south Texas, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma



Young entrepreneurs Jose and Diane Cuevas thought they'd be happy making \$21,000 a year. Jumburrito now grosses over 200 times that amount.

and Arizona.

That young man with a dream of wanting to serve people, who was told by co-workers at the Hilton that he'd never succeed, has come a long way.

"I didn't listen to them (the doubters). I was single-focused, willing to do anything

to make the restaurant successful," he said.

"It's exciting to be the owner — it's yours," he said, which also means "you're top bottle washer and any other job title that comes along. Unless you're willing to sacrifice, it won't work. No one will do it like you will."