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Center Story #16

In this article, Diane focuses on two very successful Commercial Center businesses, La Vecindad and La Vecindad Cantina:

- *To what does "La Vecindad" translate in English?*
- *How does the purposeful decor of the restaurants speak to customers?*
- *What caused the owners to expand the footprint of their first restaurant AND open another nearby?*

Thanks again to Diane for her continued help with uncovering the fascinating stories that live throughout Commercial Center every day.

La Vecindad Restaurant Exterior



La Vecindad Interior



La Vecindad Cantina Exterior



La Vecindad Owners Vanessa Barreat and Raul Martinez

## How a Couple's Leap of Faith Created Two Beloved La Vecindad's

Vanessa Barreat, a native of Venezuela, and Raul Martinez, born in Mexico, met in Las Vegas, fell in love, and married 22 years ago. Today, they own one popular Mexican restaurant and one newer bar – La Vecindad Cantina - in Historic Commercial Center. We talked with Vanessa about the couple's business and its history.

In 2016, Vanessa was working at Caesar's Palace and Raul was employed at the Cannery Casino & Hotel. The couple decided they no longer wanted to be employees because they wanted to be their own bosses. So, they started with a food stand situated at a Swap Meet in Las Vegas where Raul was the cook and Vanessa did everything else. Customers loved the food and begged the couple for a sit-down restaurant.

In 2018, Vanessa and Raul found their restaurant's first location in Commercial Center's E Building. They named their restaurant, featuring Mexican foods, La Vecindad, meaning "the neighborhood." The restaurant gradually grew in business "until," as Vanessa described, "COVID came and we had to close up our dreams." During the two months the restaurant was closed, Raul painted the inside of the restaurant and Vanessa and their two children made souvenirs they hoped they could sell later.

Fortunately, during the shutdown, the couple applied to one of the government programs to support small businesses hurt by the pandemic and they received some money that helped.

"Finally, when La Vecindad re-opened," Vanessa explained, "we used social media to invite all our friends and former local customers to the opening. Fortunately, the customers did come back.

One day the leasing agent for our building, Cheryl Midby, came by and we were very busy. She wanted us to expand to another store, but we were too busy to think about it. She asked us to look outside, and we did. There was a big line of customers waiting! Yes, we did ultimately expand and we now occupy three spaces for our restaurant."

One of their regular customers was a man who always bought a burrito and tea. He said he came every day because he didn't want them to close. "I later found out that he was managing a building across the center. I told him to let us know if the owner ever decided to sell the building. That day came, and after some negotiation, we

bought and renovated it, secured a liquor license, and last year in March, we opened the Cantina.”

Today, La Vecindad’s restaurant and Cantina employ 60 people. Vanessa says the customers are about 80 percent tourists, finding out about the two places online. At the restaurant, one entire wall shows pictures of the Hispanic celebrities who have visited.

As there are many other Mexican restaurants in Las Vegas, why is La Vecindad so popular? Vanessa says that the décor inside the restaurants is very familiar—full of color, and with laundry hanging on lines just as it does in Mexico. “People are comfortable here,” she says.

And the food? “All cooked from scratch. Restaurant favorites are rice, beans, homemade tortillas, and Mexican sandwiches. The Cantina features higher-end items such as steak, lobster and salmon.”

Both places also have live entertainment. At the restaurant, one of the early two-hour live music sessions is on weekends when the wait for service can be long, and Vanessa says the entertainment helps customers pass the time before they dine. Live music in the evenings is popular in both spots.

Future plans for the Cantina include adding gaming, which may mean that it, now open seven days a week, may expand its offerings.

Because of the popularity of both the restaurant and Cantina, the couple’s children are able to go to college. And, as Vanessa emphasizes, some 60 families have an income, as well.

What is Vanessa’s advice to other wanna-be entrepreneurs? “Don’t be afraid. Go for it and be consistent even if sometimes you want to throw in the towel.”

Finally, she adds, “Raul and I are very proud of our kids and the community. We love what we do.”