



# Recipes from Home

---

FIESTA TEQUILA OWNER SEIZES OPPORTUNITIES IN GILLETTE

By: Jen Kocher Photos: Taylor Helton

---

Jesus “Chuy” Jimenez ping ponged through the many tables at Fiesta Tequila Mexican Restaurant’s downtown location during a busy Friday lunch rush, stopping at each to visit and put his hand on a shoulder. The savory sizzle of bell peppers and onions wafted from the kitchen as cheerful music set the tone in the festive dining room.

Creating a comfortable, inviting environment is the mission for he and his staff, who consider their customers like family.

“I treat my customers like this is my home,” he said with a smile, stopping to talk in Spanish to the bartender, who was busy loading up condiment containers with limes, lemons and other bright fruit to decorate the rims of their many fruity cocktails, margaritas and other mixed drinks.

This isn’t work to him because cooking and taking care of customers is what he loves to do, beginning in the kitchen where he dices, slices and chops as if second nature.

“I love what I do, I do what I love,” he repeated when talking about his lifelong love of cooking and the hard work learning his craft.

His training began years ago in Guadalajara, Mexico. He was a kid when he learned how to make street tacos and eventually his taste buds came alive after taking a job as a cook in a Japanese restaurant there. He had no idea that food could be so flavorful, and it fueled his ambition to learn as much as he could and expand his culinary horizons.

All the years of training are evident in his cutlery skills, as he rapidly carved a zucchini into thin slices, fanning them with the sleight of a hand. He still gets a lot of practice chopping, he joked, because he insists that the salsa, guacamole and other accompaniments at his restaurant are all made fresh everyday. That’s what they’re known for, he said, that and the spices he incorporates into his traditional dishes not typically found in Mexican restaurants this side of the border.

Part of this has to do with the authentic nature of their dishes like carnitas, street tacos, molcajetes, and menudo, meals he brought with him from his homeland that are popular with customers in search of spicier foods. He has also borrowed and adapted some of his mother’s classics like her specialty refried beans and green chili pork.

Preparing these meals, he said, is the thread that keeps these faraway worlds and lives connected.

## **FOLLOWING A DREAM**

After the lunch rush, Chuy took a rare break to sit down and talk about his family in Mexico and his life in Gillette. Shifting in his chair, he purposefully sat with his back to the handful

of tables near the bar still filled with customers because otherwise, he laughed, he’d be up clearing plates or refilling water glasses.

“There’s always something to do,” he said with a shy smile as he adjusted the collar of his crisp, neatly ironed pink dress shirt, which despite all the running around he’s done, still looked fresh out of his closet.

He pointed to the hallway toward the back of the restaurant leading to the bathrooms where the walls are covered in a collage of photos sealed behind glass frames. In the photos, customers smile from underneath sombreros while Chuy and staff stand behind holding guitars after serenading them with a birthday song. The photos go back several years to Fiesta Tequila’s first location off Highway 59 before expanding to their current location in downtown Gillette.

He’s just returned home from Rapid City, South Dakota, where he has spent the past eight months opening a second restaurant with his partner. In the years since first opening in Gillette in 2013, Chuy has since revised his dream of owning one restaurant to owning many.

He’s happy to be back in Gillette, Chuy said, where so many of his customers have stopped by to pop their heads into the kitchen and give him a hard time about being gone for so long. Likewise, his fiancé and two young daughters missed having him home. They, too, help at the restaurant. The girls like to hostess, he laughed, which they do with the flourish of game show models.

His daughters used to give him a hard time about working so much, but he cured that by sending them home to spend a few weeks with his family in Mexico one summer. By the end of the trip, the girls asked him if they could leave their





clothes for their cousins. Now, they save anything they outgrow to send in frequent packages.

“How did you live with so little?” they wondered out loud to their dad, who said he saw an immediate change in their attitudes following that trip. They have a new appreciation for why and how their dad works so hard.

For him, it doesn’t feel like much of a sacrifice because he feels lucky to live in this country and community.

“It hasn’t been easy,” he said, “but I’m so happy and blessed.”

## **TAKING HIS SHOT**

Chuy grew up hearing stories about all the opportunities available in America. As a boy in Guadalajara, he’d been told that anyone could be successful if they worked hard enough to earn it and he wanted a shot at a better life. Back then, he looked around him, at the home where he shared a pair of shoes with his cousins and some days went without eating. He vowed he would make a better life for himself and would follow his dreams of becoming a chef and moving to the states where he was determined to one day own a restaurant.

He shakes his head when he thinks of his early days growing up eating little more than beans, eggs and rice. Since leaving home and coming to the U.S., first Colorado and finally, Gillette, where he worked in other Mexican restaurants learning the trade until finally buying his own place.

The Gillette community is like family to him, he repeated, and until moving here he’d never met such kind people. He recounted his first weeks in town, when he had nowhere to stay and was sleeping in his car by the Fishing



Lake. Someone had heard about his situation and that Chuy was a good, hard-working person and ended up giving him the keys to his house, inviting him to share his family home.

“He had small children,” Chuy said with surprise, “and yet he trusted me.”

The offer was too generous for him, so he ended up pitching a tent on the family’s back patio. Now, when this same guy and his family come into one of the restaurants Chuy owns, he makes sure they eat for free.

“When I first opened the restaurant, I made a promise to God,” he said, nodding toward the ceiling. “I told him, everyday, I would give back.”

He’s made good on that promise, too, and once a month, donates all of one day’s profits to

help someone in the community in need.

“People bring someone to my attention,” he said, “and we help if we can.”

He feels that’s how a community should work.

As the afternoon sun streamed through the windows, Chuy jumped to his feet to get back to work to prepare for the evening dinner crowd.

Glancing out the window at the street full of parked cars in front of the restaurant, he admitted that parking on Gillette Avenue is sometimes a challenge. But, the fact that they’ve done so well here despite hurdles like limited parking, he said is testament to the quality of their cooking and service.

“We’re definitely doing something right,” he said.



311 S Gillette Ave | (307) 686-8010

 @FiestaTequila1

By: *Jen* C. Kocher