

Wake Up & Eat: Harrisburg's Family Owned Breakfast Spot

By: Leah Ervin

CHARLOTTE, NC— In the heart of Charlotte, where the smell of bacon fills the air and the sound of clinking coffee mugs is present, Jose Fuentes stands behind the counter of his restaurant, Wake Up & Eat—a place he feared might not succeed when only six months after his doors opened, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down businesses nationwide. Jose's restaurant not only survived, it thrived.

Growing up shadowing his father while he owned his own restaurant, Jose knew from a young age he wanted to follow in his dad's footsteps. Through his perseverance and grit, Wake Up & Eat made it through the pandemic, upgraded to a larger venue and he is now hopeful to open a second location in the near future. Jose embodies the true determination and roll up the sleeves mindset of many small business owners in today's date.

“We were six months in and everything was getting shut down... I guess being a small business and being the size that we were before, we were able to stay open, run our business and make it through.”

Although he feared being forced to close his doors within the first year of opening, he feels COVID-19 is what helped them gain business because they stayed open. He spoke about how the company's takeouts skyrocketed, and during the shutdown, Wake Up & Eat really grew their business. Jose then spoke about how his restaurant did not just survive the pandemic but thrived because they adapted quickly and focused on what their customers needed most—convenient, comforting meals that could be enjoyed at home. Through all the uncertainty, one thing remained constant at Wake Up & Eat: the tight-knit, family-driven environment.

Wake Up and Eat is strictly a family owned and operated business, all of the kitchen staff and almost all of the front staff is either family or friends of the Fuentes family. Jose even cooks in the back, while speaking with him, he took a great deal of pride in how much he has put into Wake Up and Eat to watch it succeed. While speaking with one of the waitresses who wished to remain anonymous, she expressed how grateful she is to have the family environment while working.

“I am not directly related to Jose, but he and his family have made me feel like I am a part of his family... I have been working here for almost two years now... I would not trade the people I work with for the world.”

She talked about how the environment makes her enjoy going to work. “It feels like home here,” she said. “We all take care of each other, and it's not just about the food we serve, it's about the way we treat people, from customers to coworkers.”

The Fuentes family's dedication to creating a warm, welcoming atmosphere has contributed to Wake Up & Eat's success, helping them build a loyal customer base that has remained faithful, even through the toughest times.

However, the Fuentes family isn't immune to the growing challenges that come with running a restaurant in today's economy. One of the biggest struggles has been the rising cost of food, Jose specifically mentioned the cost of eggs. With supply chain disruptions and inflation, the price of eggs has surged dramatically, affecting the product the restaurant arguably uses the most. "Eggs are a huge part of our menu," said Jose. He fears the price of eggs will never return to the prices they were in 2019. "It's frustrating because eggs are in so many of our breakfast items, and we don't want to compromise on quality... At the same time, we can't keep absorbing the price hikes... We have only adjusted our prices twice, and I hate that idea, but it's the sad part of running a business right now."

Jose was more than happy to share about his company, Wake Up and Eat, and hopes to gain traction. He takes pride in the fact his only form of marketing is through word of mouth. "We've never had a grand opening or even a big marketing push. It's all word of mouth," Jose explained. "For me, it's about building a relationship with each customer. When they walk through the door, it's not just to eat, they're part of the family, too." He hopes by sharing his experience and love for his establishment, he will be able to grow his family and be given the opportunity to show them the food he takes such pride in.