



## Nicaraguan restaurant brings community to Southeast L.A

**By: Kate Sequeira**

**A**t least once a month for the last five or six years, Silvia Suarez Rojas has made sure to stop by Las Segovias restaurant in Huntington Park. It's the only Nicaraguan restaurant in Los Angeles County that she said truly reflects the flavors of her home country. To her, Las Segovias brings a piece of home to L.A.,

where she's resided for the past 10 years. It provides community and an opportunity for her to connect with the culture she misses. She has continued this tradition even amid the restrictions that have surfaced because of the coronavirus pandemic. Though she can't meet and talk with others at the restaurant as she once did, she said she can't help but crave the Nicaraguan flavors the

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restaurant prepares.

"We are people that when we were born in another culture, in another geographical region, we carry, so to say, a certain level of nostalgia for our land, the place we were born," Suarez Rojas said in Spanish. "When you are in a completely different culture where another language is spoken ... you suddenly need to find the culture of your country. That nostalgia, that void, is filled with a space like Las Segovias, for example. It lets us meet people of our own language, of our own food, with a family atmosphere where you don't feel like a foreigner."

Las Segovias is one of two Nicaraguan restaurants located in Southeast L.A. and one of less than 10 in L.A. County, which has one of the largest concentrations of Nicaraguans in California even though it makes up less than 1% of the population, according to Census data. The other is Restaurante Managua, which is just around the corner. That's why Las Segovias owner Daysi Rivas said it is so important to create spaces where Nicaraguans can connect and that allow them to share their culture with others. It's what she said she's aimed to do with Las Segovias.

However, since the pandemic hit a year ago, much looks different at the restaurant. The wooden tables that once lined the front of the restaurant now stand stacked by the counter, leaving just enough chairs

for a comfortable wait while dishes are prepared. Hours have been cut as business has dropped, but nonetheless Rivas, who opened the restaurant in 2012, keeps the faith. She still has regulars such as Suarez Rojas and even others who visit daily, though the number has dwindled.

"There are few old people left and new people who have found us, new clients," Rivas said in Spanish.

In Las Segovias, located at the border of Huntington Park and South Gate, the orange and yellow walls proudly display elements of Nicaragua. The country's flag hangs at the center of one of the walls, accompanied by photos of the country's landscape and important Nicaraguans, such as three-time champion boxer and former mayor of Managua Alexis Argüello, who died in 2009. Artisan pieces and a doll dressed in the blue of Nicaragua adorn the counter and ledge that runs along the wall.

"It's a small place, it's not very pretty, it's not remodeled or anything in its looks but we have put our Nicaraguan touch so that people feel they are at home," Rivas said.

For Suarez Rojas, Las Segovias has not only been a place that she's been able to connect with her family and friends, but also with other Nicaraguans who frequent it. She's met and exchanged information with many who also visit the restaurant and has been able to keep in touch with them because of it.

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culture and we have found that we are from the same area [of Nicaragua]," Suarez Rojas said. "It's interesting for me and lets me, in a way, preserve my culture because it's as if I meet a little bit of my country here in Los Angeles."

What Suarez Rojas said makes Las Segovias so appealing to her is the sazón Nicaraguense that shapes the cooking, which Rivas said remains free of outside influence from her nearly 19 years in L.A. Rivas has been cooking since she was 6 years old growing up in Nicaragua's region of Las Segovias, the restaurant's namesake, and she hasn't stopped since.

"I have loved trying different plates and so I went learning all the Nicaraguan food and that's where it all originated," said Rivas, who had not considered opening a restaurant until a friend who loved her cooking encouraged her to do so.

At Las Segovias, Rivas has a number of plates traditional to Nicaragua. And with most dishes come ensalada de repollo as well as a choice between gallo pinto and queso frito combined with either plátanos maduros fritos or tajadas de plátano verde, among other options. Many, including Suarez Rojas, gravitate toward the fritanga mixta dish, which combines all the sides and carries a variety of meats, Rivas said.

"The difference [in food at Las Segovias] is the seasoning of the food, which is original from Nicaragua," Rivas said. "It's the same food but many people have learned it through the internet or they do, I'm going to add that, with that it's going to be better."

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Behind the front counter of the restaurant, cooks put together nacatamales, a dish similar to the Mexican tamal in its use of masa de maíz but prepared in a plantain leaf with a filling that includes pork, potato, bell pepper, tomato and onion and is served alongside a slice of white bread. Though it can be eaten any time, it's traditionally eaten midmorning on Sundays or during special occasions and festivities. Las Segovias won second place for the dish in L.A.'s annual Nacatamal de Oro competition in 2013, shortly after the place opened.

Las Segovias also serves baho, which, like the nacatamal, is an indigenous dish with a long history in Nicaraguan tradition and is prepared by wrapping beef, plantains and yuca in a plantain leaf and steaming it over a large pot of water. The dish, which takes a day to make including the marination, isn't the most convenient for people to cook because it has to be done in large quantities. For that reason, Rivas said she's happy to be able to provide it.

As the direness of the pandemic lessens in L.A., Rivas continues to do what she can to keep Las Segovias going as a vibrant space within the local Nicaraguan community.

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