

## A Family Affair

When arriving to El Torero's on 231 E. 26th St., you pull up to a dirt parking lot on a side road that looks like an alleyway. There's an auto shop across the street, buildings with sun-worn, chipped paint surround the restaurant. If you walk through the wrong door, you'll end up in the kitchen.

But when you do find the front door and walk in, a slew of traditional Mexican paintings hang on the walls, bartenders greet you by name from behind the sea of glasses.

There was no need for music because the restaurant was buzzing with tables filled with people stuffing their faces and laughing over plates of food on a typical Tuesday night.

Lerua's was a Tucson staple for 97 years. El Torero, the sister restaurant to Lerua's, now combined the two restaurants under one roof. You can sit down at the El Torero tables and still order the same Lerua's dishes.

The green corn tamales made famous by Lerua's, tamales that made the mouths of the Tucson community water, now reside at El Torero. El Torero in their own right have deep-fried tacos that keep people coming back for more.

Lerua's all started from a man named Tony Lerua, who was the



president of Tucson's first ever bank. His wife Elisa Lerua was a stay at home cook and her cooking was a favorite among their neighbors, according to Mikey Hultquist Jr., chef and one of the co-owners of El Torero and former co-owner of Lerua's.

"They found a little old house off of 4th Avenue and 9th Street and moving from their home, they moved it to a more commercial location. And in 1922, it was kind of set in stone that that's the year it started," Hultquist Jr. said.

Lerua's became a household name among all of Tucson's residents. In the 1940s, the Lerua's moved their restaurant to 2005 E. Broadway Blvd. 1960 was officially when the keys were handed over to Carmen Borgaro-Hultquist, Hultquist Jr.'s grandmother.

"My grandma Carmen was like 'I'm going to buy a business,' and [my grandfather and Tony Lerua] were like 'no you're not' and she's like 'yes I am, and you can't tell me what to do.' She was kind of ahead of her time for when she did these things, she was not sitting on the sidelines," Hultquist Jr. said.



Everyone who lived in Tucson knew Lerua's was the place to go if you wanted good food and especially good tamales, made so well it was like eating food your nana made.

The tamales were so good, and the business was so booming, Lerua's even had their own corn broker, according to Michael Hultquist Sr., former owner of Lerua's and co-owner of El Torero.

“It’s a good name, people love the product. We’re not the fanciest restaurant, we’re not the average taco shop either...it’s a family business, it’s a family restaurant,” Hultquist Jr. said. “It’s not so much just a place where I go grab really good tacos, there’s some history behind it, there’s a connection behind it.”

El Torero was bought in 1957 by Carmen Borgaro-Hultquist’s sister and Hultquist Jr.’s great aunt, Adelina Borgaro. She ran it a little different than Lerua’s but none the less, their food was just as popular in South Tucson as Lerua’s was on Broadway.

Both restaurants were taken over by the sons later on, once the founders had reached old age. Hultquist Sr. took over Lerua’s in the 1980s and Brad Hultquist took rein over El Torero.

“Two completely different styles of food, two completely different recipes and really two different outlooks,” Hultquist Jr. said.

Lerua’s closed their doors Jan. 19, 2019 due to the city of Tucson wanting to use the space for the Broadway Boulevard expansion project.

While Lerua’s was famous for their green corn tamales, a delicacy that is hard to make from scratch, according to Hultquist Jr., El Torero has deep fried patty tacos that tasted as if you were at your nana’s house, meat dripping with juice and complete with all the fixings of a good taco; cotija cheese sprinkled on top, salsa and lettuce.





“I’ve been [coming] here for about 35 years, my husband has been here since the 50s....because we love the people here and the food and my mother loved it here,” Sherry Brown, a longtime El

Torero customer said. “It was a tradition to come here every time my brother, anybody we picked up from the airport from Connecticut, we’d bring them here...this is the first place we’d stop.”

Her favorite dish at El Torero is the chile relleno. Her husband, Lloyd Brown, was a regular at Lerua’s, always raving about the food and bringing friends and family there who came to town.

They walked out after finishing their meal, but not before they said a few jokes and a goodbye to former owner of El Torero Brad Hultquist.

El Torero was temporarily closed in mid-December after Brad Hultquist suffered a stroke. Hultquist Jr. slowly re-opened at the beginning of June this year. Hultquist Sr. and Brad Hultquist are still around watching over the restaurant, which is now ran mainly by Hultquist Jr.

These two restaurants are some of the longest running restaurants in Tucson, in neighborhoods that embraced the food, the legacy and the loyalty that both restaurants embedded in the community. Everyone who came to the restaurant was treated like family.

Memories forever ingrained in the minds of the owners will always play back when asked about the history, like Hultquist Sr. when he would come to El Torero at 11 years old and hide



behind the bar until closing time or see famous people such as actor Lee Marvin coming into the restaurant with his flock of women.

“They closed at 2 a.m....I had my bike so I rode it home...police officer stopped me and he goes ‘what are you doing, it’s curfew.’ I said, ‘well I was working at El Torero bar,’ I always did this,” Hultquist Sr. said.



While the community is still devastated about the physical closing of Lerua’s, the two restaurants are doing well under one roof. Menus still provide both Lerua’s and El Torero favorites.

Hultquist Jr. is trying new things out with old favorites with his expertise in Mexican cuisine but keeps a close eye on what the community wants.

“I don’t actually consider it work, I enjoy it. My kitchen is my test lab, I get to experiment, I get to cook, see what people think...” Hultquist Jr. said. “For me it’s fun...when you do this, customers aren’t necessarily your family, but they become your family.”

Hultquist Jr. plans on expanding the business and there are ideas in the works to re-open Lerua’s in a new location. The location is still to be determined.