

Road to a better life leads to Lopez to Mucho Loco

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Above: Juan Lopez is the face of Mucho Loco, but the business is a family operation. He owns it in partnership with his father and a cousin.

by Britt Aamodt

Special to the Star News

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{snippet instory} Not every waiter dreams of owning

a restaurant. Not every waiter possesses the skill or ambition to climb the ladder from server to owner. Lopez didn't always.

One of his regular customers in Tennessee opened a Mexican restaurant in Savage, Minn. He asked Lopez if he'd come and work for him. Why not, said Lopez. He packed up and headed north.

"I was young then, 20 years old," Lopez remembers. "I was like a lot of young men, drinking, not thinking much of the future."

His father, a business owner in Jalisco, lectured long-distance. "You're never going to have anything in life," he told his son. In other words, he better give up the party and get down to business.

Lopez didn't listen. He was having too much fun. But the fun stopped after the second DWI. That was in 2001. He found himself in treatment.

"I lost my driver's license," he said. "You feel handicapped not being able to drive."

That's when he started to think about his future.

"I decided I didn't want to drink. When I decided that, when I didn't have the alcohol, I started to think about progress and how to be a better man."

He called a cousin and together the two opened

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their first Mexican restaurant, Rancho Grande, in Buffalo in 2002. “It was a small place, enough room for 15 tables,” he says. But the restaurant flourished. Soon Lopez and his cousin expanded to Monticello and Albertville.

Throughout this period, Lopez toyed with the idea of an Elk River location. But either there wasn’t an available space or the rent was too much. When the business partnership finally split, Lopez’s cousin took the Monticello location and Lopez the Buffalo and Albertville restaurants.

With the Albertville lease coming due, Lopez again turned his sights on Elk River.

Five years earlier, a customer had come into the Buffalo restaurant and asked for the owner. Lopez steeled himself for a customer complaint. But the man handed him a business card. He said he owned commercial property in Elk River and if Lopez ever wanted to open another restaurant, he should give him a call.

Lopez had held onto the card all those years. He rang the number. The next thing he knew he was looking at a property next to the closed Target. “I almost moved there,” he says. “But then the owner said Hirschfield’s Paints was closing and did I want that place?”

He did. Mucho Loco opened Oct. 1.

What differentiates his restaurant from fast-food Mexican, says Lopez, are fresh ingredients. “We make everything fresh. We make fresh salsa with tomato, onion and cilantro. Only the tortilla chips we buy, but we fry them here,” he says.

Plus, there’s added the family touch. Lopez borrowed many of the recipes — enchiladas rancheras,

burrito charro, carne asada — from his mother’s kitchen in Jalisco.

“I don’t know why I decided to move to Elk River when I did, or why I called the building owner when I did, or why the space opened up,” he says, wondering at the neat ordering of events. “I think sometimes when God wants to give you something, it comes by itself.”



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