

The 50-year reign of a self-proclaimed king

The years have proved to be golden for Matt's El Rancho, Austin's Tex-Mex vanguard

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There's no law that says great cooks have to be great storytellers. But a gift for tale-spinning can sure help the time pass while the guests are sitting around waiting for the enchiladas to bake.

Matt Martinez Sr. and his family have spent their lives in orbit around food, either preparing it or serving it or both. So, fortunately, they have no shortage of lore from which to draw while working their magic in the cocina. A half-century's- worth of lore, in fact. Because the Martinez familial creation, El Rancho, opened its doors on July 7, 1952.

Perhaps they will tell you about the time Matt's father, one of Pancho Villa's revolutionaries, narrowly escaped hanging by the Federales. ("We're hanging your husband tomorrow morning," the government telegraphed his would-be widow, "If you want the body, bring a wagon.")

Then there were the lean times when Matt -- who became Austin's first Mexican American Golden Gloves champ in 1937 as "The Battling Newsboy" (he used to throw this very paper, in fact) -- picked up change by going from bar to bar in Central and South Texas and boxing all comers.

Or maybe the Martinez family will relate how Matt and his young bride, Janie, proposed to start an Austin dining tradition -- Matt's El Rancho -- with \$75 cash and a \$300 loan.

And there were the occasions when Matt's maitre'd would receive "The Big Call": Air Force One was landing out at Bergstrom Air Force Base. And shortly thereafter, the Secret Service would cordon off the block, and Lyndon Johnson would make his way through the kitchen, shaking hands with the cooks and busboys and reducing the three little Martinez girls to giggling anxiety when he clasped their small hands in his enormous paw.

If the family ever runs out of tales to tell, then the folks who have flocked to Matt's for the past 50 years will be happy to chime in with their own chronicles. The politicians, sports figures, movie stars, reporters and rock stars all have their stories. So do the just-folks, who for generations have celebrated engagements, weddings, divorces (sometimes sequentially), birthdays and anniversaries all in the shadow of the chatty big red sign that boasts "King of Mexican Food" and "Always Good," and, without qualification, "Best Mexican Food In the World," and, oh yeah, "Closed Tuesdays." (The story goes that Matt used to take his kids to the fights in San Antonio on Tuesdays, and the unusual schedule has endured.)

The sort of multi-generational customer loyalty that El Rancho enjoys derives from a passion for

taking infinite pains, according to 57-year-old Matt Jr., who has built a four-restaurant empire of his own in Dallas and in Jefferson in East Texas. "My daddy was a master at taking care of creatures of habit," he said. "He realized that people were creatures of habit -- they want to go to the same place and see the same people, and know what to expect."

Add to that Matt Sr.'s steel-trap memory for names and faces, his participation in an array of civic organizations and causes (a tradition of involvement that his offspring perpetuate), and his intuitive command of Tex-Mex "comfort food" long before that buzzword was coined. It all adds up to the building blocks of an Austin tradition.

"I used to tell him, 'Daddy, you'd make friends with a rock!' " said his daughter, Gloria Reyna. Doubtless Matt Sr. took the observation as a compliment.

Austin was in a different epoch in 1952. Many, if not most, restaurants in town were racially segregated (although family members insist El Rancho never was); Hank Williams played his last show at the old Skyline Club out on the Dallas Highway that December; the country had a president -- Dwight Eisenhower -- who was born in the 19th century. And Matt and Janie Martinez were fixing to open the doors on their 10-table restaurant. The idea that the humble eatery would endure for three generations and half a century must have seemed like science-fiction to them. Might as well imagine men landing on the moon.

Memories, food and family meld into an unending ribbon of history at Matt's El Rancho, just as textures and tastes of cheese, cumin, chiles, garlic, masa and chili gravy combine into a sublime whole that eclipses its humble components.

When El Rancho No. 1 opened at 302 E. First St. (today, Cesar Chavez Street) in 1952, Matt resembled some sort of tireless, hyperkinetic performance artist, simultaneously greeting customers, buttonholing passersby and passing out El Rancho postcards, matchbooks and business cards with ceaseless enthusiasm.

(Today, by mournful contrast, Matt Sr. is silent and homebound, caught up in the advanced stages of Parkinson's disease.)

The small structure was crammed with its 10 tables and shaded by a huge crepe myrtle bush. Matt and Janie started out serving blue-plate specials, chicken-fried steak and the like, but requests for enchiladas and the other Tex-Mex specialties that Janie had grown up cooking soon took precedence.

Of course, Tex-Mex predates Matt's. It is a venerable cross-border fusion of cowboy/vaquero cooking, with infusions of influences from Aztlan (corn and chocolate) to Europe (pan dulce and potatoes). Still, the Martinez family takes credit for innovative flourishes to the basic Tex-Mex vocabulary: fresh lime margaritas, Mexican pizza, seafood a la Mexicana, the pecans and raisins on the restaurant's famous chile rellenos.

"I grew up in the kitchen, just watching and watching my mother," Janie Martinez recalled of her girlhood. "Then, when my grandmother came over, watch out, because I would be between the

two of them."

El Rancho served many a meal before anyone got around to writing down a formal recipe. "When we started, it was just the way we would cook at home," Janie recalled.

Recipes or no recipes, they must have been doing something right. The Martinezes added an additional dining room onto El Rancho No. 1 the first year. Before they moved across the street to the current site of the Four Seasons Hotel, they expanded No. 1 four times. El Rancho No. 2 went through five expansions before the family finally moved in 1986 to the sprawling, 10,000-square-foot current location at 2613 S. Lamar Blvd.

Some of the wait staff and cooks who worked in No. 1 traveled with them -- some for decades. Daughter Cecilia Muela recalled Lupe Redkey, a waitress who was the first nonfamily employee at El Rancho. "They're not my customers; they're my friends," Cecilia recalled her saying. Redkey worked for Matt's for something like 45 years. Today, her picture is on the restaurant's portrait wall, alongside athletes and politicians and movie stars.

Other employees enjoyed tenures that were extraordinarily long in the context of the service industry. "He trained people to be their very best," Cecilia said of her father.

Fifty is an advanced age for a restaurant, especially one operated continuously by the same family. There are rituals and legends that have grown up around the place after so many years, and the business seems to have encoded itself into La Familia's very DNA.

"Somebody made a mistake," said Janie Martinez with sly deadpan humor one Sunday afternoon at a back booth from which she could keep an eye on the kitchen. "I think we're really only 45."

Two of her three daughters, Cathy Kreitz and Gloria Reyna, sat beside her, laughing knowingly in agreement.

Cathy and Gloria -- along with brother Matt Jr. and sister Cecilia -- all grew up working in the restaurant for various periods of time, just as in his own boyhood, Matt Sr. worked at his father's Congress Avenue restaurant, El Original. To the kids, pulling duty at El Rancho must have seemed like Manifest Destiny.

Matt Jr., Cathy and Gloria all acknowledged they felt a certain pressure to participate in the life of the restaurant. "We just kind of had to be there, because it was our responsibility and we had to help," said Gloria.

"It was our home, as well as our business," said Cecilia later. "It was hard to separate."

"At first, I thought I felt pushed," said Matt Jr. "But I enjoyed doing what I did so much that all of a sudden I realized that this was what I always wanted to do."

"We were so busy, we wanted them to get involved," said their mother. "The first one to get involved was Matt. He must have been 13 years old, and he would help in the kitchen after

school. He loved to be in the kitchen and go to the patio in back where we served drinks. He had a long apron, and he was just so excited to do that."

The girls, for their part, worked at bussing tables, and as hostesses, cashiers and waitresses when time, school and personal inclination permitted.

"I used to be there between 2 and 5, especially during the summertime when there was no school," recalled Gloria. "Daddy would say, 'OK, you go greet the people and make sure they've got whatever they needed. I'll go take the orders, and you help me bring it out. We're gonna do it together.' And that's how I learned." Learned so well, in fact, that she would go on to become, for a time, the general manager at Matt's.

On the other hand, Cathy was by her own admission, "more interested in running around and having fun." She ran as far as New York City, where she went to school and worked in the garment district for 10 years. In need of a job, she applied at "a really fancy Interior Mexican restaurant. I'd never waited on a customer in my life, and my first customer was this big critic from Vogue magazine, and she told the manager, 'Finally! Someone who understands service!' So I thought, well, I must be doing something right."

Some folks would call it dead-solid destiny. Cathy wound up moving back to Austin and becoming involved with El Rancho on a day-to-day basis for six years. Today she, along with her sisters and Matt Jr., sits on the restaurant's board of directors. At least one family member is on hand every day at the restaurant, lending continuity to the personal touch.

Cecilia, with a degree from the University of Texas in interior design, was the natural family member to take a hand when Matt's at last outgrew its second location and prepared to move south of the river in the mid-1980s.

One day, while the third incarnation of El Rancho was still on the drawing board, Cecilia asked her father, "What do you want it to look like?"

"A home, a big hacienda," her father replied. "I want it to have a warm feeling, so that when people are coming here, they feel like they're coming home."

And so it does, from the radiant sunburst on massive, hand-carved wooden front doors, to the oasislike bar, to the patio whose stone wall and lush plantings conceal the sight of the Sonic Drive-In across the way.

On a recent Saturday night, Cathy Kreitz was the Martinez du jour, perambulating among diners, greeting an old customer here, making an adjustment there, holding a quick conference with a waiter over yonder.

In the cool, dark bar, bartenders dealt out variations on Matt's magnum-force margaritas.

Out in the dining room, waiters in long aprons and crisp white shirts oscillate back and forth from the kitchen, like honeybees traveling to and from a hive. Diners, sated for the moment, lean

back in contentment, while others queue up awaiting their turn.

One wonders if Matt and Janie always pictured it this way so long ago. Did they hold hands in the dark and whisper dreams back and forth? It seems a fair guess. At the very least, it's a cinch that it makes a good story.

Some historical material in this article was taken from "Matt Martinez's Culinary Frontier: A Real Texas Cookbook," by Matt Martinez Jr. and Steve Pate (Doubleday, 1997).