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70 years of bean dip and margaritas at El Charro

By John T. Miller



Employees of El Charro beneath the signature sombrero. Photo J. Miller

a cancer facility in Pleasant Hill, the owners give her two nights a week where she happily toils behind the bar.

Ron Adams moved to Lafayette four-and-a-half years ago and calls El Charro his favorite spot in town. "The food is good and everyone who works here is super nice. The prices and the atmosphere are really good. It's laid back." He says he comes here about two to three times per week.

At the other end of the bar, a customer who declined to be named said that he's been coming at least twice a week to El Charro for 50 years. His dad was in the liquor business and claimed that the restaurant was one of his best clients. The Acalanes grad remembers the happy hour that included free bean dip by the pay phone next to the bar. His favorite part of the restaurant? "The parking lot! There's always room for one more car...and the bean dip."

Asked what the secret is for lasting so long in a business where restaurants tend to come and go, Dave Shields responds, "We strive to create the perfect place for friends and family to meet and eat. Everything we do has to answer the question: What does it look like to the customer?"

Laura added, "We want our customers to feel welcome, like we've invited them into our home." She pointed out that they are now serving the third and fourth generation of families in the restaurant.

In 1974, Garcia loaned money to Shield's brother Jim -- an employee in the restaurant at that time -- in order to sell him the business. That same year Laura was hired as the first female hostess. Dave worked for his brother until buying the restaurant from him in 1993. The Garcia family still owns the land and has control of the outside of the building.

"When we took over the business we had 22 employees," said Dave. "Now we have 75!" When Dave worked for his brother he would open in the morning, work as a prep cook for lunch, run the bar at night, close the restaurant and do janitorial work. "I always remember where I came from and try to treat my employees well," he said.

It truly is a family business. One of Dave's favorite memories is of his mom and dad working for them. "My father tended bar and my mom served as a hostess for a 10-year span." The Shields also fondly remember their wedding: "After the ceremony at Hacienda de las Flores the wedding party came to El Charro afterwards for dinner and dancing," recalled Laura.

When Dave was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease about four years ago, Laura took a more active roll in the restaurant after having the luxury of staying at home and helping to raise a grandson. Asked what the

It's 7:30 on a Tuesday night and the parking lot at El Charro's is virtually full. As one car backs out, another enters to take its place.

El Charro has been packing in customers for Mexican food and margaritas for 70 years now, and to mark the occasion the Chamber of Commerce will sponsor a ribbon cutting and celebration at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, June 1, an event that will surely fill up its ample parking lot and then some.

Since 1947, when Fidel "Frank" Garcia occupied the original log cabin on Mt. Diablo Boulevard, El Charro has been serving family-style Mexican food to satisfied customers.

Dave Shields, the current owner, took over the business from his brother in 1993. They added an outdoor patio and have worked to improve the restaurant while maintaining its charm and character.

This particular Tuesday night is representative of all 70 years worth of business. Bartender Jocelyn Monroy is a figure in constant motion. El Charro is her "second family," she says, estimating she makes between 200-300 margaritas a night. She has been working here for 15 years -- the first five fulltime while she went to school, but now that she works as a medical assistant at

future holds, she says, "I'll hang in there as long I can, but when the time comes I'll probably sell the business to one or more of my employees."

We imagine Frank Garcia would applaud the move.

Reach the reporter at: john@lamorindaweekly.com

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