

## Maria Bonita

### Serving Up a Fiesta of Flavors

What started with a dream of one day opening a family restaurant, has become a reality for the owners of Maria Bonita Mexican Cuisine restaurant and catering business, which is also home base for a pair of food trucks recognized for their bold graphics and tasty burritos.

"If you're familiar with Mexican culture, our traditional colors are very bright and vibrant," explained co-founder Itzel Lopez. "The artwork was inspired by my grandmother's garden that was full of colors, so our food trucks stand out when people see them on the street."

Colorful murals by local artist Mike Giron also liven the décor of the Maria Bonita restaurant at 52nd and L Streets, where customers can order from a full menu of casero-style dishes including antojitos (appetizers), burritos, enchiladas, tacos, tortas and quesadillas.



Itzel (right) cited the strength of her mother Miriam (center), sister Dayana (left), and other family members as the driving force behind the success of Maria Bonita, especially during her father's repeated battles with cancer.

"Casero basically means homemade," according to Dayana Lopez, who is assistant manager at the restaurant. "Our flavors are very vibrant and that's what makes us unique. We stay with our original family recipes and our customers love them."

The restaurant features a salsa station with five different styles of salsa made fresh daily from locally purchased ingredients, as well as a Mexican luncheon buffet.

"Customers can choose salsas with mild to really spicy flavors served with our homemade chips," Dayana shared. "And everyone who comes to Maria Bonita has guacamole. Everything we serve is homemade."

Among the restaurant's signature dishes is Enchiladas Verdes, spinach and artichoke filled enchiladas coated with a creamy spinach salsa. Another specialty is Alambres consisting of grilled steak, chicken and shrimp fajitas covered with melted cheese.

The authentic recipes are a family tradition prepared by Miriam and Miguel Lopez who opened the original Maria Bonita restaurant at 19th and Missouri Avenue in 2009. Both were chefs at other Omaha restaurants prior to starting their own business.

"Cooking is in my parents blood, so they handle the cuisine side of the business," Itzel emphasized. "My sister, Dayana, has a huge impact as manager of our website and social media, while I handle most of the administrative work."



Maria Bonita food trucks can usually be found in downtown Omaha, the Old Market area and at major events including the Taste of Omaha, Summer Arts Festival and Benson Days. The menu and scheduled stops for the popular trucks are posted on the restaurant's website at <http://www.mariabonitaonline.com/food-trucks.html>.

Other family members run other aspects of the business."

Catering corporate events, graduations, weddings and other special occasions is another important part of the business.

"In addition to offering box lunches and full-pan options, we cater with our food trucks, which is unique," according to Itzel. "We have capacity to cater gatherings of 500 people or more."

The family's emphasis on quality and innovation has earned the restaurant positive reviews from food critics, customers and Omaha Magazine's "Best of Omaha" designation in the food truck category for three years running.

"Our customers are our cheerleaders, constantly tweeting us and responding to various events that we cater," Itzel observed. "When people experience Maria Bonita, it's hard to let go."

Itzel credited First National Bank of Omaha and the Nebraska Enterprise Fund (NEF) for believing in her family's vision.

"Without the help of First National Bank, we would not be here," Itzel insisted. "First National has been a proud supporter of Maria Bonita starting with our first restaurant. We come in for advice, we share our dreams and they believe in us. We have been delighted to work with them from the beginning to where we are today. They treat us like family."

Photos courtesy of Mike Markoff

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