



Mirna Garcia
Mi Tierra
Memphis, Tennessee

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Interviewer: Simone Delorme, Kelly Spivey, and Annemarie Anderson

Transcription: Annemarie Anderson

Length: Seventeen minutes

Project: Summer Avenue, Memphis

[00:00:35]

Simone: This is Simone Delorme. Today is July 21, 2021, and I am recording this interview for the Southern Foodways Alliance Sumer Avenue documentary project. To start, could you introduce yourself?

[00:00:47]

Mirna Garcia: Sure, my name is Mirna Garcia, and I'm a co-owner of Mi Tierra Restaurant on Summer Avenue. Been here for nineteen years, we're going on nineteen years, close to it.

[00:01:02]

Simone Delorme: And when were you born?

[00:01:03]

Mirna Garcia: I was born in Guatemala, Central America.

[00:01:07]

Simone Delorme: And what year?

[00:01:09]

Mirna Garcia: Oh, please. [Laughter]

[00:01:10]

Simone Delorme: When was it? Tell us your birthday.

[00:01:12]

Mirna Garcia My birthday is November 17, 1964, so that was a long time ago.

[Laughter]

[00:01:18]

Simone Delorme: Okay, okay. So nineteen years ago, you opened the restaurant.

[00:01:10]

Mirna Garcia: Yes, we moved to Tennessee in 1995, and it was a small community for the Hispanics. It was really little. So I got a job at Cozymel's on Poplar Avenue. They were owned by Brinker, and that's where I learned all of my chef stuff, like where to learn how to be a manager. I never got the position, but I got all the training I needed, and that's what brought me here.

[00:01:53]

Simone Delorme: So tell me about the process of opening up your restaurant. Walk me through it. What was that experience like?

[00:02:00]

Mirna Garcia: We come from Chicago. We have-- our family owns a restaurant over there in Chicago. It's the same, it's Mi Tierra, and we always wanted to have a restaurant for ourselves. I was working for Su Casa Realty. I was a secretary. We started looking for a spot, and we found this one. It used to be a cleaner, a doctor's office. It took us nine months to bring the building up to code, and when we rented it, we rented it for ten years, but we were not, we didn't know it wasn't ready to be a restaurant. So the plumbing, the electrical work, the mechanical, everything, took us nine months to actually open the doors. And once we opened the doors, we were really welcomed by the community. The Spanish community was great. We have a little bit of everything, which, there's salsa dancing, and that brings a lot of customers in. Our kitchen is open to 2 AM, so you know, full Colombian menu, and full Mexican to 2 AM, so people, while they're having dinner or having a snack. They're dancing, listening to music, having a drink.

[00:03:16]

Simone Delerme: That's fantastic. Tell me about the interior of the building. The decorations, the décor, and the pictures on the table.

[00:03:24]

Mirna Garcia: Yeah, well, the restaurant, we wanted to bring customers and make them feel like Colombia. Like going out of the country, going on vacation once you walk in through that door. So we put a lot of love into it. The decorations we were putting away for a while because our dream was to open a place like this. So we finally made it. A lot of our customers that go out of town, or they have something at home, they used to bring us souvenirs for us to hang up. You see, we've got a lot of stuff now. [Laughter] And the picture at the table, that's just how we made it at the beginning, but it's been so long that now we're making new tables because we want to get new customers in the tables because they come looking for their picture when they come in. [Laughter]

[00:04:14]

Simone Delerme: Okay, so these are some your older customers.

[00:04:17]

Mirna Garcia: Correct. We made new tables. Some of the tables we still have pictures when we opened up.

[00:04:24]

Simone Delerme: Okay, that's fantastic.

[00:04:25]

Mirna Garcia: Now we're making new pictures on new tables, as you can see. So we're trying to get them ready for new customers' pictures.

[00:04:35]

Simone Delorme: What was Summer Avenue like when you first opened the restaurant? Has it changed a lot?

[00:04:39]

Mirna Garcia: It has changed a lot. It has changed a lot. And then during the pandemic, it's changing— a lot of businesses didn't make it through. And it has been hard, but you know, first steps, this side of Sycamore View and Summer, all the restaurants were open. Shoney's was open, the other places were open, but now, they're like, they're going of business and now we're trying to get it back on track.

[00:05:04]

Simone Delorme: And you've been resilient. How? What did you do throughout the pandemic?

[00:05:09]

Mirna Garcia: Well, we had to close for a few months. We did a lot of carry out. And, but God has been great to us. Now that we're back open, we did a lot of delivery. That was the only way we were able to make it. And then now with, once we opened the doors and all the restrictions were taking, I guess customers were just really ready to go out and have dinner because now we are a lot busier than we were before. Which means that we really made it.

[Laughter] We really made it. We're just hoping we're not go back to the pandemic with us picking up again.

[00:05:59]

Simone Delorme: I want to ask a few more questions get the stories behind the food and get a better sense of your history. Can you tell us what it was like when you moved to Memphis from Chicago, right?

[00:06:10]

Mirna Garcia: Yeah, in 1995 the community was really small. There was hardly anything here. I mean, there was one or two restaurants. It was a long way to have a Mexican plate, and it was just Mexican. When we were first opened, it was just Colombian for us. Instead of serving chips and salsa, we were serving bread and butter and customers would look in and they'd look and they loved the place, but they were not adventurous enough to try the food, so they would leave. So we said we have to do something about this. So we added the Mexican food to the menu, and that started letting customers stay trying the Mexican food and also trying the Colombian. Now they come back and just order the Colombian. They come back for Colombian. They finally tried it out and they like it. You know, our plates are lot of plantains, a lot of fish. Not a lot of cheese. So it's a lot of Caribbean food.

[00:07:12]

Simone Delorme: And you said you're from Guatemala initially. Can you tell me what you remember? How long were you there until you moved to Chicago?

[00:07:20]

Mirna Garcia: Well, I was only— I was fourteen years old when I moved to Chicago. I finished grammar school in Chicago, and then I went to high school there and I did some college and then I moved to Tennessee in 1995. And like I said, I went looking for a job, when I found Cozymel's where they trained me and showed me everything I needed to know to have this place.

[00:07:49]

Simone Delorme: Okay, okay. Growing up, what were mealtimes like in your family? What kinds of foods did you eat? Who did the cooking?

[00:07:57]

Mirna Garcia: In Guatemala, my mom. My mom and grandma. My grandma was essentially the one who cooks. And in Guatemala, we'd eat a lot of black beans. Colombia has red beans. They, we eat a lot of plantain, sweet or ripe. We, Guatemala is more like Mexican. More like Mexican food.

[00:08:21]

Simone Delorme: And did you learn to cook the food?

[00:08:23]

Mirna Garcia: I did. Once I got here, I had to. I had no choice because sometimes the cooks, you know, they're sick or we don't have enough employees. They're not like it. I have done the bar, I have done the kitchen, and right now, I'm staying away. [Laughter] I'm just from behind. I can't handle it anymore. I'm tired. It's been twenty years, yes. So a little bit of everything.

[00:08:58]

Simone Delorme: Okay. What was it like in Chicago growing up?

[00:09:01]

Mirna Garcia: Well, in Chicago, the reason why we moved from Chicago is because of the weather, you know.

[00:09:05]

Simone Delorme: Oh.

[00:09:05]

Mirna Garcia: The weather in Chicago, it's terrible. It's fifty below zero. It's really cold, so.

[00:09:15]

Simone Delorme: How did you choose Memphis, of all places?

[00:09:18]

Mirna Garcia: Well, I have my uncle, my uncle and my aunt live here. And I came to visit, and they live out in Cordova, and I thought it was a beautiful place. And I have a son. He was seven then and you know, I thought it would be a good change for him. And we're here. Never going back. We go back to visit, but that's it.

[00:09:39]

Simone Delorme: Okay, so you have family in Chicago still.

[00:09:41]

Mirna Garcia: We still do, yeah. My family is very large, so we still have aunts and cousins.

[00:09:52]

Simone Delorme: Do you guys have any questions you want to jump in and ask about the past or family?

[00:09:58]

Annemarie Anderson: I have a couple questions, do you, Kelly?

[00:10:00]

Kelly Spivey: Yeah.

[00:10:00]

Annemarie Anderson: Go ahead.

[00:10:03]

Kelly Spivey: Has anybody in your family come and eaten here?

[00:10:05]

Mirna Garcia: Yes, actually, tonight my uncle is going to be, he's got a birthday. He's going to be seventy, and all my family are coming. They have a reservation at six o' clock, to come and have dinner and have a good time for a little bit.

[00:10:21]

Annemarie Anderson: You were talking a little bit about the Latino community in Memphis and how it's changed.

[00:10:27]

Mirna Garcia: It has grown a lot. It has grown a lot.

[00:10: 30]

Annemarie Anderson: Will you talk a little about that? How its changed since you've arrived in 1995?

[00:10:34]

Mirna Garcia: When we first started, we were, actually, the first restaurant that we had food, liquor, and dancing at the same place. So we were really busy all the time. The small community would get together and come here. A lot of business owners are part of our customers. And now, you, before it was more Colombian. And now, it has grown to where we serve people from Honduras, from Guatemala, from El Salvador, from Puerto Rico. We got a lot of— our community has grown a lot more than before.

[00:11:17]

Annemarie Anderson: That's cool. I'm also wondering what was the draw to food? Why did you choose a career as a restaurateur?

[00:11:27]

Mirna Garcia: Well, like I said, we come from Chicago, and my brother-in-law owns a restaurant and we help him build it, and he made something like Mi Tierra, so it was our dream to do something like it. And over here in Tennessee, there was nothing like this. We would have to go like Collierville looking for a Mexican restaurant to have a plate of food, and we knew it was going to be a hit if we would do something like this because there was nothing else like it. And the Colombian food, there are just a couple of restaurants in Memphis that serve Colombian food. And thank God, now we're selling a lot of food. And before, it was more the dancing part, the bar, now it's, you know, people come in and eat. Our food sales have gone up a lot.

[00:12:22]

Annemarie Anderson: I have one more. Could you maybe describe or talk a little bit about the Colombian food you serve here?

[00:12:26]

Mirna Garcia: Yes, we have a full Colombian menu , but we have traditional plates, which are the ones that sell the most. And we try people try them out. Like, we have one that's called Bandeja Mi Tierra, which is the typical, traditional Colombian plate. It has a little bit of everything. It has white rice, red beans, which we cook with stew and plantains, that comes with ripe plantains. Chicharron, which is the pork rind. Steak and fried egg. It's a big plate. Fried egg, avocado, and a little arepa, which is like a corn tortilla, but it's a little thicker and smaller. That plate is very traditional. And sausage with the corn cake, call it corn cake, but it's called an arepa. It's just like the tortilla. But it comes with the sausage, or it comes with steak or shredded

beef. Our typical empanadas, which is a really great dessert. They're like turnovers, little chimichanga. They're stuffed with a special stew that we make with potatoes and meat, and tomatoes. And we cook this stew and we just put it together , put it inside of the empanada and we fry it. Those are really good, too. You guys have to try it.

[00:13:57]

Kelly Spivey: I have one more question. I was looking at your menu, and it may have been a couple years older, but you have a drink on there, I think it was called bebido con queso?

[00:14:10]

Mirna Garcia: Chocolate?

[00:14:11]

Kelly Spivey: Maybe?

[00:14:12]

Mirna Garcia: We have a aguapanela con queso, which is piloncillo water, which is brown sugar, and then when it's really hot, you put the cheese inside and it melts. It can be done with that, or with the hot chocolate.

[00:14:11]

Kelly Spivey: That sounds really good.

[00:14:34]

Mirna Garcia: It's really good. Chocolate, you know, it's a hot drink, it's a hot drink because the idea is for the cheese to melt. Queso fresco, which is a white cheese.

[00:14:55]

Simone Delorme: Otherwise, is there anything that you want to add? Give you the last word. Is there anything you want people to know? Any memories you want to share?

[00:15:06]

Mirna Garcia: Well, we just, we've been here for a while. Everything that we've done here, Mi Tierra, we do it for our customers so that they can enjoy it and they can have a good time. And we're very happy to know that it's been so many years and the community has been there backing us up. Especially as I said, then now with the COVID, the food to go kept us going. The community. As soon as we opened the doors, they came in and backed us up. And here we are. We're still here trying to make it.

[00:15:43]

Simone Delorme: Thank you so much.

[00:15:45]

Mirna Garcia: No, thank you guys.

[End of interview]