



Alberto Campos, owner of Cafe de la Mission takes the last orders of the day while his friend Mario Lopez, left, helps clean up.

# Corazón y Alma

## Cafe de la Mission celebrates 12 years

Story by Emily Huston Photographs by Emily Trinh

**A**lberto Campos swings around the counter to fetch a piece of flan from beneath its glass dome. As he returns to the table, caramel pools in the corner of the paper tray. "Don't be shy," he urges, pushing the wobbling custard forward with a smile.

Six days a week, Alberto works behind the eight-wheeled technicolor cart that is the heart of Cafe de la Mission. He and his wife Veronica Campos have been serving up fresh pastelitos, tamales and pupusas to

the City College of San Francisco Mission Center community since 2008. Situated on campus, in Room 153, an institutional space that likely was intended to be a classroom or student study lounge, it's the kind of place where regulars are welcomed by name, and people tend to stay a while.

"This is a commuter school. Where else do students get a chance to meet people?" asks Bill Schwalb, a sometimes-student who lives four blocks away and has been frequenting the cafe for many years.



Alberto and Veronica Campos' homemade flan is a favorite at Cafe de la Mission.

He jokes, "My major is eating here," as he tucks into a pupusa revuelta, a traditional Salvadoran dish of masa stuffed with crispy pork, beans and

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cheese then topped with queso fresco, peppers and fresh salsa.

Spanish is the prevailing language here, of the food and of the people. Growing up with seven brothers and five sisters in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, Alberto has been cooking since his grandmother used to kill the roosters by hand. "Like this," he says, twisting his wrist with his fingers clamped to mime the unlucky bird's neck being wrung dry.

Alberto moved to Oklahoma when he was 14, and found himself to be the only Spanish-speaking student in his school. The other boys asked him to teach them bad words in his native tongue.

Wanting to be closer to their cousins, Alberto and his brother Joel moved out to San Francisco a few years later. There Alberto found work as a dishwasher, then prep cook and eventually climbed the kitchen ladder up to line cook. No job lasted very long, as he flitted back and forth between his hometown of San Juan de los Lagos, in Jalisco, and San Francisco.

In his late 20s, at the behest of a friend, Alberto went to Los Angeles to cater at Universal Studios for Denzel Washington, Matt Damon and other Hollywood stars.

Nowadays, his menú del día serves a less glitzy clientele. Since there's no kitchen, only a cramped 8-by-8 foot prep corner in Room 153, most of the food is prepared off-site, either by local vendors or by the Campos family in their San Bruno home. The dozen-item menu encompasses a cross-pollination of food traditions—Salvadoran, Dominican, Argentinian, Mexican—the portions are hearty and affordable.

Take, for example, the cafe's popular breakfast burrito. It's stuffed with a fair bit more than \$4.75 worth of egg, chorizo, and potato. The South San Francisco restaurant Villa del Sol delivers

out when we don't open because they're like, 'Oh we're not going to sell anything to you guys?' and I have to say, 'Sorry, we're closed.'"

Some of their local vendors Alberto knows only on a first-name basis, like Mariano. He brings the flan, baked fresh each morning by his wife. "You won't believe it," Alberto says with a laugh, "but I never asked his last name."

As Alberto and Jose heat up orders and squeeze fresh orange juice on a Thursday morning, the cafe's soundscape contrasts staccato slams of the microwave door against the high-pitched whir of



Alberto hands a pupusa to a student at the counter.



Alberto, right, and his wife Veronica Campos, left, work together at Cafe de la Mission at the Mission Center before the campuswide shut down in response to the shelter-in-place orders.

their juicer. The doors open at 8 a.m. and orange plastic chairs spread around the cafe fill up fast.

In between orders, Jose complains of declining sales as a result of class cuts. The recent spate of slashed courses from the spring 2020 schedule has translated to a noticeable drop in students, faculty and staff eating at Cafe de la Mission versus semesters prior.

"Compared to two to three years ago, it's pretty slow," Jose says. "The rumor is that summer classes have gotten cut even more, so we don't know if summer is going to be worth opening up." Short-Term Interim Chancellor Dianna Gonzales announced in April that the summer session will operate entirely online to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Without a home on campus, the Campos family could be forced to seek out other ways to keep their business afloat.

"Maybe we'll have to look for something independent, open up our own spot," Jose continues.

Despite the ups and downs at this family-run cafe, Alberto remains a constant; the man behind every morning's start and every night's close.

As Jose tells it, he and his father wake up everyday at 6 a.m. to set up the cafe. Jose leaves around 2 p.m., but Alberto is there all day, shutting down at 8 p.m. to get home by 9 p.m. That's a 15-hour day, for those doing the math at home. His only day off is Sunday.

"I've been working so hard here," Alberto says, as he sits down after a long day on his feet. He greets customers as they settle around communal tables scattered about the room.

Jose speaks of the mutual familiarity that has formed between the Campos family and the Mission community over the past 12 years. "You see the same faces usually, and then you start to know what they like. Sometimes they don't even have to ask. They'll just show up and we'll do it," he says.

Since Cafe de la Mission doesn't run ads, they depend on word-of-mouth to entice new customers. It also helps that there aren't many places in San Francisco where you can get a tamal and a fresh churro for under 10 bucks.



Alberto stands behind his technicolored cart where he can often be found greeting and serving customers. He hopes the cafe will be able to reopen soon.

At the end of the night, while Alberto wipes down the counters, Veronica turns with an expectant look and asks, "Do you want anything to eat, to drink?"

The casual touch of kindness is a reminder of the currency of relationships that cafe owners deal in and why a small business like theirs has lasted over 12 years in San Francisco. Here the food is something not to be sold, but to be shared—and there's plenty of flan to go around.

*At the time of publication, Cafe de la*

*Mission remains closed due to City College's decision to cancel all on-campus classes. Instead of celebrating a storied 12-year anniversary, the future of this neighborhood mainstay is in limbo.*

*In the meantime, Cafe de la Mission cannot offer takeout like other restaurants because they depend on the college to be open. After speaking with Gregoria Nova Cahill, the interim dean of academic affairs at Mission Center, Alberto hopes to reopen in the fall 2020 semester.*