

Food for the Body, Food for the Spirit: Irma Gabran and Her Award-Winning Mexican Restaurant, Irma's

By Sandra Davidson



In the 1940s, young Irma Gonzáles Galvan moved with her family from Brownsville, Texas, to Houston's Second Ward. As children, Irma's brothers shined shoes, while Irma and her sister worked at their school cafeteria and neighboring bakeries in order to help their mother. These early experiences, combined with later work in retail, and the desire to overcome personal tragedy, culminated in Galvan's 1989 opening of her own Mexican restaurant, Irma's.

The success of Irma's, particularly being named an America's Classic by the James Beard Foundation in 2008, has brought Galvan much attention in the form of articles and interviews. Megan Schneider interviewed Irma in 2008 for the "Houston Oral History Project"; two years later, I interviewed her for the Center for Public History's project at the University of Houston, "Gulf Coast Foodways: History, Culture, and Economy."¹

The very first time I met Irma, she asked me if the interview was going to take place right then. She was ready, I was not! When I returned at a later date, Galvan looked much as she had before—a petite lady, hair pulled neatly back, and eyes sparkling behind dark-rimmed glasses. Her physical appearance, combined with the long, white apron she wore, made Galvan look every bit the mother

or friend figure amid this comfy home away from home where photographs, articles, and knickknacks cover the walls. Because most items came from family, friends, and customers, they reflect what Irma's means to the community, what the community means to Irma, and the link between food and family.

Sandra Davidson [SD]: What are some of your earliest memories of cooking?

Irma Galvan (IG): I was like a mother to my two brothers and my sister. I cooked for them. And I remember the first time that I learned how to make Mexican rice. ... It didn't turn out very well at first, but I think when you try and try again you kind of get the niche to do it better. So we had rice for breakfast, rice for lunch, and rice for dinner, and that was the first thing that I remember. And another thing too is the *picadillo*, you know, the ground beef, and refried beans. I was the chef in the family. ... But it was good because I learned how to be responsible and how to cook.

SD: What do you remember about your school experience?

IG: I have always lived in the Second Ward area, ... I've been here forever. I went to Our Lady of Guadalupe School, ... Marshall Junior High, and I graduated from Jefferson Davis High School. ... We didn't have anything when we were kids. We always took tacos for lunch and the other kids took ham sandwiches. We were embarrassed to take

This is how Irma's looks today. Many improvements, including new paint and plants, were added to the original building.

Photos by author unless otherwise noted.





Irma Galvan proudly holds her James Beard Award. Irma's was the only restaurant from Texas to win in 2008.

tacos to school. ... that kind of made me be the way I am ... you learn from those experiences, [and] you try to better yourself in life.

Megan Schneider [MS]: After working for [Furniture Warehouse owned by Melvin Littman], what happened that pulled you towards opening a restaurant?

IG: I had a friend that told me ... "Open you up a sandwich shop right here on Chenevert." And I told him, "Well, I am not good at that." He said, "No, you are a good cook." But this was a warehouse area and everybody was moving out of here. ... It was like a ghost town here. It was a very dangerous and very depressing area. Finally, he talked me into it and I opened up a sandwich shop, and I did not do very well for the last two or three months. It used to be where people would come in, grab a sandwich and get a bag of chips, a drink, and on the go. But I got stuck with a lot of sandwiches. ... Nobody came out here. I started fixing up the place because ... people did not want to come up here. I started landscaping. I had my friends help me paint the building, decorate it a little bit, brought in little whatnots and I had started [to get] people coming in.

I was delivering tacos to the judges, to the courthouse. ... I opened the restaurant in 1989 and ... I started getting attorneys, judges, bankers, the police department, the sheriff's department, and it was all word of mouth that I got these people in. I made it a point all the time to be here to wait on my customers. I greet them at the door, I go to their table. Sometimes I know what they like, how they like the stuff cooked, and they bring me customers from all over the

world. During the spring, the teachers come with the kids, and during the summer, people travel from out of town to come to Irma's. And I have to be here because when they travel from so far ... I want to make sure that I am here to take care of them.

SD: What changes in the building have you made since you first started?

IG: When I first started it was a little table that I brought from my house. I brought a lot of stuff from my house. I had no pots. No pans. No nothing. ... Then I'd say about three years later I borrowed money from the bank to do my middle dining room. And people said, "Please don't change. Don't get big. They tend to lose this and that." I said, "Well, I hope not, but I'm going to try to do the same thing that I did—decorate with Mexican flair, New Orleans and the Warehouse District. And it caught on.

MS: I heard that when you were first starting the restaurant, people would steal things and that people actually stole the plant out in front of the restaurant.

IG: When I first opened up here, we painted the building real nice...I put beautiful Mexican pots with palm trees and stuff like that. I am from the Valley so I like palm trees. I decorated really nice. I would come, and I said, something is missing. All my pots were gone. I started planting little palms along the side of the restaurant. They were pulled out. That kept on for a long time. I got a friend of mine who is like six foot seven [inches tall] and there was a Fiesta Ballroom right here on the corner of Franklin, so they were taking those plants up there to sell them to the ladies up there at the ballroom. ... I knew who was doing it [because] they came and told me. I got my friend, and we got a play gun — you couldn't tell the difference. I approached the two guys, and I said, "You have been stealing the plants from me." "Oh, no, no." "Yes, you have." As a matter of fact, he had a little buggy with a couple of the plants of palm trees, so I knew they were mine. My friend told them, "If you ever do this again, we are going to come up here and get you." They [replied], "Oh, no, we are not going to do it anymore." ... The thing about it is they broke in the building here two or three times. They stole my meat. That is the reason that I have all this wrought iron all over the restaurant. When I first opened it was very, very hard to keep anything that was not attached to the building.

SD: Where did all the wall décor come from?

IG: They came from my customers. People that travel say, "Irma, I brought you this." If I see people that I know [are] in the paper I cut it [out] and put it on the wall. I have a lot of the people that are running for office, and they say, "Irma, can you put the sign on your restaurant?" I say, "I'd be happy to." I have things that I have [from] people [who] have passed away, and they're still here. Their family comes here and they say, "Oh, Irma, you still have it here?" I said, "Yes, I do." I have things that customers want to buy. And I say "No money can buy the things that were handed to me from my people so there is no price. Things are priceless."

SD: Let's talk a little bit about food. How do you know what you're going to be serving on a particular day?

IG: When I first started, we had about two or three different things on the menu because we have a very tiny kitchen. I



Irma knows how to decorate. She frequently acquires pieces from customers and deeply values all of the items that line her walls.

Photos by Naveen Inampudi.

had like *chile rellenos*, I had *mole poblano*. I had enchiladas. Things that do not sell, I [would] delete them from the menu. And things that [did], well I put it twice a week on the menu. We have no menus because we want to do what the customer wants. ... Usually when you go to a restaurant they have a menu and they say you cannot change it. I said, "Okay, but that's not the way I want to do things. I want to be able to please my people, my customers."

SD: What are some of the more popular things that people order?

IG: Vegetarian fresh spinach enchiladas with a green tomatillo sauce. The roasted poblano peppers stuffed with chicken, beef, or cheese. Those are very popular. The mole

poblano is very good. Steaks—ribeyes, black angus, is one of our good sellers and then we have a very good seller. It's the talapia fish with shrimp with the sun dried tomatoes, mushrooms and fresh garlic.

SD: What is your favorite dish?

IG: I like eating my food. All of it. Actually, I have no favorite. They're all good.

SD: Could you please tell us a little bit about the James Beard Award that you won?

IG: About three years ago there [were] about sixteen people that came in. It was about one o'clock in the afternoon and my friend Alison Cook, who is one of our good customers—she brought some people in to eat. ... I love waiting

on people personally. I sat them in the front dining room. ... I walked up to them, and I said, "Okay, what would you all like to eat?" And they said, "Well, we don't know." So I took the initiative, and I said, "You know what? Let me fix you something good." I served it family style. You know, *casuelas*, the bowls of mole poblano, mole enchiladas, Mexican enchiladas. ... Tamales. ... Chile rellenos. [I] cut it up in small portions, and I put it on the table, and I passed it around ... They loved it. They took my picture. ... I would say it was about a month later, I saw it in the paper that I had gotten the James Beard Award in Houston, Texas. I said, "Oh my God." I was shocked. You know these people had visited other restaurants, and I don't remember what restaurants they visited, but nevertheless I was very happy that Irma's little hole in the wall had gotten the James Beard Award. I got a call about two months later. I was in the middle of lunch, and they asked for me. I said, "This is Irma." And she said, "You have won this and that." I said, "You know what? Can you call me later?" 'cause I didn't know—understand what they were saying. I said, you know, they're always trying to sell you something. She called me the next day, and she said that I had gotten the award. She explained to me I got plane tickets, and I said, "Oh, my God." Of course it was in the paper, and I was very, very, happy. This was like an Academy Award. I went to New York to the Lincoln Center, and it was like the red carpet. Bobby Flay gave me the award. Actually there [were] five restaurants, and the only one in Texas was me. ... When I went up there to New York they interviewed us even before I got there. It was—it was like a dream. I mean they picked me among other fine restaurants in Houston. We have very good restaurants. We have very good chefs. I'm not a chef. I'm just a homey person thinking, or hoping, that people like my home cooking.

SD: You also won the State Farm Embrace Life Award. Could you tell me about that?

IG: I remember this very well. It was a summer, a summer day about five thirty. And my girlfriend Gracie Saenz, who was on City Council, she calls me up and she says, "Irma, I'm going to write a story about you." She had been trying to sit down and talk to me, but I was very busy. Always busy. So she says, "I got maybe twenty-four hours to turn this in." She was interviewing me when I was out in the parking lot parking cars. She said, "I want to know about your life, how you started your business and stuff like that." I was on my cell phone giving her all the information. She said, "I'm going to turn your name in and hopefully we'll do something." I said, "Yeah, Gracie. Right." Then I get another call about a month later, and this lady says, "Irma, this is so-and-so, and you've won the ... State Farm Embrace Life Award." I said, "Yeah, okay." Again. That was the first time I said, "Yeah, okay." And again she says, "I'm going to mail you a packet." I said, "Okay." ... I got all the information—a trip for two to New York, my first trip to New York. ... I was shocked and pleasantly surprised that I had won the award. I got ten thousand dollars, the round trip for two to New York, the hotel, dinners at three different places. Beautiful. You know when people say, "I love New York,"

I say, "Everybody loves New York." But when I went to New York, I loved New York very much.

SD: Was there an awards ceremony for that also?

IG: Yes. There was a little awards ceremony, and they did kind of a little history on each of the winners, the five. ... They called mine, "Diamond in the Rough" because of the area, my life history, how a widow like me has strived to better themselves ... not only for themselves, but for their family. My four kids, they're not kids anymore, they're forty, forty-five. I still call them my kids.

SD: One of your kids has a restaurant.

IG: Yes, Louis, my oldest son. ... He has Irma's Southwest Grill on the corner of Texas and Austin. He's been there [about] thirteen years now. ... He's doing very, very well and I'm very, very happy for him. ... [it] means a lot to me when he asks me for permission or ideas.

SD: Were you surprised when he wanted to open a restaurant?

IG: No, I wasn't surprised. I wanted him to do that because he's got different ideas than I do. And ... I want him to do things on his own. I really wasn't surprised. I was kind of sad that I had to lose him because everyone loved Louis here at the restaurant, but in a way it's better. He's bettering himself in going in different directions.

SD: Do you have similar food?

IG: Not really. He's got my lemonade, the fresh fruit lemonade. But he does more like sea bass and different things than I do. If he does the things that I do they are different, differently cooked than mine.

SD: What do you think is the most important lesson you have learned over the years?

IG: I think losing my husband, losing my job has made me a stronger person. ... When my husband passed away, I had no insurance. I had no *dinero*, no money. My kids were very young. My youngest one was five years old. When I first opened up here, it wasn't good. I wasn't doing very well. Actually, nobody knew that I had a restaurant here ... because everybody was gone. The thing that I had learned from this is, don't give up. I swear I wanted to give up, just like I want to give up opening at nights. But you know, if [I] give up, I will never have respect for myself ... because you know what? I know I can do it. With God's help, and people that know Irma, they have helped me through this because I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my friends and my customers. ... You have to have confidence in yourself. When you start losing confidence, you start losing—like me trying to give up, it wouldn't be me. If I die, I would have that always in my heart, and I cannot do that. I cannot look back. I have to look forward. And I have to go forward. 

Irma's, just blocks from Minute Maid Park, is located at 22 N. Chenevert Street, Houston, Texas, 77002. Hours are Monday through Wednesday 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., Thursday and Friday 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., and Saturday 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. The restaurant is closed on Sundays.

Sandra Davidson is currently a Ph.D. student studying history at the University of Houston.