

# House Special: Mexican Food & Houston Politics

By Mikaela Garza Selley

From their beginnings, restaurants have served as more than just places to eat; people use restaurants as social centers and community landmarks. This is especially true in ethnic neighborhoods, where minority entrepreneurs have historically used their establishments to engage in civic activism.

Doneraki Authentic Mexican Restaurant, Merida Mexican Café, Villa Arcos Taquitos, and Andy's Café are long-standing Houston institutions whose political involvement remains as well-known as their house specialties. From hosting campaign stops to providing a place to catch up on local political news, these four establishments played important roles in Houston's political scene.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion of food and politics in Houston would be incomplete without due recognition of Felix Tijerina. Tijerina (1905 – 1965), Houston civic leader and original owner of Felix Mexican Restaurant, became “the most recognized Mexican

American business success story in Houston.” Most importantly, Tijerina and others of his generation began a level of civic activism that influenced events from the 1920s to the mid-1960s, using restaurants to strengthen their connection to the Mexican American community. Felix's became the unofficial gathering place for many groups and clubs from the 1930s forward.<sup>2</sup>

When Doneraki, Merida, Villa Arcos, and Andy's opened for business, the political scene in Houston looked and felt different. In 1966, the Houston Mexican American community won its first victory to a major political position—Magnolia Park's Lauro Cruz won the State Representative District 23, position. In 1969, a record number of Mexican Americans ran for office. By 1975, three elected Mexican American officials served in major positions.<sup>3</sup>

Along with the rise of Mexican Americans in more powerful positions in Houston came a national change in at-



*Doneraki used this poster to promote the opening of the Gulfgate Mall location, an investment that made Rodríguez very proud.*

Photo courtesy of Cesar Rodríguez.

titudes toward Mexican food. Books published in the 1970s defined Tex-Mex food as a purely American regional cuisine and highlighted the growing interest in ethnically diverse foods among Americans.<sup>4</sup> Houston's economic boom in the late 1970s and early 1980s brought an influx of Mexican immigrant laborers who demanded Hispanic businesses. A rise in immigrant and minority entrepreneurs catered to this previously untapped Hispanic market.<sup>5</sup>

Within this environment of change Doneraki, Merida, Villa Arcos, and Andy's were established. I sat down with the owners and managers of these eateries, and they shared their stories with me.

## Doneraki Authentic Mexican Restaurant

As a young man, Cesar Rodríguez moved with his mother and one of his brothers to Houston's Northside from Mexico in 1972.

Rodríguez held three jobs that first year. At the end of

the year, he received a \$600 refund check from the IRS, and with it, he opened his first restaurant on 76th and Avenue E. He remembers doing just about everything to get people to go inside his restaurant, including standing outside making noise with pots and pans and shouting for customers to try his tacos. Within one year he expanded and opened a location on Fulton in a former gas station.

Rodríguez wanted to work for himself, and he knew that a restaurant with authentic Mexican food would do well. Places like Felix Mexican Restaurant and Molina Mexican Restaurant (first established in 1941) served Tex-Mex food. Rodríguez explains, “I don't like to serve enchiladas in that way: chili con carne, because we don't eat that in Mexico.” He thought the community was ready for authentic food, and Doneraki provided it. He named the restaurant after Don Erakio, the creator of tacos al carbón, a style Rodríguez says he himself brought to Houston.

The food, however, is only half of Doneraki's story.

Rodríguez's entrepreneurial spirit complimented his genuine interest in the Latina/o community. The long list of prominent political players that frequent the restaurant on Fulton and the number of campaign fundraisers and community meetings held at Doneraki over the years reflect the restaurant's history as a political stomping ground. This political history and investment in the community goes back to Doneraki's earliest years.

Rodríguez described the first few years of business in the Northside in the 1970s. Directly across from Moody Park, Doneraki on Fulton was and remains in the center of one of Houston's Mexican barrios. "We [had] a lot of oppression in that area. It's hard to do my business because there [were] a lot of problems in that time . . . I remember they came to my place to steal my jukebox money. Two times a week they broke my windows." Rodríguez approached the young men who targeted Doneraki and personally invited them to his restaurant; ". . . in the future they were the people that protected Doneraki. They never stole anything [again]."

Just a few years later in 1978, the area witnessed the Moody Park riot, a reaction to the murder of Joe Campos Torres by Houston police a year earlier. He recalls the chaos and the flames from burning businesses. "Everybody knew me . . . the people said 'No don't do anything to Doneraki because he helps us every time!'"

Rodríguez was a fixture in the community and Doneraki became a gathering place for Mexican American leaders. The restaurant's first major role in politics began when it headquartered Ben Reyes's campaign for Houston City Council in 1979. Reyes served as the first Mexican American member of the city council. Many consider Reyes the godfather of Mexican American politics from the 1970s to the 1990s. In 1991, Frumencio Reyes, a leading political activist and founder of the Harris County Tejano Democrats, described Doneraki as his "second home," a sentiment shared by many, due to the frequent meetings held at the restaurant. Rodríguez explains that when politicians run for office, ". . . they come to the barrio . . . this is the heart. There is a lot of power here."<sup>6</sup>

*Cesar Rodríguez's family has always been a part of the three local restaurants. Here Rodríguez stands with his brother Jorge at the original location on 76<sup>th</sup> and Avenue E.*

Photo courtesy of Cesar Rodríguez.



*Rafael Acosta, third from right, at the ribbon cutting ceremony for the inauguration of the Merida location on NASA Road. Acosta is the son of Merida's founders and the current owner.*

Photo courtesy of Rafael Acosta.

## Merida Mexican Café

Merida Mexican Café opened in 1972 on Navigation Boulevard. Rafael and Olga Acosta started with just eight tables, plastic chairs borrowed from friends, and tortilla chips donated by Ninfa Laurenzo's tortilla factory across the street. The original staff included the Acostas, one waitress, one busboy, and the Acosta children. Their only son, also named Rafael, has owned Merida since 1977, and he recalls:

*My mother was an American citizen. But my father was not, and neither were my sisters or I. When they applied to come here, they were told that my mother could come in, but . . . the rest of the family had to stay in Mexico. My mother had a lot of guts. She wrote a letter to Eisenhower in 1953 or '54 . . . and in about four to six weeks she got an official response from the White House that said 'Go to the embassy and show them this letter' [stating the whole family can come to the U.S.] Now who was to think that a Republican president would care about a Hispanic family in Mexico?*

When the family arrived in Houston after receiving the letter, Rafael Acosta opened the Acosta Refrigeration Shop where Merida now stands. The business struggled. He did not charge if he knew the family could not afford it, sometimes working a full day without pay. Rafael recalls, "People would help my dad, just like he helped them, because word got around. . . . I used to come and answer the phone and hear 'This is Mr. Morales from KLVJ [the first Spanish language radio station in Houston]. Tell Mr. Acosta he needs to come right away something is wrong with the air conditioner.' So my father would go out and see that somebody had cut the wires. It was Mr. Morales cutting the wires so my father would have something to do. He would pay him one hundred dollars."

Rafael Acosta worked in AC repair until an injury prevented him from running the shop. He and his wife decided to open a restaurant. "In the 1970s, you had national chains or semi-national chains: Monterrey House, El Chico's, and El Torito. . . . [Felix] Tijerina was part of

these chains. For some reason there was a . . . rift between Mexican restaurants and Tex-Mex restaurants. . . . I like both.” Even though Rafael’s family would complain about going to the chains, he recalled “I’d go once a month . . . the classic enchiladas with chili con carne. I had to get my fix. Once a month we’d go to Felix’s restaurant too.”

The Acostas wanted to offer regional food from the Yucatan, or Mayan cuisine. “We brought in a new style of Mexican food. Doneraki’s and Ninfa’s, for example, [had] the carnes asadas and tacos al carbón. Merida’s the *cochinita pibil* . . . Yucatan food . . . when we sold black beans . . . people would say, ‘What are those things? Horrible! Take them away!’ So we would give them platters of black beans for free. After about three years, most of the enchiladas were ordered with black beans.” Rafael explained, “We had to educate the Anglo community to trust us. . . . But they were a little fearful . . . first off just coming into the neighborhood . . . We had to say, ‘Hey, it’s not as bad as you think it is in Hispanic neighborhoods.’”

Merida’s location just blocks away from downtown Houston has served the restaurant well. Their customer base boasts a long list of judges, lawyers, and other downtown employees. “I remember they used to call . . . my restaurant a Brown & Root subsidiary because at lunch everyone from Brown & Root was here.” The restaurant takes pride in its long list of repeat customers. “The good thing is that the same people . . . have been with us for years. . . . I’m talking twenty years. . . . We’ve been fortunate.”

Merida’s is also known as a “political restaurant.” City politicians such as former Councilmember Gracie Saenz and Texas Representative Carol Alvarado have held their fundraisers at Merida. Former Houston Mayors Bob Lanier and Bill White also frequented the restaurant. “We have Republicans, Democrats, we even have Independents come here, and we treat them all alike. . . . One day we had the Democratic candidate for city council, and the very next day we had the Republican candidate for the same office.”

Rafael believes that a business must lend itself to the Houston community to have a role in local politics. His restaurant does this by opening its doors to political functions and events. Merida is frequently used as a neutral location where important negotiations and decisions are made, and every election year, Merida hosts fifteen to twenty fundraisers. “For some reason . . . and I’m not saying that it’s true, but the feeling is if you want to get in touch with the Hispanic community, you gotta have your fundraiser here.”

Rafael explains that it is popular belief that a fundraiser at Merida is a good investment. “We do it because we feel that the Houston community is entitled . . . to hear their message and let the people decide. If this is what it means for us, for people to get to know their candidates, then I think it’s a good idea. It doesn’t hurt that they stay and have

dinner afterwards, and they like the food. But we do it with the intent of letting those people carry their message and let the people decide who the best candidate is.”<sup>7</sup>



*Campaign fundraiser for Robert Eckels, seeking position as county judge, at Merida’s second Fulton location.*

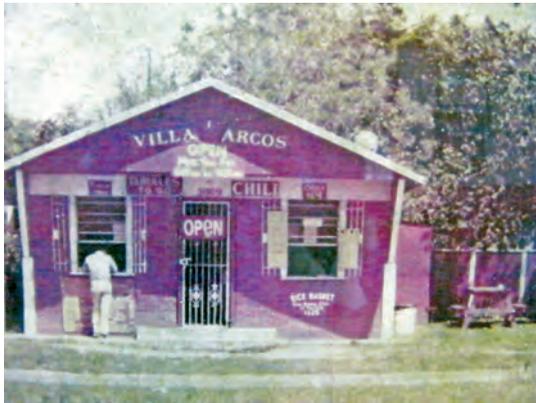
*Photo courtesy of Rafael Acosta.*

## Villa Arcos Taquitos

Velia Arcos Rodríguez Durán opened Villa Arcos Taquitos in 1977 in an effort to provide for her family. Her eldest child and current owner, Yolanda Black Navarro, believes that her mother’s story resembles that of many Latina restaurant owners. “If you look at the history of Latina restaurateurs . . . they did it because of the need to survive. It’s what they needed to do if they lost their husbands . . . People of every ethnicity really enjoy Mexican food, and so there’s a time when you say, ‘well I know how to do this . . . that’s what I do best.’”

Velia, as she was known, was born in San Antonio in 1922 and moved to Houston at the age of seventeen. She raised her six children in the Second Ward and was an active member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. Working in a number of restaurants and bakeries in Houston before opening her own place, Velia started the restaurant with \$1,000. She cooked, and a woman called Doña Maria made tortillas. In those years, Villa Arcos was a take-out place. With no actual entry into the tiny wood-frame building, customers ordered and received their food at a window. The original menu included ten varieties of tacos, the “villa burrito,” and a few combination plates. At the time, Velia opened at 5:00 a.m. and closed at 3:00 p.m., hours that suited truck drivers passing through the area. By word of mouth, Villa Arcos survived.

After thirty-four years, the restaurant still sits on Navigation Boulevard. Though larger than the origi-



At the original Villa Arcos, customers ordered at a window. Photo courtesy of Villa Arcos.



Now the restaurant can seat approximately forty patrons. Photo courtesy of Nicolas Garza Selley.

nal, it remains in a wood-frame building of less than one thousand square feet without air conditioning. There is no wait staff, customers pay cash, and they fill their own glasses of water. Navarro explains that people keep coming back for the food, the price, and the atmosphere.

Villa Arcos now has an entrance and eight tables, providing space for approximately forty people. A gravel parking lot was added behind the restaurant and an enclosed patio in the front. The customers are different too. Villa Arcos now attracts a much more diverse clientele that ranges in ethnicity, class, and age—a reflection of nearby downtown. The most significant change, however, came with Velia's passing in 1990. Navarro took over and added an element to the restaurant it had not seen before: politics.

The long list of repeat customers, which includes Houston City Councilmember Melissa Noriega, former Harris County Commissioner Sylvia Garcia, former Mayor Bill White, and many state representatives, reflects the restaurant's current status as a regular hot spot for community leaders. Politicians frequent Villa Arcos to catch up on the news, with the understanding that Navarro (a social and political activist) will provide the update, and if not, they are sure to run into other constituents and politicians. Villa Arcos has hosted a number of fundraisers and campaign stops.

Since the late 1990s, Navarro has worked as owner, manager, and cashier. Many in the community say Navarro *is* Villa Arcos. While she admits her presence behind the cash register makes Villa Arcos different from other restaurants, her goal is simple: to maintain the same dedication that her mother, Velia, put into it over thirty years ago.<sup>8</sup>

## Andy's Café

In 1977, Sadie and Jesse Morales opened Andy's Café in the Heights. They named their restaurant after their youngest child, who was three at the time. Anthony Espinoza, the founders' grandson, explains that "[Sadie's] from Texas so she's Mexican American, but really she is Texican. . . . She really knew southern or Texas-style cooking: chicken fried steak, fried chicken. . . . and that's why we're not authentically Mexican, we're completely Tex-Mex."

Espinoza says the restaurant relies heavily on repeat and long-time customers. "It's all about the food. People have come back for all these years because basically grandma's recipes are the same. We haven't fiddled with the menu too

much at all. . . . Felix Tijerina's son comes once a week. He always says 'This is the only place that I'll eat enchiladas because they're this close to my dad's.' . . . That's the only reason we've made it is because people like that."

Andy's Café was not the Morales's first attempt at running a family business. Previous ventures included a bar, dance hall, gas station, and a few small restaurants. Opening Andy's, in a building that formerly housed a small Greek diner, the Morales family finally realized success. "There was a niche . . . nobody in the neighborhood was open really late. He [Jesse] said 'Well let's stay open as late as the bar and that way we'll make some more money.' . . . Before you know, it we were 24-7, and we were one of the first."

During those first few years of business, Sadie ran the kitchen while Jesse worked the front of the restaurant. With eleven children, they had plenty of help as wait-staff and dishwashers. Sadie is now retired but still monitors the restaurant; no major decisions are made without her approval. Jesse passed away nearly ten years ago, and today three of



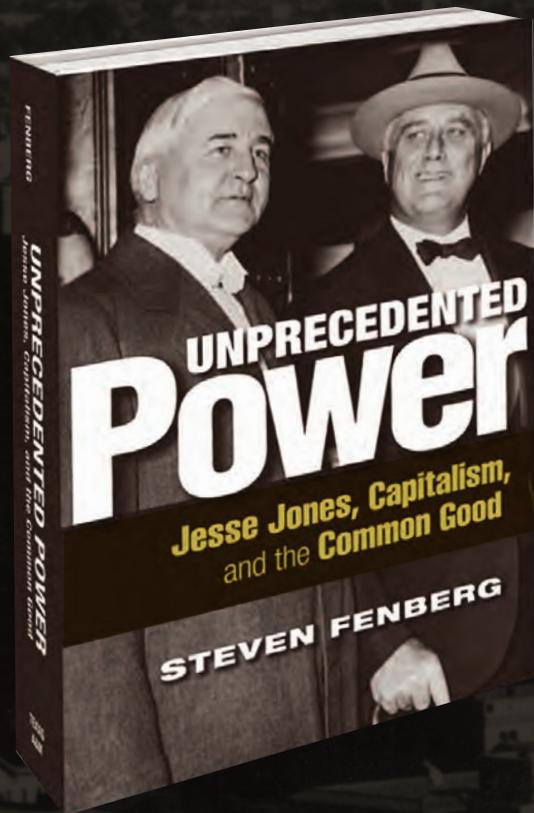
Open twenty-four hours a day, Andy's Café serves a diverse crowd. It is a frequent hot spot for kids when school lets out, families at the end of the day, and musicians late at night.

Photo courtesy of Mikaela Garza Selley.

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their sons and one grandson manage the restaurant. The person working the cash register at Andy's is almost always a family member; in this way, Andy's has tried to maintain a "mom and pop" atmosphere.

Nearby Fitzgerald's, a well-known music venue and Houston landmark, generates a significant customer base. "We were always in cahoots with them . . . The musician community helped Andy's make it through those early years." Andy's would advertise in the venue's publication, *Fitz Herald* (no longer in existence), and the opening acts would end the night at Andy's. The two establishments continue to keep close ties.

In addition to serving famous musicians, Andy's remains a frequent venue for political functions. The restaurant has served members of the Mexican American political community including Rick Noriega, the late Joe Moreno, both former state representatives; Jessica Farrar, a current state representative; Melissa Noriega, Sylvia Garcia, and others. Andy's restaurant has hosted many of their political fundraisers and campaigns, and openly supports people in office.

*It's probably mainly because of Joe Moreno . . . who brought a lot of [politicians] in the past fifteen years . . . We always try to help them out, keep the price low, or we donate. We try to help the community . . . from small time charity work, like with churches . . . and little leagues, up to people who hold state office. Also we're kind of close to downtown and the courthouses, and at one time or another, they've all come through here: Adrian*

*Garcia [Harris County Sheriff], Sylvia Garcia, Gracie Saenz . . . My grandparents never pushed for the restaurant to serve the community in this way. It just happened. . . . It was kind of organic . . . . While we are no Doneraki's, I guess Andy's is a sort of vessel for political groups. We just help.<sup>9</sup>*

## Conclusion

All of the interviewees explain the political aspect of their restaurants in the same way, saying "it just happened." Their histories tell a different story. A common theme in the history of political and community organizing among ethnic minorities is the use of alternative spaces to carry out this activism. However, not all Mexican restaurants host political fundraisers, and politicians do not seek out all Mexican eateries for this purpose. Although the owners and founders of Doneraki, Merida, Villa Arcos, and Andy's did not intentionally create a political atmosphere, their receptiveness to their community needs have made them more than mere on-lookers to a unique process in the Mexican restaurant business. By serving as the venue to reach the ethnic Mexican community, these long-standing institutions have affected Houston politics and continue to do so. 

Mikaela Garza Selley is working toward a master's degree in public history at the University of Houston with a concentration in twentieth century United States history. Her research interests include ethnic and minority communities and Houston history.



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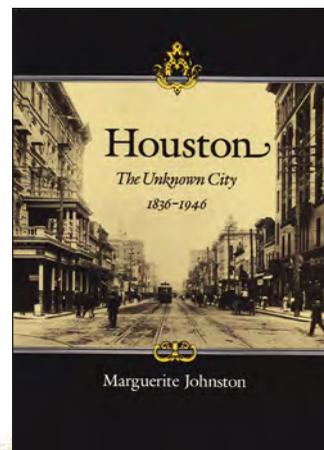
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