

Rebuilding Mi Tierra, one locally grown tortilla at a time

By **T. Susan Chang** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 12, 2014

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STEVEN G. SMITH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Dora Saravia and Jorge Sosa make tamales in their Springfield restaurant, Estelita's Taqueria.

SPRINGFIELD — Almost a year ago, Mi Tierra in Hadley burned to the ground, a blow to a community that had embraced the Mexican eatery's simple, flavorful food and its husband-wife owners, Jorge Sosa and Dora Saravia. After the fire, friends, town residents, business associates, and local officials moved quickly from mourning to recovery.

In September, their efforts will culminate with the opening of a new 180-seat Mi Tierra, 1½ miles west of the original in Hadley, more than twice the seating capacity of the first spot.

The rubble was barely cool when fund-raising efforts began. Sosa and Saravia's friend, Michael Docter, owner of

Winter Moon Roots in Hadley and founder of the Food Bank Farm in Hadley, helped them set up on the fund-raising website YouCaring.com and businesses held benefits throughout the winter. Sosa and Saravia started working long hours at their Springfield market and eatery, Estelita's Taqueria, and selling labor-intensive fresh tamales on holidays, and weekly at Northampton's Sutter Meats.

But it's tortillas that have jump-started Mi Tierra's recovery. Sosa is passionate about his tortillas. They're moist and dark yellow.

The couple were no strangers to hard luck. Sosa, 37, grew up poor in Mexico City. He arrived in Western Massachusetts in 1992, staying with family and working odd jobs. It took him nine years to save the \$6,000 he needed to open a grocery store in Springfield. Saravia, 43, was raised in war-torn El Salvador, and came to the United States in 1989. By 2007, Sosa and Saravia had met and married, added a small taqueria to the Springfield store, and started the Mexican restaurant Mi Tierra in Hadley.

On that fateful Sunday on Oct. 27, "everything was going perfect," says Sosa. Mi Tierra was thriving, its food a hit with students and faculty from colleges in the area. The Norwottuck Shoppes plaza also housed a banh mi shop, a Middle Eastern grocery, and a Southeast Asian grocery. Sosa, Saravia, and other shopkeepers dubbed themselves the "United Nations of Good Food."

Mi Tierra's bar manager, Derek Gavegnano, designed a margarita menu and the 85-seat restaurant hosted a weekly dance night. Two months earlier, Sosa and Saravia had invested their savings — more than \$40,000 — and had driven to Mexico to pick up a machine that allowed them to produce tortillas more easily. They sold as fast as the pair could make them.

It was Gavegnano who first alerted Sosa to the smoke, coming from the ceiling tiles in the bar area. "I started lifting the tiles to try and see," says Sosa. Finally Sosa, engulfed in smoke, followed a police officer's voice out of the restaurant. Sixty firefighters were unable to tame the blaze, which originated in a next-door laundromat. By early morning, the Norwottuck Shoppes business plaza had burned to ashes, claiming 11 small businesses.

Common Capital, a Holyoke-based community development financial institution, which invests in small Western Mass. businesses, loaned Sosa funds to buy new tortilla machinery, including a grinder, kneading machine, and a gleaming, room-long tortilla machine. "To make 3,000 tortillas by hand this winter [before they had the machine] took seven hours and five people," says Sosa. "With this machine, 40 minutes." The heirloom field corn he uses is grown on farms in Hadley and Ashfield.

On a recent day in the Springfield kitchen, Sosa and an assistant, Miguel Ixcuna, are kneading ground corn with oil and spices into a moist masa for tamales; the dough is a perfect foil for spiced pork or shredded chicken and chiles. While the tamales steam, Sosa, Saravia, and Ixcuna prepare taco fillings for tortillas made that morning. The fresh rounds are delicately crisp when warmed on the griddle, giving tacos the nubbled texture and lingering flavor distinctive to minimally processed corn. The tortillas are sold locally, something Docter helped set up; sales are growing at a rate of 5 percent a week.

Eight months after the fire, Sosa has not seen a payment from his insurance company. But he and Saravia are overwhelmed by moral and material support closer to home: friends willing to advise on how to negotiate deals, the help from Hadley town administrators, Common Capital's funding, and donations from around the Pioneer Valley.

“I believe in this community,” says Sosa. “I think everything is possible here. You just have to try and try.”

Mi Tierra, 48 Russell St., Hadley (go to www.facebook.com/mitierrahadleyMA to find opening date).

Estelita’s Taqueria & Groceries, 262 Oakland St., Springfield. Taqueria phone 413-788-3738; grocery phone 413-214-7821.

Mi Tierra tortillas available at Whole Foods Market, 300 Legacy Place, Dedham, 781-329-7100, and 575 Worcester Road, Framingham, 508-628-9525; River Valley Market, 330 N. King St., Northampton, 413-585-5151; and Maple Farm Foods, 10 S. Maple St., Hadley, 413-585-1117.

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