

Tamayo family couple starting restaurant

Sonoma Latina Grill to focus on freshness; Novato location planned as first of regional chain

BY LORALEE STEVENS,
STAFF REPORTER

NOVATO – Mike and Lucy Tamayo, of the family that founded La Tortilla Factory, are launching what they hope will be a chain of high-end, fresh Mexican food restaurants.

Sonoma Latina Grill will open this fall in the Hamilton Marketplace, an upscale shopping center near the entrance to the Hamilton Landing residential and business park in Novato.

"We want to serve the kind of food we like to eat," said Mike Tamayo, who with his two brothers and their parents built a national brand around a line of healthy tortillas and salsas.

Mr. Tamayo and his wife envision 10 Sonoma Latina Grills operating in high foot-traffic locations in five years.

The concept embraces all natural and organic food from local suppliers, with hand-made artisan tortillas made on the premises, something you don't see in Northern California, he said.

"We are all about 'good food,' fresh meat, poultry, produce and health. In fact we have a pledge with our suppliers not to use any trans-fat, high fructose corn syrup, preservatives or additives in our food and beverage supplies. We'll have fresh juices instead of fountain drinks, and we'll use ovens and grills for cooking, not deep fryers."

The couple is funding the prototype restaurant themselves with a supplementary loan from Wells Fargo Bank in Santa Rosa.

"Money is hard to come by right now, but we were fortunate. We had our pick of banks," he said, adding that investors are watching while the Tamayos test and adjust the concept.

The 1,600-square-foot restaurant will seat 42 inside and 20 on a patio, with

takeout available. The menu will feature chicken and beef grilled over a wood fire and dishes such as chicken mole, all made in an open kitchen. Customers will choose from a variety of fresh tortillas.

Clover Stornetta of Sonoma County will supply the dairy ingredients and Mr. Tamayo is in talks with Ceja Vineyards in the Carneros region and other local wineries to furnish wines.

"Food grilled over wood lends itself perfectly to pairing with wine," he said.

Bohemian Stoneworks in Occidental is building the counters; Salsa Trading in Sonoma is providing tabletops from post-consumer copper.

Faux wood beams and other recycled materials will be used for interior and exterior construction and decor.

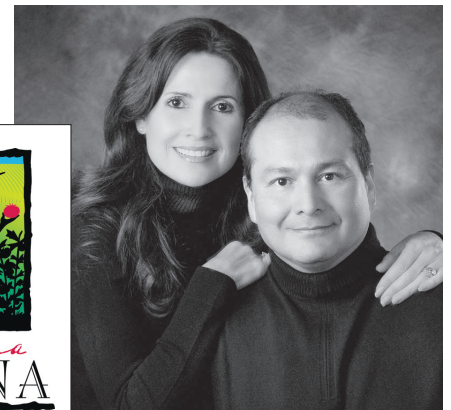
The couple is currently searching for a general contractor. Late October is their target opening date.

"The whole concept rests on the word 'Sonoma' and how it's come to be synonymous with sustainably farmed, fresh foods and beverages and healthy lifestyles," said Mr. Tamayo. He and his wife also want to evoke and honor their families' farm worker heritage.

"Lucy still loves coming into a house with a pot of beans brewing on the stove like my mother made them.

"That's why 'Sonoma Latina' seems appropriate," he said. "We're naming the restaurant after our mothers, who both exerted a strong influence over us as children."

Each Sonoma Latina Grill will employ about 16 full- and part-time employees, to whom the couple hopes to impart their mothers' work ethic and encouragement to stay in school.



Lucy and Mike Tamayo

Ms. Tamayo worked with Nelson Sobel Design of Santa Rosa to develop the restaurant logo.

The couple expects to locate the restaurant chain's headquarters, along with a test kitchen, in a live-work space, most likely in Sonoma County.

"Our goal is to define a whole new category of fast, casual Mexican food, much the way I pioneered new categories of tortillas. I developed fat-free tortillas, low-carb tortillas and tortillas made with olive oil."

Those tortillas, suitable for people on the popular Atkins Diet, were a major driver of La Tortilla Factory's growth into a \$30 million business.

In January Mr. Tamayo left La Tortilla Factory, where he was vice president of research and development.

"If Lucy and I can take what we learned about consumers after working for the past 20 years at La Tortilla Factory and translate it into fresh, delicious food with a Mexican accent, I believe we'll be able to take the concept to the Bay Area and other untapped target markets outside of the Bay Area," said Mr. Tamayo.

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