

Portsmouth Herald



Margaritas co-owner John Pelletier and Lupe La Maestra, who is in charge of production at the factory in Tlaquepaque, Mexico. All of the chairs for Margaritas Mexican Restaurants are bought from this factory.

Keepin' it quirky

Margaritas co-owner makes trips to Mexico part of recipe for success

BY RACHEL FORREST
rforrest@seacoastonline.com

With 21 restaurants opened in 25 years and a possible four more in 2011, including a few in a newly launched franchise program, the Margaritas Mexican Restaurant empire could have become just another corporate “chain” filled with automaton-like waitstaff, schmaltzy cookie cutter decor and food nuked en masse from a microwaved bag.

But it didn't. Thanks to a few admittedly quirky personalities, the privately owned empire struck back and Margaritas restaurants have retained the individuality and local flair that keeps people coming through the doors. They even go to Mexico to find art and culinary ideas to keep customers in the mood, south of the

border style.

“When I started going to Mexico, that's when I really started enjoying it,” says Margaritas co-owner John Pelletier. “I started understanding the food, that there was a lot more to it than what we were getting in the U.S. There really was a hole in the market then.”

Our gig is that we want people to feel like they're as close to Mexico as they can be without getting on an airplane.”

John Pelletier
Margaritas co-owner

Starting as a dishwasher in 1975, Pelletier worked his way up through the ranks at Chuck's Steak Houses when at age 19 he was asked to move to Concord to run a restaurant there. That restaurant became Tio Juan's and eventually with the help of his brother Dave and friend Stan Bagley, the trio opened a restaurant in Orono, Maine. In 1988, the brothers started going to Mexico, bring back the fruits of their immersion into the cultures found particularly in the areas of Tonala and Guadalajara.

“After our trips to Mexico, the food changed gradually over the next five years,” says Pelletier. “We started understanding what the food was in Mexico but

GO&DO

What: Margaritas Mexican Restaurant

Where: 21 locations throughout New England

Contact: www.margs.com

we still had to use American ingredients, you couldn't bring a lot of the ingredients across the border. And we started buying the local arts and crafts. I started sending back tractor-trailers filled with furniture and art. We went to artist centers in Guadalajara and Tonala. You really have to hit the streets. Our gig is that we want people to feel like they're as close to Mexico as they can be without getting on an airplane.”

Feeling like one is in Mexico also involves eating like one is in Mexico, and in a decade where “foodies” seek “authenticity” in their cuisine, Pelletier says that Margaritas incorporates what he's found in his travels.

“Authenticity in Mexico is ever-evolving. We take what is traditional in Mexico and what American's consider traditional Mexican food. You go to Mexico today and there are restaurants where you see only Mexicans eating and no one is eating tacos and enchilladas — it's all high cuisine. Then you have those hole in the wall plac-

FOOD: Margaritas co-owner keeps it quirky

Continued from page B1

es where you can get goat on a stick and street food. We look at all that stuff and take flavors from many different styles. There's a lot of really bad 'authentic' food. There are a lot of little places with bad food that are 'authentic' in Mexico. What's the national dish of the United States? The hamburger. And you can get a bad hamburger. We respect the Mexican cuisine and the past and we have to adapt it to the American taste. You just have to make it fresh every single day."

Staying "local" with the food is a challenge with more than 20 restaurants. The terms "locavore" and "eat local" have become ubiquitous here on the Seacoast as in many regions and Pelletier says that "local" goes far beyond buying tomatoes from the farmer down the street.

"There are managers in some locations who buy local. But it's about getting a predictable supply and that's not happening yet. It's important though to employ local. Each of our locations has up to 75 people who go out into the community and buy local themselves. They're going

to the farmer's market and buying local lettuce and tomatoes."

Those employees are not only a part of the local economy but a part of that "quirky" Margaritas community.

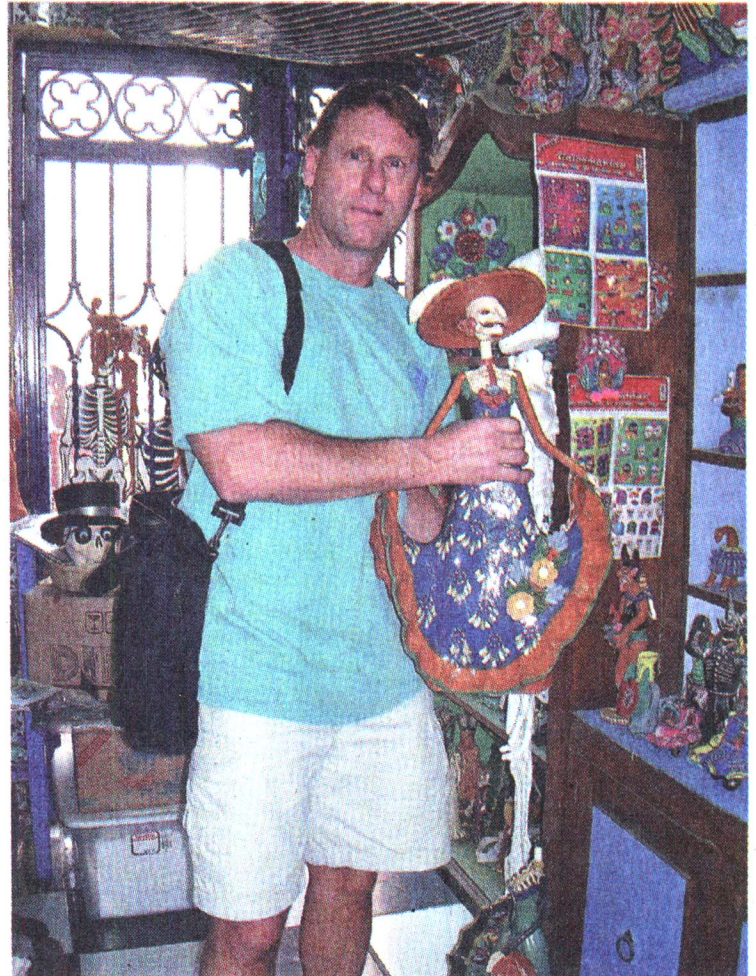
"We hire for personality," says Pelletier. "We hire for hospitality then teach the skills. We look for the right people. We're a quirky company and when people find us and want to work for us, they stay."

The company continues to grow and support local economies through a new franchise program.

"We're being really selective. We have a lot of active candidates and I'm encouraged by it. I think we'll have 10 signed up by 2011 and two or three franchises plus two of our own in 2011. That means jobs for 280 more people."

The company also gives back to the community with local charity nights and offer "field trips" for school groups where students can come and learn about Mexican culture.

The growth of the restaurants translates into not only customers but accolades. Margaritas was recently named "Best Mexican Restaurant in New England" in a consumer



John Pelletier shopping at Mis Amores in Tonaló, Mexico for décor for Margaritas Mexican Restaurants.

poll through New England Cable News.

"I think people give you an award when they walk