

Friendly Tamale Tradition

By Barbara Yost

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Theresa Leon grew up making tamales with her mother and aunts in Yuma, and they had a little trick. They would leave the pits in the olives that went into the meat filling so they could count how many tamales had been eaten.

“Of course, they were the best,” the chief operating officer of Phoenix’s Friendly House says of her family recipe. “*Everyone* makes the best tamales.”

So pity Carolina’s Mexican Food, which has the daunting task of measuring up to every family’s expectations when it caters the 67th annual Friendly House tamale dinner Friday at Heritage Square in Phoenix. Last year’s dinner served the tasty stuffed cornhusks to 1,700 people.

“That’s a hell a lot f tamales,” says Jim Martinez, director of community and corporate relations for Friendly House, which has been assisting immigrants and serving the elderly and disabled since 1920.

“Doing it for Friendly House is really special for me,” says Joe Hernandez, one of the owners of Carolina’s. In 1950, his mother, Carolina Valenzuela, was struggling to raise her family in a Phoenix housing project. Friendly House stepped in. “I got shoes from them. I got clothes,” Hernandez says.

In 1968, Valenzuela opened her restaurant, which is now at the 12th and Mohave streets. Now 75, she still works every day and will be apart of the assembly line making 3,500 tamales this week for Friday’s dinner.

Although Christmas is the traditional occasion for tamales, the Friendly House dinner usually falls around Cinco de Mayo, another festive time for Mexican-Americans and all lovers of Mexican food and drink.

“You think Cinco de Mayo, you think tamale dinner,” says Mary Rose Wilcox, a member of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors and three-time chairwoman of the dinner. But she says tamales make any occasion special.

“The whole appeal in tamale making is to celebrate. It’s symbolic. You can’t make them alone. You make them as a family.”