

Hot time of year for Carolina's

People flock to eatery for tamales, more

By Carol Sowers
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SOUTH PHOENIX – The lines start forming early this time of year at Carolina's, an unpretentious restaurant wedged into a south Phoenix neighborhood of car repair shops and homes with front yard shrines to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

On Wednesday, people began lining up at 6:30 a.m. to claim whatever they could get of Carolina's 40 dozen red chile tamales and 20 dozen green corn tamales, traditional Mexican Christmas fare that has crossed happily into other cultures.

Sold out in no time

The tamales were sold out in an hour, said Josie Quiñonez, who was supervising a kitchen as busy as a bus station.

But there were plenty of other orders to fill: beans, salsa, burritos and the velvety handmade tortillas that have made Carolina's reputation.

Workers in red shirts and tasseled Santa Claus caps rolled tortillas through two flattening machines, and twirled them onto a hot griddle for 20 seconds.

By 4 p.m., when the small restaurant with in well – worn cement floors would close Wednesday, 720 dozen flour tortillas would go home with families who would roll them into burros or give them as gifts.

That's almost twice the number turned out in a normal day, said Joe Hernandez, owner of the family business started in 1968 by his late mother and father, Carolina and Manuel Hernandez.

As word of the original Carolina's tortillas spread more than 30 years ago, her tiny take-out restaurant grew, and eventually moved to 1202 E. Mohave St., where cars wheeled in and out Wednesday in a kind of controlled chaos.

Lupe Moreno drove from 87th and Olive avenues to buy 3 ½ dozen tortillas for her Christmas Eve dinner. She was told there was 20 to 30 minute wait. She didn't mind. She munched on a 75-cent buttered tortilla to pass the time.

"I'd wait as long as it takes," she said. "It's worth it."

Moreno and others who waited grew up eating Carolina's tortillas.

"My family started buying them...when I was 10 years old," she said. "My best friend who now lives in Texas says the only thing she misses about Phoenix is Carolina's tortillas."

Tommy Borquez, who grew up near Carolina's, drove Wednesday from 59th Avenue and McDowell Road to his old neighborhood to pick up two dozen tortillas and 60 pounds of maza, the corn mixture needed for his family's Christmas Eve tamales.

“It’s just great food,” he said, standing behind a line of people waiting for Christmas orders or simply buying a breakfast burrito.

Longstanding tradition

For many, the annual Carolina’s Christmas Crush, which starts Dec. 1, is as much a tradition waiting in line to see Santa.

Lois Phelps, who lives in South Phoenix, has been putting her Christmas order for 30 years.

She ordered her three dozen tortillas Monday and was told to show up at 8 a.m. Wednesday to pick them up.

She rolled into the parking lot at 7:40 a.m. and discovered 18 other people also had 8 a.m. orders. But left by 8:20 a.m. with her tortillas, tostada shells and a pint of red sauce.

Joe Hernandez said his crew, which includes three of his seven daughters, sons-in-laws and grandchildren, hate to make people wait.

“We’re working really hard in there,” he said, emerging from the kitchen to the dining room, which has no particular décor, just dozens of framed awards for the city’s best for tortillas, green chile or tamales.

“Those aren’t all of them,” Hernandez said of the awards for fare made from recipes that date to 1839.

So what would the large Hernandez family eat on Christmas Eve?

“Tamales, of course,” he said.

The family made them at home Dec. 14.

Hernandez’s wife, Phyllis, stirred up peanut butter, nutmeg, cinnamon tamale, a creative diversion from shredded meat and cheese.

“I’m looking forward to that,” Hernandez said. “If they’re really that good, I might put them on the menu.”