

# “The Best Tortilla’s In Town!”

A dream of ‘el barbero’ and Carolina lives on

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The husband who was a barber made his wife a promise, “Vieja,” he told her, “one of these years I’m going to put your name in lights.”

She can’t recall where or when he made the vow. But she knows this much: They were riding in their white 1966 Pontiac station wagon, the car they called *La Paloma* – white dove.

And when dusk veils the day and the bright white, slump block building at 12<sup>th</sup> and East Mohave street pales, Manuel Valenzuela’s promise shines in yellow above the flat-roofed rectangular building. The lighted sign reads: “Carolina’s The Best Tortillas in Town!”

This is Carolina’s house, built with her hands.

She mixed the masa for tortillas with her fingers, flour, water, lard, salt, baking powder. She shredded the beef for the machaca. She chopped the green chiles, tomatoes, onions, green and yellow jalapeños for her green chile gravy.

But before all this, she had her foundation. As a girl, Carolina stuck to her mother’s elbow in the kitchen. As a young woman, she worked in restaurant kitchens and later stood behind a white tableclothed table at the Riverside Ballroom, selling her fresh tamales, burros and tostadas during Monday night boxing bouts and wrestling matches.

Carolina could only taste a place of her own. She kept bugging her husband. It was hard for him to say no to his wife. Manuel rented a tiny building close to the ballroom at South Central Avenue and the Salt River. That was the first Carolina’s.

Carolina and her mother cooked, and Manuel cut hair at Louie’s Barber Shop. They called him *el barbero*.

He had dark brown eyes, black hair, brush strokes of gray at his temples. He loved mustaches. Carolina didn’t. They met in the middles. A pencil-thin line of hair framed his smile. And when he did smile, which was often, his left tooth shined gold. Manuel stood a half a foot higher than his 5-foot wife. They seemed to fit. Carolina with an apron knotted around her waist, tucking herself under Manuel’s shoulder.

When they moved a few blocks to the northeast to a bigger Carolina’s on East Mohave near 16<sup>th</sup> Street, Manuel, determined to see his wife in lights, had his sign made.

Red letters spelled out “Carolina’s.” The woman in the sign wore a mariachi hat tilted back on her head as if she was wearing a halo. Carolina’s customers drove from Tempe, Mesa, Chandler, Ahwatukee and Glendale to buy her tortillas and machaca.

Manuel still worked in the barbershop. When he wasn't cutting hair, he picked up the meat, produce, beans and flour for his wife's recipes. When she needed something fixed, her jack-of-all-trades took care of it.

They depended on one another.

Then, one October evening in 1979, about the time the sign at Carolina's lit up, a heart attack killed Manuel.

She lost *el barbero*. With all the dreams they had, sooner or later she knew she would give up. Carolina stayed home for a month.

But Christmas was coming, and tamales needed to be made. Carolina put her work shoes back on and went to work. She had her two sons, Edward and Joe. Her grandchildren were getting older. Everyone started working.

As Carolina's grew, so did Phoenix. With Sky Harbor International Airport busting at the seams, the city knocked down much of Golden Gate Barrio, including Carolina's. Carolina's closed one day and reopened the next day, on the Fourth of July in 1986, at 12<sup>th</sup> and Mohave streets.

While the surrounding neighborhood, *Las Quatra Milpas*, depends on Carolina's for fresh tortillas, customers around the Valley still come. And Carolina's tortillas go to faraway places.

A map of the United States hangs on one of the restaurant's walls. Hundreds of black-tipped straight pins highlight the flight of tortillas from Phoenix to burgs such as Polson, Mont.; Columbus, Neb.; Glasgow, Ky.; Corinth, Miss.; Fargo, N.D, and Augusta, Maine.

Dozens of hands make the tortillas that Carolina and her mom once made. Her family puts her on a schedule or she would work every day. Arthritis runs through her body. But the 72-year-old never complains.

This is the house that Carolina built.

She pats dozens of tamales she's wrapped as if she's giving them one last hug.

She stands over 300-degree oven, stretching a ball of dough from her middle finger to her elbow, so thin and delicate it looks as though it's her own skin. Just like the thin gold bracelet she wears from her husband.

She never takes it off.

The restaurant's been open ever since the fall of '79 when Manuel died.

Except for Mondays.

That's when Carolina closes.

*El barbero* never worked on Mondays.