

Hispanic

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family HERITAGE

Inheriting a business can be both a blessing and an intensely challenging affair. Continuing the original vision of their businesses' progenitors, the following entrepreneurs embody *herencia familiar*.



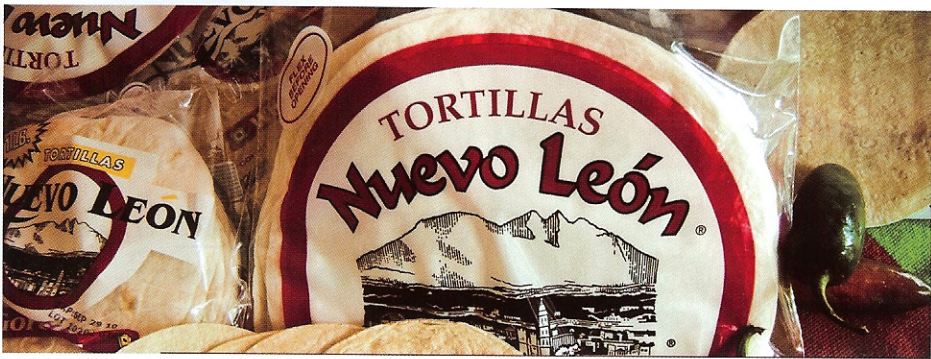
BY ZACH BALIVA

Oscar and Maria Martinez's move from Mexico to East Chicago planted the seed for a family venture: homemade tortillas. Now, 35 years later, their company, Tortillas Nuevo Leon, is a true family affair, expanding with the help of their three children: Jaime, Olga, and Jesus.

Oscar and Maria Martinez left Nuevo León, Mexico, for life in the United States and eventually settled in East Chicago, Indiana. The couple started producing homemade tortillas for the Hispanic population in nearby Chicago. When those early customers started using Martinez products to stock

the shelves of their stores, Tortillas Nuevo Leon (also known as O.M. Distributors) was born.

That was 35 years ago. Now, the business that Oscar and Maria worked so hard to launch is expanding through efforts led by their children, Jaime (director of sales), Jesus (director of opera-



(Top): Owner's Oscar and Maria Martinez founded Tortillas Nuevo Leon in 1975. (Bottom): The company's tortillas are made fresh daily at its 65,000 sq.ft. facility in Hammond, IN.

tions), and Olga (office manager). The younger Martinezes credit the company's success to lessons learned from their parents. "My father always told us that to learn the business, we had to start from the bottom and learn everything. Because of that, we really know how to run every single aspect of the production and the business," Jaime says.

Jaime and Jesus, identical twins, grew up observing all areas of the company. They learned recipes, mixing, boxing, bagging, routes, and customers. Actually watching employees make a product, taking that product to a store, and seeing a customer purchase the product helped give Jaime and his siblings satisfaction and passion. "We didn't just put on a tie and sit in an office. We learned from our family the value of hard work and being proud of what we do,"

Jaime remarks. The experience deeply affected the Martinez children, who saw their parents work long days to benefit the family. Now, the children are doing the same.

Prior to 1990, Tortillas Nuevo Leon's products were only sold in Chicago and northwest Indiana. Jaime and Jesus graduated from Robert Morris College with degrees in business and accounting in 1990 and then joined the family business in their current roles. They started developing more products and attending food shows. Now, Tortillas Nuevo Leon manufactures flour, corn, and whole-wheat tortillas. They have added various nacho chips and snacks and distribute salsas made in Mexico. Other products include Mexican cheeses and chorizo. The company has 40 employees and serves grocers and restaurants across 20 states.

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Input from customers helped drive Tortillas Nuevo Leon's expansion. Whole-wheat tortillas, for example, were added to meet a frequent request. "My parents knew that any company has to make a product the customers like. We learned to take all feedback including compliments and criticism. That's how we can improve our products," Jaime says, adding that customer service and interaction have long been hallmarks of his parents' business.

The real key to the company's success, however, is the authentic flavor of its products. Oscar and Maria are still part of every development, and Maria creates the basis for many recipes. Products that originate in Tortillas Nuevo Leon's facility are sent to friends, employees, and family members for taste testing. "Customers can buy ready-mix products anywhere, but our products are authentic recipes," Jaime says. "Every ingredient we put into a product is from our family and came down through heritage."

The business has enjoyed gradual growth every year since 1991. "Food shows, new products, and good customers have helped us expand," Jaime says. After growth of 30 percent over a two-year period, the Martinez family decided it was time to expand their operations, too. Tortillas Nuevo Leon updated all equipment and moved into a new 65,000-square-foot manufacturing and office facility in Hammond, Indiana. The newer building is 45,000 square feet larger than the older and provides the space necessary for the company to accommodate its growing demand.

Being part of a family business is important to Jaime, Jesus, and Olga, who say it changes their outlook. "We take a lot more pride in our work because we know people—our employees and our families—are counting on us," explains Jaime, who is especially determined to preserve the company his parents sacrificed so much to build.

Tortillas Nuevo Leon was first known as O.M. Distributors, but Jaime prefers the new name, which was selected to pay homage to his parents' Mexican home. "We used to vacation to Mexico to visit family all the time. We saw a culture that loves its family, has special customs, and really cares for each other. If there are successes or failures, those are shared together," he says. Now, as he runs the family business with his brother and sister, Jaime tries to bring those same ideals to Tortillas Nuevo Leon. *H/E*

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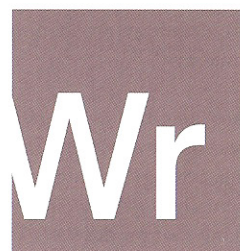
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