



Anyone who's had a craving for good Mexican food around here knows there are quite a few options. In a crowded field, it's difficult to stand out. But that's what Juan and Lisa Garcia have done. For nearly a decade, the enterprising restaurateurs have worked hard to create fun, go-to restaurants, whether you're in the mood for dinner, a quick bite, tapas or just drinks.

The restaurant business isn't for everyone. But the Garcias have consistently shown an ability to find new ways to serve different types of customers—and then to execute their vision.

#### DIFFERENT WORLDS

Born the second oldest of 10 children in a small town in Jalisco, Mexico, Juan was brought up working on farms. By the time he was a teenager, he was toiling in Pennsylvania and sending money home to support his family.

"That was how families could progress down there," he said.

Lisa was born the younger of two sisters and raised in the Harrisburg area in what she describes as a typical, suburban middle-class life. For her family, education was the top priority.

"My parents didn't want me or my sister to work during the school year because they considered it our jobs to get good grades," she said.

Although the couple came from two different worlds, they would eventually find themselves working together at a pizza shop and began dating. They later married in Mexico and lived for the next two years in La Paz de Ordaz, the small town where Juan's family resides.

"There was a certain amount of culture shock," said Lisa, who described what it was like to live in another country for the first time.

Small-town life had fewer modern amenities than she was used to, but, she said, the experience was like going back in time a generation to when things were simpler in the United States.

While mail delivery was not always reliable, Lisa recalled the convenience of daily food deliveries. Produce trucks would come into town selling fresh fruit and vegetables by the kilo, she said. Also, tortilla trucks would drive through the town selling the freshly made product twice a day. People could step outside of their front door and buy ingredients for the day's meal.

## MEXICO TO THE MIDSTATE

*The Garcias have grown a business around food and family.*

BY JULIE VITTO

The couple's shared appreciation for fresh, local ingredients and love of Mexican culture would inspire them to open the first of many restaurants after they arrived back in the United States.

#### A GOOD TEAM

The Garcias' early days back in the midstate started with the co-ownership of a pizzeria with one of Juan's brothers. Lisa worked a full-time day job while expecting their first son.

"We felt like we made a good team," Lisa said of their working relationship. "He was more of a kitchen guy, and I was more front of the house."

Juan described playing around with recipes for El Sol at the pizzeria, developing some signature salsas before the new restaurant became a reality.

They explained that, at the time, former Harrisburg Mayor Steve Reed wanted to make S. 3rd Street an international dining district. The Garcias liked how close the street was to everything else downtown.

"We just felt like it was the right place," said Juan.

Navigating the maze of start-up costs proved to be a daunting task. Not many banks were eager to lend money for a restaurant, they explained, which forced them to shop around for financing with a toddler and another baby on the way.

"We had to put a lien on our house," said Lisa. "It was kind of scary, but we both had faith and just pushed forward."

Juan acted as the general contractor for the restaurant renovation, laying the floor tiles in the dining room with his own hands. He also used his eye for design, transforming the space into an oasis in the middle of the city.

After much work, El Sol Mexican Restaurant opened its doors in May 2007.

"Why pay someone to do designs for you when you can do it just as well yourself?" said Lisa. "We have a lot of sweat equity in all of the restaurants, but El Sol is the biggest. It's our baby because it was the first."

#### SEEING POTENTIAL

Since it opened, El Sol's momentum has been building quickly.

In late 2009, as the Garcias were expecting their third son, they opened El Sol Express in Camp Hill. The location was later sold to Juan's brother, Pedro.

Next came Tierra Café and Grill on Lindle Road in 2012. Last year, the name and menu were retired, and it turned into a second El Sol Express.

In 2013, downtown Harrisburg saw the addition of the corner taqueria, Taco Solo, which completed an expansion in June on 2nd Street.

Their most recently completed project is La Noche Cantina, a small-plates wine bar that opened just next door to El Sol in November 2014.

The Garcias are proud of what they've built over the years, but agree that the restaurant business isn't for everyone. Being there for the kids is a priority for the couple, and finding a balance isn't always easy. In fact, these days, Lisa focuses on raising their family, while still performing some administrative duties.

Fortunately, diners in the Harrisburg area can reap the benefits of the Garcias' hard work, sacrifice and vision at a growing number of restaurants, in a growing number of locations.

"When I see potential, I like to do something about it," said Juan. **B**

*The Garcias' flagship restaurant, El Sol Mexican Restaurant, is located at 18 S. 3rd St., Harrisburg. For more information, visit [www.elsolmexicanrestaurant.com](http://www.elsolmexicanrestaurant.com) or call 717-901-5050.*

HBG SMALL BUSINESS ARTICLES ARE PROUDLY SPONSORED BY:  
**Select Capital Commercial Properties, Inc.**

