

Todo Verde

TAKING ROOT

Jocelyn Ramirez is bringing plant-based cuisine to a community steeped in carnivorous tradition—and surprising patrons with delicious results.

Growing up in southeast Los Angeles, Jocelyn Ramirez remembers her parents, who worked long hours, frequently bringing home fast food for dinner. “I didn’t give it too much thought at that time,” says Ramirez, now 36. “But there weren’t a lot of healthy food options. Fast food was kind of the norm and people were just expected to eat that regularly.”

Then she moved up to Burbank for college and discovered an array of healthy restaurants and grocery stores in the leafier San Fernando Valley. She only needed to walk a few blocks to find reasonably priced organic offerings. “That’s when I really started to see the disparity in access to food and how it was normalized,” she says.

Today, Ramirez is part of the solution, bringing her own style of healthy fare to

southeast L.A. via Todo Verde, a catering business focused on plant-based offerings inspired by Latin cuisine. Although she learned to cook helping her Mexican-born grandmother prepare traditional dishes like pozole and tamales during holidays, she never had any culinary aspirations, instead becoming a college professor after earning a master’s degree in business. But when her father, who had already been struggling with chronic diabetes, was diagnosed with cancer for a second time in 2014, Ramirez, a newly minted vegan, created a plant-based diet focused on helping him heal. “Especially in Latino culture, a lot of times men are like, ‘Oh I have to eat meat.’ It’s this machismo culture,” she explains. “But I really saw a sense of surrender from my dad at that point. He became a lot more open to the idea of eating plant-based because he was trying to survive.”

Just weeks after consuming mainly nutrient-dense smoothies and vegetable-heavy soups, her dad made such positive progress that even his doctors were impressed. He was soon able to significantly scale back his diabetes meds (and his cancer eventually went into remission).

After seeing how a better diet may have helped save her father’s life, Ramirez was inspired to find ways to share healthy, plant-based eating with the rest of her community. She left her university job, enrolled in a vegan culinary school and soon started selling her



superfood smoothies at farmers markets, using seasonal ingredients she procured there. Once she gained access to a commercial kitchen, Ramirez created a full vegan menu and launched the first iteration of Todo Verde, deploying her all-female catering staff everywhere from weddings to quinceañeras to corporate parties. “More than anything, we’ve gotten so much traction through word of mouth,” she says. “We realized, ‘OK, these are the things people really enjoy.’”

Those “things” are a fresh, plant-based spin on Latin classics—like seared jackfruit tacos topped with a vibrant *pipian verde* sauce of pumpkin seeds, pistachios and poblanos, or roasted oyster



Todo Verde founder Jocelyn Ramirez offers a fresh vegan spin on Latin classics.



Todo Verde's vibrant, plant-based menu includes items like seared jackfruit tacos or hearts of palm ceviche.

"ONCE YOU TRY OUR FOOD, YOU DON'T MISS THE MEAT."

mushrooms covered in an almond-based mole.

Of course, not everyone can wrap their head around the fact that there isn't a speck of meat on her menus. If a potential client requests, say, just a little chicken, Ramirez stands her ground. "This is what we're doing. If you want something else, you can find another caterer. For me it's a very powerful movement with a statement,

and I think it resonates with a lot of people," she says. "And once they do try our food, they don't miss the meat."

In 2018, she initiated a crowdfunding campaign to launch a brick-and-mortar restaurant—slated to open in the Huntington Park neighborhood later this year—that reached its goal of \$50,000 thanks to more than 700 backers, some of whom chipped in just \$20 or \$30 each. "Those little amounts go a long way when a lot of people come together," adds Ramirez. "For me, more than the money is this value of if I do build it, they'll show up. It really proved to me that people want this to happen."

Costs can be tricky when it comes to retaining customers,

but Ramirez says she'll set price points that feel affordable while sustaining Todo Verde as a business and paying employees a fair wage. She's planning on concepts like a "pay what you can" bowl, discounts for residents, and cooking workshops.

And while nutritious, there's more to plant-based eating than just the food. "I'm trying to create something that feels more culturally relevant and also feels like it's a nice place for folks to—in Spanish we say *convivir*—live each other's lives together. We deserve to have nice places where we can enjoy each other's company. And in a Latino neighborhood, it's not Panda Express."

—Lizbeth Scordo