

City College cafÃ© owner customizes and caters to make students, staff and professors feel at home

Description

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Thanks to Alberto Campos, students at City College of San Franciscoâ??s Mission Campus can get an affordable breakfast, lunch or dinner.

Lodged in what was originally designated to be a classroom, CafÃ© de la Mission sells breakfast burritos, sandwiches and ethnic meals for under $10.

The menu caters to his customersâ?? needs and preferences; in fact, most were suggested by them, he said. Campos takes a fatherly approach by befriending students, professors and staff. â??I like to take care of them and make them feel like this is their own home,â?• he said.



Alberto Campos, who opened his cafÃ© in 2008 in a classroom at City Collegeâ??s Mission campus, loves talking to the students, staff and professors who rely on his menu for breakfast, lunch and even dinner. (All photos by Mary Anne Lewis)

He originally wanted to offer a wider variety of food but under arrangements with the school, he landed in a vacant classroom. He serves from a colorful food cart, surrounded by a beverage cooler, racks of Mexican chips and snacks â?? and a standing chalkboard with the daily menu posted.

Students and faculty can take out or eat at one of several rounds tables.

â??I made plans and it was going to be a nice restaurant, like a taqueria, with good sandwiches and a salad bar, so the students could have more,â?• he said. â??But I ended up having this little location, which is good.â?•



CafÃ© de la Mission has a few tables in a converted classroom on the schoolâ??s campus. Itâ??s the closest place for students, staff and professors to grab something to eat.

The cafÃ© is reached from inside the campus, just up a few steps and around the corner from Valencia and 22nd streets. Itâ??s just a few blocks from his previous job on Mission Street, where he worked for his eldest brother at La Corneta Taqueria.

Campos, who lives in San Bruno, commutes to the cafÃ©, holding forth from 8 a.m. to 8:45 p.m. Monday through Thursdays, and 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. He and his wife have four children â?? three girls and a boy. His son works at the cafÃ© while going to college; one of his oldest daughters is an attorney, the other works at the Child Development Center at CCSFâ??s Mission Campus. His youngest daughter is still in high school.

Back and forth from Mexico

Now 56, Campos began working at 14 and hasnâ??t stopped since. He opened the cafÃ© in 2008, bringing a wealth of experience to the job.

He was born in Jalisco, Mexico, where his father and mother ran a small store. Campos moved to the U.S. with his family in 1970, but they soon returned to Mexico, which his father missed. When he was 14, he and his second-oldest brother moved to Ada, Oklahoma, which his brother had visited.

â??My dad said, â??OK, let me bless you and see you later.â??â?•

Campos went to high school in Oklahoma and worked as a prep cook. But after a couple years, the two of them moved back to Jalisco, then took off again for San Francisco, where Campos lived with a cousin and worked as a dishwasher.

He returned to Mexico again when he had saved up enough money to lease a building where he could open up a business for himself. â??It was a supermarket, like a Costco, but a mini-Costco. I was selling wholesale and retail,â?• he said.

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It was there that Campos married Veronica and had their first daughter. But when the business floundered, he declared bankruptcy and they returned to San Francisco. But soon, Campos was commuting to the San Fernando Valley, where a friend who ran a catering company for movie studios hired him as a cook.

A second chance at business

In a few years, when the back-and-forth got too much, Campos returned to work in local restaurants work, including the one operated by his brother. Then he got the chance to open CafÃ© de la Mission.

It had a rough start, operating on an outdoor patio at the school. â??I was there for almost six months. It was bad, because often, it was raining and there was no space for me,â?• he said.

â??I donâ??t know how I was doing it. It was just one fridge, and the espresso machine, and I was just selling pastries and coffee and fresh orange juice and fruit cups.â?•

The cafÃ© is one of the few food operations on CCSF campuses. Downtownâ??s culinary school has a cafeteria and pastry pop-up, where students sell what they make. The Ocean campus has a small restaurant selling breakfast, pastries and sandwiches.

Once indoors, CafÃ© de la Mission was able to offer a wider choice of items.



Before opening his cafÃ© inside a CCSF classroom in 2008, he sold coffee, pastries, fresh orange juice and fruit cups from a cart on an outdoor patio.

Its specialty is central and South American foods â?? empanadas and pupusas, which he purchases elsewhere to sell, and Mexican tamales, which Campos cooks at home with his wife and brings to campus. Other specialties include plates of plantains.

Eventually, customers started making suggestions for what type of food he should sell. When some Eastern Europeans asked if he could get piroshkis, which Campos calls â??Russian burritos,â?• he said sure.

â??So, I contacted one of the students from Russia who had a friend who was selling this product, and I started buying them and selling them. They were good. They had like cheese and pepperoni in them.â?•

The piroshkis were an experiment, and no longer available. But the empanadas and Salvadorean pupusas, at $6.50 each, as well as his tamales, at $5, are regular favorites.

Then again, you can also get a corned beef sandwich, with chips.

He even takes special orders: for example, the 20 hard-boiled eggs he made at home and brought in for some dieting female customers who had requested them.

An admitted neatnik

Though he works in an enclosed space behind narrow countertops with coffee and juice machines, Campos, a neatnik, is constantly in motion. Everything is exceedingly clean: no grease stains anywhere, spotless counters and pastries and other dishes wrapped in plastic.

â??Every single night, the routine has to be â?? nice and clean. You always like to shine,â?• he said. â??I always told my employees, â??You have to have a good presentation to the restaurant. If a customer goes to the bathroom, and itâ??s nice and clean, heâ??ll imagine the kitchen has to be nice and clean, too.â?•

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CafÃ© de la Mission survived a two-year pandemic closure, but business isnâ??t as brisk as it once was. Yet Camposâ?? is sanguine about hard times and hard lessons, including the bankruptcy.

â??It was a great business, successful, but in the end, I screwed up. It was my inexperience. I was like 24 years old, and I was spending so much money, sometimes on things you donâ??t need.

â??Thatâ??s life. You make mistakes. You have to pay for your mistakes.â?•

Settled but still planning

Now that heâ??s paid, heâ??s enjoying life as much as he can. He and his wife, a nanny, like to travel, and theyâ??ve been to Tahoe and Cancun. He has a lifelong passion for soccer, but is worried if he plays now, heâ??ll break a leg, and then â??whoâ??s going to run my business?â?•

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Itâ??s not an idle worry. From 2020 to 2022, when the cafÃ© was shut down by the pandemic, he took a construction job to make ends meet. A man running a machine to haul sheetrock and other construction debris accidentally dropped some on Campos, injuring his shoulder.

He eventually had to have two surgeries and quit after he settled with the company. By that time, the cafÃ© was back in business, and he is now considering renting a storefront in the nearby Mission District to sell fish and seafood. â??Iâ??d make everything myself,â?• he said, â??including octopus and ceviche.â?•

But heâ??s dedicated to CafÃ© de la Mission and is there for the long haul.

â??I will never let it go. Itâ??s a good business,â?• he said. â??You make money, little by little. Iâ??ll always have someone there, my son, one of my brothers, someone I trust.â?•

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