

FOOD & DINING

'Tradition and family legacy': Meet the chef at Fire and Braids, winner of Top Tamale 2024



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Family and legacy are at the heart of Brenda Mercado Valdez's tamales.

"It is such an honor to be recognized for my tamales. It makes me proud to be able to share my heritage through my tamales. I get to share my traditions and family legacies left by the women who inspired the recipe I created in their honor."

Those were her first words when she found out that the tamales from her food truck, Fire and Braids, had been chosen as the best in metro Phoenix by Arizona Republic and La Voz readers.

Fire and Braids is a concept presented by Dish is Da Bomb, Mercado’s food supply business. The Scottsdale-based food truck, which started up last October, swept the final voting phase among the five finalists of the first edition of the Top Tamale 2024 contest, taking over 60% of votes out of almost 12,000.

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Mercado shared in an interview with La Voz her immense gratitude for the recognition that she says is the dream come true of any entrepreneur.

The kitchen has been her “sanctuary,” bringing her peace and well-being through life's ups and downs. Both Dish is Da Bomb and Fire and Braids are projects that were recently launched, in 2022 and 2024, respectively, and have yielded magnificent results for Mercado. Today, knowing that the recipes inspired by a legacy of women in her family have satisfied so many people fills her heart.

‘The kitchen was my sanctuary’

Mercado, 45, was born in San Diego, California, and grew up in the San Ysidro district, on the border with Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. She spent most of her days in Tijuana surrounded by a large family on both her mother's and father’s sides in which food was always the common denominator. Today, the flavor she transmits through her

dishes is attributed to all of them.

"All of my family, both on my mom and dad's side, have always been connected by food," Mercado said. "That's kind of where all my enjoyment for cooking began because it was a way I felt that I belonged somewhere."

After getting married and having two children in her early youth, she began working in the energy industry, later transitioning to biotechnology. In 2012, Mercado began a rather challenging journey in her life — a series of physical health ailments and illnesses that by 2019 would have her living with disabilities and prone to experiencing seizures. The aftermath of her ailments and loss of loved ones pushed her mental health into a dark place.

"That's what scared me, when I just started having very dark moments. I needed to find something to let them go," she said.

That same year, Mercado received a proposal from her husband's brother and sister-in-law that would revolutionize her life, but this time for the better. The couple offered her and her husband to move in with them at their home in Phoenix, Arizona. Mercado's health and the lack of employment for both her and her husband made them take their relatives' word for it and they soon settled in their new desert home.

During their stay, the couple helped by taking care of their nephews and by cooking snacks for the family. While that was happening, Mercado experimented with high-quality and minimally processed ingredients in the kitchen that little by little made her realize that she could live with less pain through food and not with the medication she took that caused side effects that left her “unable to function” and mentally exhausted.

"The kitchen was my sanctuary. It was where I found again the connection to the women in my family. I call them mis guerreras," Mercado said, calling them the Spanish term for women warriors.

‘I wanted my tamales to be known throughout El Valle’

Sometime later, her sister-in-law began asking her to prepare food for events for some of her friends — people who had tried Mercado’s food and praised her for her incomparable seasoning. This moment marked only the beginning.

After seeing the excellent response from customers and her husband’s motivation, Mercado decided to start a food business. While she was recovering from back surgery, she took care of all the paperwork, and by October 2022, Dish is Da Bomb, her food supply business, officially opened.

One dish in particular received positive reactions from customers: tamales.

According to Mercado, the recipe for her tamales is not only hers — it belongs to a legacy of women ranging from her grandmothers to her mother, mother-in-law and aunts.

Mercado began selling her tamales at farmers markets, an initiative that won her quite a few loyal clients. They encouraged her to start offering them wholesale in local stores. Mercado liked the idea and decided to act.

"I wanted my tamales to be known all around the Valley because if that happened, it would mean that traditions from my family, from my abuelitas and the women of their legacy moves on too," Mercado said.

The entrepreneur approached the owners of a small market in Mesa to discuss the possibility of selling her tamales. They showed interest and placed an order which, according to Mercado, was a huge one.

Through the community kitchen where she cooks in Mesa, she was able to meet a large community of entrepreneurial women motivated to continue growing their ventures, which in turn motivated Mercado to do the same — one of them being Ivette Olivares, owner of Lola’s Tacos, with whom she formed a strong bond and even supported her by selling her tamales at her taco stand at State Farm Stadium.

'I always said I'd never do a food truck'

At the end of April 2024, Mercado was presented with an opportunity that would turn not only her business but her life around. One of the chefs at her community kitchen put her in contact with Bob Wilson, owner of the Pinnacle Brewing Company in Scottsdale.

Wilson and his son Wyatt, master brewer, had recently opened their brewery in Scottsdale and were looking for a partner who would be interested in taking over the operation of a food truck that would be located in the same place.

"I always said I'd never do a food truck," she said laughing.

However, there was something that both Wilson and she had in common: children of the same age with the drive to fulfill their dreams and the vision as a father and mother to recognize the potential in them along with the desire to motivate and support them.

"I saw the passion that he saw in his son. It was a moment in which we connected on a level of 'I want to leave a legacy, I want my children to lead a path on this.' We spent two hours talking and realized this was something we could definitely do," Mercado said.

On Oct. 14, the Fire and Braids food truck opened its doors.

[Fire and Braids](#) is "a food trailer concept brought to you by Dish is Da Bomb where our focus continues to be on using simple high-quality ingredients, from the best local sources, minimally processed while using traditional methods to bring you the most authentic and soul-nourishing dishes."

[The food truck menu](#) offers a variety of Mexican food ranging from tacos to quesadillas, burrito bowls, quesatacos, nachos, hot dogs, desserts including cookies and brownies, and of course, their signature dish: tamales — only available by pre-order.

‘This recipe is a legacy of many women’

When Mercado was asked what it meant to her that her business was chosen as the best tamales in Phoenix, she expressed that this is the dream of any local small business owner and that she still pinches herself.

"After everything I've been through in life, after some very dark moments, to be recognized for something like this is of huge significance for me," she said. "This recipe is a legacy of so many women, the recognition isn't only about me."

Mercado shared that the idea of the name Fire and Braids was born from the desire to “keep the fire and traditions of her grandmother alive.” And the braid symbolizes the union between her grandmother, mother and herself. The logo shows a woman, inspired by her maternal grandmother Maria, with a rose adorning her hair — symbolizing her paternal grandmother Rosa — and her hair in a braid.

Mercado mentioned that in addition to this recognition, another that embraces her heart is when people approach her after eating her tamales and say, "you just reminded me of my nana." Or even when they ask her, "how come your food doesn’t make me swell or make me sick after eating it?"

If at some point in her life the thought of expanding her business was not an option, she's now fully open to it. Her vision for the future is to have a brick-and-mortar business and become a nomadic chef, traveling and getting to know the cuisine of different places in the world and fusing that with her own knowledge in the kitchen.

"With this recognition I get to share my story and let other people know, through tamales basically, that there is a life after whatever is going on," Mercado said. "That it is possible to pursue your passion, that it's never late."

Have story tips on Latino communities in the Valley? Reach La Voz reporter Paula Soria at psoriaaguilar@gannett.com.