

E^ligia Torres

"MRS. T" KNOWN FOR HER CHILE

As Eligia Torres moves through the dining rooms at Pete's Café in Belén, she's greeted with smiles, handshakes and even hugs. "Mrs. T" makes sure all of her guests are happy.

That's one of the reasons she's been in business for the past 56 years.

"I may not know all of their names, but they know mine," she says. "And I know what they like to eat."

That's the other reason Pete's has been around since 1949—the chile. "I always enjoyed cooking and coming up with recipes," Torres says. "And chile is one of the things I can do."

Torres learned the secrets of chile from her mother, who tended her pods from the field to the table in Peralta. "Chile is basic to New Mexico," Torres says. "For generations families have grown, harvested and prepared chile in their homes. We include chile in our daily meals and have acquired a love and a need for its wonderful flavor and taste."

Knowing this need, Torres strives for authenticity in every batch. "From the beginning it has been our intention to prepare and serve the 'real thing,'" she says.

In the beginning, October 1949, Pete and Eligia Torres had been married just four years and already had three little mouths to feed. What better way to feed them than with a family restaurant.

Pete's mother owned a small building facing the train depot on North First Street in Belén that had served as a meal stop for World War II troop trains. "I remember stacks and stacks of sandwiches

there," Torres says. "The soldiers would jump off the train, come in and grab their sandwiches, and get back on the train."

Pete's Café began there as a one-room diner with an L-shaped counter, red vinyl booths and knotty-pine paneling. Passenger-train travelers and freight-train crews would be greeted by Pete in his tall chef's hat as he broadcast the day's specials at the top of his lungs in front of the small café.

"The Santa Fe was so popular with passenger trains," Torres says of Belén's days as classic railroad town. "Every day you'd see the Indian ladies selling jewelry and pottery outside the depot, people coming and going. We served passengers, conductors, porters, engineers and track crews. Railroaders like their steak, and the track crews wanted the chile and fried potatoes they'd missed all week."

After about 15 years of catering to the railroad business, Pete's made the transition from a diner to a Mexican food restaurant. The locals started coming then and haven't stopped. Expansion in the 1980s increased Pete's capacity from 40 to 140. In recent years Pete's has been voted the No. 1 restaurant in Valencia County three times. Some claim it's the red chile, others rave over the sopaipillas.

Along with the food, people come to enjoy Torres' other love: art. For the past 35 years Torres has collected the work of local and national artists and weavers. The precisely placed paintings and Navajo rugs in each room of the restaurant create an ambience that shows she


cares about the details.

"Art is very important to me," she says. "Sharing it is something I enjoy."

In the early years, Torres raised her four children from the café. For her daughters, Mercy and Theresa, she sewed fiesta dresses at a corner sewing machine during the slow hours. Her sons, Pete Jr. and Michael, and her daughters started out playing in a back room and grew to be busers, cooks, servers and cashiers.

Restaurateurs seem to be born into the Torres family. Pete Jr. started his own restaurant 20 years ago in Los Lunas, named Teofilo's Restaurante after his great-grandfather and inspired by Pete's menu. Michael ran a chuck-wagon business taking Pete's dishes on the road. Theresa now assists her mother in the daily operations of Pete's Cafe. And in 2004, Pete Jr.'s son, Japhen, took the menu east, opening Zia—A New Mexican Restaurant in downtown Chicago.

When Pete died in 1977, Torres relied on her family and a very loyal staff to see her through difficult times. Three employees have worked for her for more than 20 years and others are hitting 10-year milestones.

Today, at age 80, she's at the restaurant Monday through Saturday. Each day the red and green chile must meet her approval. She personally makes the fruit pies, handles the paperwork, prepares for the next day and says: "I enjoy what I do and, after 56 years, how can I close the doors?" 

Melissa W. Sais is featured in the "Storytellers" department on Page 6.