

Table Hoppin': Taco Caliente is open for business again

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Job Cardenas of Worcester and Patrick “PJ” Heffernan of Grafton, friends for nearly 20 years, opened Taco Caliente, 226 Chandler St., Worcester, in February, purchasing the building formerly owned and occupied by John & Son II.

Then came the COVID-19 shutdown and the restaurant’s temporary closure.

We’re happy to report that Taco Caliente is reopened, offering dine-in and take-out, curbside service and delivery (DoorDash, Grubhub). New hours are 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Visit <https://tacocaliente.net> for info and menu. Call (508) 304-9043; Connect on Facebook.

We first talked to Cardenas and Heffernan before the restaurant stopped serving food to patrons on site. Recently, Cardenas filled us in on changes after reopening.

Taco Caliente has reduced dine-in capacity to four indoor tables. Customers can choose to sit outside at covered picnic tables next to the building, said Cardenas, and they now can order beer or wine with food. The restaurant’s parking lot has been paved and accommodates eight vehicles. Customers regularly use on street parking for take-out orders, or request curbside pickup, he said.

“Business was fantastic when we opened in February,” said Cardenas. “The restaurant scene has changed, and we’re all doing our best to adapt to meet customers’ needs. We’ve adjusted our menu and even added a couple new food items.”

There’s no special designated day of the week to eat tacos from Taco Caliente, where guests enjoy an assortment of homemade specialties, according to Cardenas, who said, “Everyday is Taco Tuesday.”

It was Cardenas who first came up with the idea of opening a restaurant. “PJ (Heffernan) heard me out and agreed to the concept,” said Cardenas. “We’ve been friends for a long time. He already owns another business, and you could say I’m the face of our restaurant.”

For Cardenas, opening Taco Caliente has brought him closer to food he has known and loved all his life. His family originates from Monterrey, the third largest city in Mexico.

“My family came to the United States, settling in Northbridge when I was young,” said Cardenas. “I didn’t speak any English when I arrived here but I learned quickly from many school friends who helped me out.”

He studied at Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester and previously worked in the food service industry. He and his wife are parents of their first child, a son, born March 21. “It has been quite an experience,” said Cardenas about opening the restaurant. “A new business, a new baby and coronavirus.”

At Taco Caliente, customers get a real taste of fresh and natural food prepared in an authentic taqueria setting, according to Cardenas, who in past years has made frequent family visits to Mexico. “When I got back home (Worcester) I always missed the tacos,” he said. “That’s when I decided to bring the flavor here.”

While he’s familiar with other Mexican food restaurants located throughout the Worcester area and personally knows some owners, Cardenas believes his handmade tortillas are different from other businesses. “Growing up, my family made both flour and corn tortillas. In Mexico, some regions make one or the other, not both,” he said.

Taco Caliente currently offers only handmade flour tortillas, he said, and meats in specialty tacos are based on family recipes. Note: The restaurant had made both corn and flour tortillas when it first opened.

Spices complement the food, he said, explaining that the spice combo used in the restaurant’s barbacoa tacos make them “the best around.” Cardenas also introduced his take on pozole (soup) forgoing traditional pork and substituting chicken in his recipe.

“Before we opened, I always said I wanted to make our own tortillas in house and for meats to be prepared like they are in northern Mexico, or Monterrey style,” said Cardenas. “My mother shares our family’s love of Mexican food and taste-tested all the recipes before the restaurant opened. She gave her approval and blessing, which meant a lot to me.

“We’re happy that customers are returning to Taco Caliente, and we look forward to serving new customers, too,” said Cardenas. “Restaurants are in the business of feeding people during good times and bad.”

Put Taco Caliente on the list of small, new restaurants to check out.

Keep it local!