

Cortez quickly fell in love with the outdoor market on the western edge of downtown because it reminded him of Tlaquepaque in his hometown of Guadalajara. Shortly after coming to San Antonio, Cortez met Cruz Llanes of San Antonio, and they married.

Papa Vale and Mama Guela, as the aunt and uncle were later known in the family, lent Cortez, then 23, \$150 in 1941 to buy Jamaica No. 5, a three-table cafe in Market Square. In 1951, he purchased the nearby Toyo Cafe and named it Mi Tierra Cafe. In part, he was inspired by the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata and one of his famous slogans, "The land belongs to those who work it" (La tierra es para quien la trabaja). Cortez also wanted to create something that inspired pride.

"To him, it was a very patriotic statement that this was 'mi tierra,'" explained grandson Pete Cortez. "He (Pedro Cortez) wanted to build something here that reflected his culture, his roots, where he came from,



Courtesy photo / Cortez family

Pedro "Pete" and Cruz Cortez were the founders of Mi Tierra Cafe.

because if he couldn't be there, he wanted it to be here."

Cortez decided to remain open 24 hours a day to cater to different schedules, from farmers selling at the produce market who would arrive before 5 a.m. to downtown workers who came for lunch and dinner and the late night crowd that frequented the clubs that were common downtown at the time.

In 1955, he added a panadería, or Mexican bakery, and also started producing candy, including candied orange peel



Courtesy photo / Cortez family

This photo shows the exterior of Mi Tierra in the 1950s. The restaurant, located in El Mercado, has become a San Antonio icon.

and pralines.

In 1961, after 20 years of operating restaurants in Market Square on a month-to-month lease, Pete Cortez bought the entire block and remodeled the restaurant.

By the mid-1960s, most of the city's produce vendors had moved from downtown to South Zarzamora Street, to the Terminal Market, a private,

modern facility that opened in 1951. The federal Urban Renewal Agency swept through much of the West Side and the west end of downtown, razing entire neighborhoods. The agency wanted to buy the area around Mi Tierra and level it for a public works project.

"This place became a ghost town. Everything was narcotics and prostitution, all the build-

ings were dying, the neighborhood was going down and urban renewal was tearing things down," said son Jorge Cortez. "And Pedro Cortez stood with faith to preserve the roots."

His business invested in the area around the restaurant, mobilized a public-private partnership and proved instrumental in revitalizing El Mercado. Those efforts earned him an award from the National Economic Development Association in 1980.

"If there was no Mi Tierra, there would not have been El Mercado," said Jorge Cortez.

In 1981, the family opened La Margarita across the walkway from Mi Tierra, then opened Pico de Gallo nearby in 1990. Recently, the family opened its latest eatery, Viva Villa Taquería, near Market Square.

Pedro Cortez died in 1984 at the age of 66, and now his children and grandchildren run the restaurants and parent company with several hundred employees.

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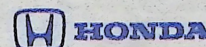
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