

The Heart Of Tex-Mex

Sherleen Mahoney

Chuy's spreads its love of Tex-Mex across the country

Since 1982, Chuy's has been the embodiment of fresh Tex-Mex flavors. In 37 years, the made-from-scratch menu hasn't changed much, but with 10 different signature sauces and the highly anticipated Green Chile Festival each summer, there's enough variety to keep guests coming back for more.

"We welcome guests to customize their orders," said Sarah Mason, Development and Accounting at Chuy's. "Most customers don't know that you can change out the enchiladas, tacos and sauces on our combo plates. We want you to get exactly what you want every time."

The menu comprises bold flavors from New Mexico, Mexican border towns, the Rio Grande Valley, South Texas, Austin and beyond. The Green Chile Sauce is a tribute to Espanola, New Mexico. The Shiner Bock beer fajita marinade is an old South Texas family recipe. Chuy's aficionados know to order the secret Creamy Jalapeno Sauce for their chips.

"It was a salad dressing that people started eating on their chips. It has a huge following," Mason said.

The annual Green Chile Festival, which takes place from mid-August to early September, is the only time of year Chuy's introduces new menu items, all focused on the freshly harvested Hatch green chile.

"It's a proprietary Hatch green chile that's grown just for us in New Mexico by fourth-generation green chile farmers," Mason said. "It's a mixture of green and red chiles. The red chile gives it more sweetness. Seventy-five percent of our menu uses the green chiles."

Last year, the special menu included green chile chicken flautas stuffed with green chiles, spinach and crema especial; a burrito stuffed with ground sirloin, bacon, green chiles and French-fried potatoes; chicken enchiladas made with Hatch green chiles; and a chicken enchilada and green chile relleno combo.

This year, 3.5 million pounds of Hatch green chiles will be harvested for Chuy's. Raul Herrera, Director of Kitchen Operations, is hard at work in Chuy's newly built test kitchen, putting the final touches on the 2019 menu, which includes a green chile pork belly dish. After the Green Chile Festival, each restaurant chooses from the menu items to add to their daily specials for the rest of the year.

To ensure peak freshness and taste, local produce is delivered to the restaurants six days a week. Food line checks, performed at 10:15 a.m. and 4:15 p.m. every day, inspect for taste, texture, color and contrast. Managers start their checks in the small walk-in, examining cleanliness and product rotation. On the food line, everything is sampled: the sauces; queso; meats; soups; beans; cheeses; pico; salsas; dressings; fried chalupa, taco and nacho shells; and guacamole. If something doesn't meet the impeccable standards, it's thrown out; there's no attempt to salvage it. Quality is key at Chuy's.

The bar is checked as well, from the fresh-squeezed lime juice and homemade sugar water to the margaritas, green chile-infused tequila, mojitos and sangrias.

While the food menu hasn't much in more than 30 years, the bar menu changes frequently. Every 60 days, a new signature drink is featured.

"People don't want basic drinks, so we offer a rose margarita, a blackberry margarita, and there's a white peach sangria that is to die for," Mason said. "We're expanding the bar menu and creating fun and exciting drinks."

JOYFUL DESIGNS

A popular saying at Chuy's is, "If you've seen one Chuy's, you've seen one Chuy's." While each restaurant shares some core elements, such as shiny hubcaps affixed to the ceiling, framed photos of local dogs hung in the bar, a custom Elvis shrine and schools of colorful hand-carved wooden Ash dangling from the ceiling, each restaurant has a different design and decor of its own.

The walls and floors are covered with a wild mix of tile patterns, complemented by colorful accent walls. There's something unique and eye-catching all throughout the space. The Elvis shrine harkens back to the original restaurant when funds were tight, and the decor budget was nil. Chuy's founders hung a velvet painting of Elvis on the wall, and customers brought in their personal Elvis memorabilia. The Chuy's Elvis shrine was born. The hand-crafted and hand-painted wooden Ash are

made solely for Chuy's by the Juarez family in Mexico. The family's grand father was commissioned by the founders to make the wooden fish for the first restaurant, and his children are still making them today.

The dog photos were an ingenious idea to allow guests to contribute to the decor and form a bond with the restaurants. Guests were invited to bring a framed photo of their dog in exchange for a free appetizer, and they responded in a tremendous way. Customers can still bring a framed photo of their dog to their local Chuy's for a free appetizer.

"Some people give us photos as a remembrance of their dogs and want to sit by their pictures while enjoying a meal," said Andi Skipper, Assistant General Manager of the Fort Worth, Texas, restaurant. "Others just love their dogs and will point out their dog s' photos when they come in with their friends or co-workers."

"People spend hundreds of dollars on paintings of their dogs and the y give them to us," said Don McMahon, Kitchen Manager of the Fort Worth, Texas, restaurant. "It gives guests a feeling of ownership and lets them be a part of Chuy's."

Barring natural disasters or accidents, the framed photos will not be removed.

"We do not take the pictures down," said Scot Aubuchon, Construction Director at Chuy's. "They will stay in the stores for as long as possible."

To secure unique decor elements, Chuy's partners with Mexican pickers who scour flea markets in search of local art and design elements. They have found stunning light fixtures, beautiful tiles, antique paintings and photographs that are 25 to 100 years old, and retablos, tin sheets painted with detailed narratives of Mexican life, as well a comical or whimsical themes, such as Martian landings, raining frogs and monsters destroying towns. Aubuchon's favorite decor item is the carnival ride that is suspended from the ceiling in the Fort Worth, Texas, restaurant.

For a new restaurant, the floor tiles and wall finishes are decided during the planning phase, but the process of choosing the decor is more spontaneous. The design team looks into the inventory and chooses items that suit the city for the new restaurant.

"To say the décor is decided ahead of time is a little bold," Aubuchon said. "There's a loose theme because we don't want to be boxed in and tied to a certain look. We have commissioned artwork, but we go with what feels best. The stores are a lot of fun to design and put together."

Summoning the Professionals

When repairs are needed, the restaurants use Verisae work order management software, which automatically dispatches vendors. The restaurants choose their own trusted vendors who are approved by corporate and loaded into Verisae.

The equipment is also asset tagged. When the code is scanned, the equipment fields auto-populate in Verisae. Tagged equipment makes tracking depreciation and repair frequency easier for the team. It is especially useful in repair-versus-replace decisions.

With Verisae's geolocation of up to 500 feet, managers can verify that vendors are on-site. Invoices are processed and approved within the software, which is also tied to Chuy's accounting platform. Verisae also autogenerates preventive maintenance appointments on the first of every month, freeing up the operations team to concentrate on day-to-day responsibilities.

"The Chuy's ops team does an awesome job keeping the restaurant impressively clean and well organized," said Rich Wilkins, Facilities at Chuy's.

Wilkins' main focus is the well-used areas, such as the front and to-go doors. He verifies the HVAC PM companies are keeping the RTU systems in good shape and coaches the general managers and kitchen managers on best practices to ensure service vendors are providing the best service.

"My favorite part of the job is traveling to our locations," Wilkins said. "When I'm on-site, I verify life safety standards and equipment maintenance. I usually have the area supervisor, the manager on duty and the kitchen manager follow me from the parking lot to the rooftop. I share with them the best practice for each piece of equipment and total building maintenance."

Chuy's eclectic design offers some flexibility when replacements are needed. For example, if tiles need to be replaced, the team doesn't stress about finding an exact match.

"We give them a tile that fits," Aubuchon said, chuckling. "We try to get them the right thing, but if we don't have something that matches exactly, we just get as close as we can and make it work."

When refreshes are needed, the restaurants receive a fresh coat of paint and new furniture but not a major overhaul.

"Most of the stores are within 12 years old, so the artwork is still fairly fresh," Aubuchon said. "We'll repaint and rehang artwork in a different way, or we may change some of the art, but we will not make radical changes."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Chuy's is deeply committed to taking care of the guests, team members and the communities it serves.

"We And ways to say yes—to the guests and to each other," Skipper said. "Our servers are empowered to perform random acts of kindness. If they observe guests celebrating an event or having a tough day, they will do something to wow them, whether it's providing a free appetizer or beyond."

"If someone requests a day off, 99 percent of the time, we're going to say yes," McMahon added. "People have lives, and it's our jobs as managers to say yes and our responsibility to figure out how to fill the gap. We bend over backward for our teams, and they do the same for us. Our staff is the heart of the house, and with out them, we wouldn't be here."

The company also offers the Redfish Relief Fund in which employees can donate money to help their fellow Chuy's employees. Every team member, regardless if they contribute, is eligible to receive emergency funds during times of need.

The family-oriented culture has incentivized many team members to stay for more than 30 years and newer team members to follow the same path.

Mason joined Chuy's in 2008 and has no plans to leave because of the company's culture.

Back then, she was working as a bartender/server while paying her own way through college. She took courses only as she could afford them. One semester, she was short \$500.

"I had no way of acquiring the money without a loan, and it was stressing me out," she said. "We were opening the Denton, Texas, store, and John Mountford, the COO, and Lisa Bryant, Area Supervisor, noticed something was wrong and inquired. I reluctantly shared my problem with , them, and they both opened their wallets and gave me the cash. That's Chuy's. We are a family."

Today, Mason's husband and sister both work for Chuy's as general managers.

"My kids get to live their lives because my husband and I work for the same company that takes such great care of us," she said.

Skipper, who has been with Chuy's for three years, loves everything about her job.

"It's fun to work here, and you feel it the moment you walk in; we're singing and dancing in here," she said. "Our food is very important but almost as important is our culture. I will never leave Chuy's for another restaurant concept because everything I have ever wanted is here."

It's important for Chuy's to give back to the communities it serves.

In addition to each Chuy's restaurant partnering with a local charity or organization to donate time and funds, the company partners with St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

"In 2017, we opened our 100th restaurant and were big enough to give back on a larger scale," Mason said. "Giving to children's charities is something we've always been passionate about."

In two years, Chuy's has raised \$ 379,000 for St. Jude Research Hospital. This year, the goal was to raise \$300,000, which it has surpassed.

"In week one, we raised \$ 143,000," Mason said. "I was amazed."

Restaurants compete in raising the most funds. They sell t-shirts, raffle tickets, and the menu cover lists items needed by children receiving treatment at St. Jude Research Hospital— rehabilitation weights, a day of meals, a pair of crutches, a pair of crutches, a chest X-ray and a day in ICU— that guests can add to their bill. Each restaurant also brainstorms inventive ways to raise money, such as hosting a character breakfast for families and bake sales. The highest grossing general manager presents the donation to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis.

Mason credits the staff for the company's fundraising success.

"Our staff tries really hard; almost all of what we raise is because of our staff's passion," she said.

SPREADING THE LOVE

With 100 restaurants, including the original location, across 19 states and counting, Chuy's is bringing its fresh and flavorful Tex- Mex recipes across the country. New restaurants are opening in Huntsville, Ala.; Lexington, Ky.; Colorado Springs, Colo.; Houston; and Columbus, Ohio, this year.

Since the menu hasn't changed much in more than 30 years, new guests can enjoy Chuy's made-from-scratch Tex-Mex dishes as the founders intended and lifelong fans have already come to love.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator.

