

Now serving: Hopes and dreams

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Durham -- The biggest sign out front still said "Biscuit Time." The music flowing among the faux-wood booths was Bach and Vivaldi, not the jumping Tejano beat Alberto Canuto had planned. The cash register didn't work, forcing the women at the front counter to total tickets in their heads.

And in the kitchen, Canuto, with a team of relatives, diced and sauteed, stir-fried and deep fried as fast as they could. The orders were taking too long to make; the customers had to be getting antsy.

Canuto knew enough to expect this. In his 16 years in the business, toiling in all kinds of eateries scattered across the country, he'd learned that on opening day, nothing was ever perfect.

Still, this time Canuto couldn't help feeling a mix of elation and worry just below his rushing thoughts of "Need more broccoli," "Fry the rice," "Where are those tostados?" Because this was not just any restaurant opening.

The debut of Chino Latino, a dine-in or take-out place serving Chinese and Mexican food, was his debut. As chef, restaurant owner, businessman. His money and his vision were on the line. Success would mean financial independence, something to leave his children, a way to bring a bit of his Mexican culture to the place he now called home. Failure would mean going back to cooking in someone else's kitchen. Canuto hoped with all his heart that Chino Latino would soar.

Financially, the restaurant was a pretty safe bet. Because of the Triangle's exploding Latino population, nearly any business set up to serve them had succeeded in recent years. And Canuto was not alone in striking out on his own. North Carolina saw a 205 percent increase in Latino-owned businesses from 1987 to 1992, according to a U.S. Small Business Administration report. More recent numbers estimate about 700 Latino-owned businesses in the state.

Yet Canuto faced challenges. He was sharing the building with Peter Yau, a Chinese immigrant who ran Biscuit Time there in the mornings. How the two would parcel out hours and space, signage and ambience, while bridging their cultural divides was still to be determined. Canuto worried about competition, too. He hoped serving both Chinese and Mexican food would set him apart from the taquerias and other Mexican places that had set up shop on so many Triangle corners lately.

But questions of success and failure would have to come later. On opening day, there were orders to prepare, dishes to wash, new customers to please.

The road to Durham

For Canuto, this chance to stand on his own had been a long time coming.

Nineteen years ago, he left his homeland of Guanajuato, Mexico, headed for Texas. He went with an uncle, illegally, looking for a chance to make more money and live a kind of life that he never could if he stayed. After three years of working construction, he landed in a Chinese restaurant, where he worked as a fry cook, clocking 12 hours a day, six days a week.

A brother had immigrated to the United States before Canuto and learned that there was money to be made in Durham. After six years in Texas, Canuto followed him to North Carolina. Again, he found employment in a Chinese restaurant, this time as a prep cook, cutting vegetables, chopping meat. It was 1986, and the government was offering amnesty to illegal immigrants. Canuto filled out his paperwork. Six months later he had a green card.

Over the years, he became a full-fledged cook, worked in a corporate cafeteria. He moved his wife from Mexico. They had two children, saved their money, bought a home. With every step toward security, Canuto thought more and more about a dream he'd long had: to open his own restaurant. But just then, he didn't have the means.

Three years ago, Canuto began working for a restaurant at the Embassy Suites in Cary, called Bistro in the Park. He talked to the managers there about serving Chinese and Mexican cuisine, but they told him it wouldn't fit in with their menu. So he kept on cooking -- and dreaming.

Then, last year, things began to fall into place. In September, Canuto became a U.S. citizen. That same month he began a class at a nonprofit organization, Good Work Inc. All in Spanish, it taught Latinos the ins and outs of opening their own businesses: how to create a budget, how to sign a contract, what inspections and documents would be needed. For Canuto, it broke the last barrier keeping him from opening a kitchen of his own.

Or so he thought.

By the time the six-week class drew to a close, Canuto was focused. He scanned the newspapers for restaurant close-out sales and purchased kitchen equipment, storing it in his garage. He took out a

\$4,000 loan from the Self Help Credit Union. Between that and \$30,000 in savings, he was financially set. He arranged for a friend and his brothers to help in the kitchen.

Canuto was waiting on just one thing: a place to put Chino Latino.

A kitchen of his own

In November, Canuto found a building in East Durham that had been a restaurant, making it easy to open up in right away. But the owners were unsure about renting to someone launching a business for the first time. They didn't tell him yes, but they didn't tell him no. Canuto held out hope.

He also kept searching the classifieds. He drove into strip malls all across Durham, but it seemed every one had either a Mexican or Chinese restaurant already. He scouted "For Rent" signs or vacant properties that looked promising wherever he went.

That was how he found Biscuit Time.

He passed the stand-alone restaurant on Holloway Street day after day heading to and from work in the afternoons and evenings. It was always dark inside. Then, he happened to drive by in the morning and saw it was open. He thought: I wonder if I could use the building when Biscuit Time doesn't? One day, he posed that very question to store owner Yau.

Yau wasn't interested. He had run Chinese restaurants before and that's why he was running Biscuit Time now. Lunch and dinner restaurants required full staffs and all the turnover and unpredictability that went with them. At Biscuit Time, it was just Yau and his wife. The last thing they wanted was to invite trouble.

But Canuto was persistent. He stopped by over and over. He explained his idea of a Chinese-Mexican restaurant, telling Yau that Mexicans liked Chinese food, often because they had worked in Chinese kitchens. That got Yau to thinking. He could help with a Chinese restaurant again without having to actually run it. Still, he was unsure.

In January, Canuto finally heard from the owners of the first property he had been interested in. They had leased the building to someone else.

But a few weeks later, just when things were looking their worst, Yau called Canuto. OK, he told him. Let's try this.

"I don't trust people that much," Yau explained. "But this young man came in with an idea. ... After a few months, I could see he was willing to work hard. He wasn't like people who talk one thing and do another. I wanted to help him start his business."

An excited Canuto talked with Yau about small changes to the place. He wanted to hang sombreros on the walls, put in TVs with a satellite that would air Mexican stations. They discussed new hours: Biscuit Time's would be 6 a.m. to noon, Chino Latino's from noon to 9:30 p.m.

Each business would provide its own supplies but would share kitchen appliances and utensils. And Yau would counsel Canuto on his Chinese cooking, at least at first.

The big day

Canuto set March 31 as the grand opening.

He lined up two Tejano bands to kick off the day with gusto. He called in the necessary inspectors. And inquired about a new sign.

The one he wanted wouldn't be ready in time, so he settled for a cloth banner with red letters. He gave his notice at work. And arranged to buy the food he would need.

In the midst of all the planning, Canuto and Yau got to know each other better. Canuto realized that Yau didn't understand how much restaurant experience he had. Yau wanted to teach him. Canuto was appreciative, but he hoped their relationship would be more equal once Yau saw him in action.

So on opening day, in addition to launching his restaurant, Canuto was also proving himself to Yau.

It started badly. Canuto didn't have as much prepared as he expected to. Yau was wound tight. At noon, trays of biscuits still covered the kitchen. It had been a busy morning for Biscuit Time. Everyone hoped it would be a busy afternoon for Chino Latino.

"Order in!" Yau shouted, then hovered as Canuto and his brothers began cooking. He paced the kitchen floor. "Do you have your first order ready yet?" he asked after a few moments. The Mexicans kept working in silence.

Yau's wife, Teresa, struggled with the two Mexican women working the front counter, one Canuto's cousin, the other, his younger brother's fiancée. Couldn't they see the to-go bags were hanging right in front of them? What was so hard about the calculator? She took it to show them how to use it, but then could not get it to work for her either.

Sharing space was never easy. It was made harder by the fact that the Yaus spoke in Cantonese to each other; the Canutos spoke in Spanish. When the Yaus left at 2 p.m., a wave of stress left with them.

As the afternoon wore on, everything got better. The Mexican TVs blinked on about 3 p.m., settling on a soccer match. The band outside began playing, drawing people from a largely Latino apartment complex across the street. Even those who didn't come to eat stood in the parking lot, giving the whole property a party feel.

The balance was shifting. The place seemed more Mexican -- and less like Canuto cooking out of a Biscuit place.

Best of all, the customers were pleased. "The food, it's great," said Alfonso Federico, who came with his family from the apartments across the road. "I'll be back every day!"

As 5 p.m. approached, the midpoint to his opening day, Canuto looked out at the full dining room with eyes of wonder. Would Chino Latino make it despite its limitations, despite the unusual space-sharing agreement? At this moment there was no question in his mind.

"Everything's good, it's good," he said, a smile finally creeping across his pudgy face. "You know, I'm really so happy."