Ivan Gutierrez turns family tradition into award-winning salsa

When you pick up a jar of Tierra Negra, you're tasting more than salsa; you're tasting decades of restaurant experience from Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood.

Ivan Gutierrez launched Tierra Negra in 2024, but his story began years earlier. He and his cousins grew up in their grandparents' restaurant, Cuernavaca Restaurant, where they spent weekends washing cups, busing tables, and learning the business. By their early 20s, the grandchildren had taken over, carrying on a tradition that started when their grandparents moved from Guadalajara, Mexico, in the 1970s.

"I was 22 when we took over my grandparents' restaurant," said Ivan, now 34. "We'd been working in the restaurant our whole lives, even in elementary school. We learned the operations at a very young age."

The restaurant was more than a place to eat. Ivan remembers mariachis playing, families gathering for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and his grandfather hosting soccer watch parties on Sundays.

His grandmother worked in the kitchen, while his mother welcomed guests. Over time, his grandparents' children opened their own restaurants around Chicago. Today, the original Cuernavaca Restaurant, where Ivan still works, is called La Vaca Margarita Bar, a well-known spot in Pilsen.

By 2020, Ivan wanted to create something new.

"During the pandemic, I realized I wanted to launch my own product," he said. "We noticed a lot of salsas were either red tomato-based or green tomatillo-based. There weren't really any dark salsas on the market. That's when it clicked – we had to come out with our dark salsa."

Tierra Negra took four years to develop. "The salsa is made with dried chili peppers cooked in olive oil, using natural ingredients and no preservatives. The result is smoky, savory, and slightly sweet, a flavor that stands out," Ivan explained.

The launch brought quick attention.

"We were probably one of the youngest brands to ever exhibit at a trade show," Ivan said about showing Tierra Negra at the Fancy Food Show in New York. "We were highlighted in Inc. Magazine, which was really cool. I'd never seen my name in a magazine before."

Through The Hatchery Chicago, a local food incubator, Ivan connected with the Meijer team.

"Two or three months later, I got an email from Meijer asking if I'd be interested in being part of the Local Favorites program. That was absolutely 100% yes!" he said.

Today, Tierra Negra is on the shelves at 14 Meijer Illinois stores.

"We've been there since February of this year. It's been great. They are our top-performing stores, and they allow us to do demos," Ivan said. "The demos help customers discover our product, try it for the first time, and maybe become repeat customers."

Ivan sees Tierra Negra as more than just salsa.

"I'm not just a random person who came out with a salsa brand," he said. "I grew up in the food industry, inspired by incredible flavors from my heritage, and now I want to bring it to the world."

Additional assets available online: Photos (2)

https://meijercommunity.com/Ivan-Gutierrez-turns-family-tradition-into-award-winning-salsa