



¡Feliz Cinquenterario!

Norte Mexican Restaurant and Cocktails
turns 50.

Written by **WENDY HINMAN**

Norte is 50. How can this be? During this season, we marvel at the passage of time. How is that kid a senior already? We feel the same with Norte. Many locals think, “It seems like just yesterday I got my first job there.” Then the memories of after-parties, Cinco de Mayos and anniversaries rush in. Carlsbad has so many new restaurants that we really must take our hats off to the old ones. Like Lola’s or Pollos Maria, family recipes make up the Norte menu. All the matriarchs of these restaurants, by the way, are longtime friends and enjoy each other’s cooking.

Martha and Fidel Montanez opened Fidel’s in Solana Beach in the 1960s. Fidel was born on Madison and raised on Roosevelt streets in Barrio Carlsbad. As Fidel’s grew in Solana Beach, the Montanezes thought about opening a second restaurant here. There have been three Fidel’s restaurants. Solana Beach, where they live. Fidel’s Norte in Carlsbad, where they’re from. And Fidel’s in the Gorge (the Columbia River Gorge), where they like to vacation.

The Montanez family would call what was originally Fidel’s Norte just “Norte.” And Norte has become so rooted in our community that Richard Montanez, the eldest of Martha and Fidel’s seven children, told his daughter, “You are going to meet three kinds of people at work: new cousins, ex-employees and repeat tourists.”

Norte is in the old Cohn house. Albert Cohn retired from his grocery business in L.A. and moved to Carlsbad in the late ’20s. He built a large estate catty-corner from his friend Eddie Kentner’s place, the old Twin Inns (now Sun Diego). The Cohn home was built in 1927, so while Norte turns 50 this year, the building turns 100 next year.

After Cohn’s passing, an investment group that included Bing Crosby bought the estate and transformed the grounds into The Royal Palms Motel and Seaside Cafe. Montanez says The Royal Palms Bar was where Norte’s dining room is, and Giovanni’s was where Norte’s bar is now. Fidel and Martha bought Giovanni’s in 1976, giving them the liquor license and transferring the 20-year lease.

What also transferred, unofficially, was Carlsbad’s hub. The Twin Inns had been our community gathering place for Sunday suppers, club meetings and reunions. Norte became that Village hub when the Twin Inns’ 65-year run ended. It was our new chicken restaurant; when locals get sick, Norte’s chicken tortilla soup is the best medicine. Many Carlsbad High School alumni have had reunion pre-parties there. “We do a lot of celebration of life” lunches or dinners, Montanez says. Any day the Day of the Dead could be celebrated there.

When the Royal Palms investment group sold to the group that built The Carlsbad Inn, the original plan called “to scrape everything” to the ground, Montanez says, “including this building.” But the city intervened to save the historic Spanish-style Cohn house and the over 100-year-old ficus tree between the restaurant and the Carlsbad Inn Beach Resort.

Change is inevitable; there was some remodeling, but Montanez can show you all the wood and tiles that were original to the Cohn house. The menu has enduring fixtures, but new items will be introduced after they’ve been inaugurated and approved around the Montanez family gathering table. The art and decor changes almost yearly because it has always been a passion of Martha’s. It began with a sort of Tijuana maximalism, then moved to a clean Zacatecas folk art style. Martha is also known for her meticulous Christmas tree trimming. But at 93, “the family has to put the harness on,” to keep her in just the supervisor’s seat, Montanez says.

Navigating the narrow profit margins in the restaurant business takes hard-earned skill. Presenting the best menu you can at a price that won’t sting people’s vacations can be choppy seas. Norte has sailed over the swells of recessions, Covid and minimum-wage hikes.

Covid was a rogue wave that Montanez says was hard to captain: “There were federal regulations, state regulations, county regulations and city regulations.” As customers, we appreciated the brief moment when we could get our margaritas in to-go cups along with our enchiladas.

During lockdown, the to-go crew at Norte was “our extended family,” Montanez says of employees who had worked there since the ’70s.

Norte has thrived, and sometimes simply survived, for 50 years. There is a familial reassurance when you walk in. It feels good to know the Carlsbad High football linemen are making a few extra bucks bouncing on Cinco de Mayo or St. Paddy’s Day. Locals expect to run into each other on the patio. And visitors can trust 50 years of tried and true when they pick up a menu. Thank you, Fidel and Martha Montanez, for 50 years of feeding the Carlsbad family.



a) Fidel Montanez at Fidel's. b) Martha Montanez planning the Norte Christmas tree. c) Norte sits on the former site of the Royal Palms Inn. d) Norte took the baton as Carlsbad's chicken restaurant and community gathering place after the Twin Inns' 65-year run. e) The Montanez children: Fidel Jr., Mark, Jay, Duke, Tracy, York and Richard. f) Norte remains a place where locals go to celebrate. g) The Cohn house had the "good bones" to become Norte, a family gathering place. h) Fidel and Jay Montanez at the grand re-opening of Norte after the first major remodel (photos courtesy of Norte).