



Virginia Castro: The Heart Behind El Mariachi



This month's HER Story Spotlight goes to Virginia Castro—a proud businesswoman, leader, and the heart of El Mariachi. Known for her dedication to her community, Virginia teaches cooking classes, gives advice, makes donations, and mentors other business owners. She was one of the **first member of the Quad Cities Hispanic Chamber of Commerce** and received the **very first Latina-Owned Businesswoman of the Year** award from the Chamber **17**

years ago, in 2008. She's also been involved with **Mercado** as one of their first vendors, served as the **Viva Quad Cities Fiesta Food Chairwoman/Vendor** for 20 years, and remains active in the LULAC organization.

Virginia is passionate about helping others and loves teaching people how to make traditional dishes. Her leadership, love for the community, and resilience have made a lasting impact. Her story is one of heart, hard work, and purpose.

Virginia's journey began in **1991** when her husband, Alfredo Castro, inspired her to pursue his lifelong dream of opening a restaurant. They started small—with a **food truck in 1991** to test the waters and see if people would like their food. That truck stayed in business for 12

years and gave Virginia the opportunity to save enough money to open a restaurant. Today, El Mariachi has been serving the community for 23 years.

Getting the business off the ground wasn't easy. Virginia didn't borrow enough to cover all the expenses, so she and Alfredo continued working full-time jobs while also building the business. Alfredo would often leave his day job and spend late nights and weekends working on the restaurant. El Mariachi gained experience through fairs, festivals, and events—starting with its first event in Colona, IL, using the food truck.

One unforgettable moment happened early on. Virginia, seven months pregnant at the time, was at a food event with other vendors set up along a bike trail. Alfredo had gone to pick up their workers, not realizing the **truck that pulls the food truck** had been left in neutral. While he was away, **that truck rolled into a canal**. Virginia was devastated But the unexpected accident landed El Mariachi on the news. The next day, she opened the food truck, and to her surprise, a line of about 20 people were already waiting to try her food. From that point forward, the lines never stopped. That incident turned out to be the best advertisement they never planned.

Over time, the restaurant became a staple in the community. Virginia recalls a moment that made it all feel real: A young man in the grocery store recognized her and said, **“OMG!**



You're the owner of El Mariachi—I can't wait to tell my friends I'm bagging your groceries!” That's when Virginia knew she was on the road to success and becoming more known and popular in the community.

Virginia has always been resourceful and generous. She shares those small loans **from programs like Project Now, SCORE, Blackhawk Small Business Grants, and others**

helped with taxes, business insurance, and writing business plans. These programs also helped her find a great, affordable accountant and gave her guidance. She emphasizes that **SCORE and the Blackhawk grants are free resources**, and she encourages others to take advantage of them.

She's quick to give advice: "Get extra money when starting a business—even if you don't use it all, it's better to have it just in case," she says. She also advises not to open a new business in the winter and encourages people to talk to other business owners and get as many resources as possible.

El Mariachi has become more than just a restaurant—it's its own community. Families have grown up there. They have regulars who come in faithfully, some who feel like they're part owners because they've been coming for so long. Some customers even consider the restaurant part of their family. One long-time supporter loved the food so much, she requested in her will that *El Mariachi* cater her funeral.

The restaurant staff is also like family. Many employees have been there 15–20 years. Some leave and come back when needed. Virginia is known for being flexible and considerate with her employees' schedules

Today, Virginia is stepping back while her daughter, Crystal Castro, becomes the new face of *El Mariachi*. Crystal has been working alongside her mom since she was just two years old. It took nine months to open the restaurant, and now Crystal is preparing to take it even further. Alfredo still helps—**he's in charge of the kitchen orders, inventory, cuts all the meat, and is a true jack of all trades.**

Virginia, **who didn't have a lot of practice but understood Spanish**, didn't speak it well until she met her husband. She still loves cooking **full-course meals most days** and loves spending time with her **children and grandchildren.** Some of her favorite sayings are:



- "Live every day like it's Taco Tuesday."
- "We don't make mistakes, we do variations."
- "Always take life with a grain of salt—and a shot of tequila."

Running *El Mariachi* has meant long hours, sacrifices, and lots of love—but Virginia wouldn't trade any of it. The reward has been more than just success—it's been the joy of building something lasting, meaningful, and full of flavor.