

## 15 MINUTES

## The Fowler Street ambassador to El Salvador

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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Red lights strung under the awning of El Acajutla Restaurant impart a welcoming glow to drivers along seedy Fowler Street at night. Nearby car lots are dark and quiet. Other places, like Escapades Gentleman's Club, are open for business. There are a few sad fast food restaurants and some bars that look vaguely sinister with their tinted windows. But El Acajutla, which is about the size of a small studio apartment, is as warm and friendly a place as any stupefied work-a-day bum could hope to find. And that is the ideal way to discover it — unknowingly, exhausted and hungry, taken by surprise by the profoundly fulfilling seafood soup, thick tortillas or traditional PuPusas the Dominguez family turns out of the kitchen.

Mario Dominguez, of course, gives any credit to the success of the operation to his wife Ana. They keep the restaurant open seven days a week, from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., and 11 p.m. on weekends. She's the brains behind the operation, the source of all success — he just works there, taking turns as a waiter, cook or dishwasher.

"All the good systems come from my wife," he insists. "That's my wife; she's the best one on the cooking."

Mr. Dominguez appeared outside his restaurant one evening earlier this winter when he noticed me, just such a worn-out traveler, outside the front door. He ushered me in past a man sitting at the table outside, not ordering anything, who was

for some reason telling me about his injured hand.

"Are you with him?" he asked, smiling. I shook my head slowly, no. I sat at a booth and he pushed the seafood soup like a real salesman. Maybe it was just that particular night, but it was a transformative experience.

Later, on a return visit, he took a map of El Salvador off the wall above that booth and showed me the town he grew up in. Mr. Dominguez's mother still lives in El Paz, a tiny state within El Salvador. From there it's roughly a 40-minute drive east to the coastal city and port of Acajutla, for which the restaurant is named. It also means "wonderland" in Nuhautl, an ancient Aztec Indian dialect.

Like some kind of Fort Myers ambassador to El Salvador, Mr. Dominguez is as enthusiastic about his homeland as he is about the soup. "If you have any time to stop by, it's a nice country," he assures.

He left El Paz in 1989 amid a civil war, when he was 15. He remembers swimming in the rivers there, and in the Pacific Ocean, playing football and being a Boy Scout.

He met his wife near Miami in 1999, while working construction jobs and taking English classes in the evening. They married and moved to Lehigh Acres in 2003. Based on a Central American restaurant Mrs. Dominguez's uncle owns in Miami, they opened El Acajutla in 2007, amid the steepest economic downturn since the Great Depression.



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Mario Dominguez with his restaurant's famous seafood soup.

By most signs, it is now thriving. Mr. Dominguez worries on many weekend nights, such as last Saturday, that he's losing profit because the dining room isn't big enough for the people waiting outside to get in. On many evenings, and especially Sunday afternoons, the room is filled with families. By the end of this year, if the business is stable, they plan to begin thinking about a second El Acajutla location.

Mr. Dominguez works at winning people over to traditional dishes, like the PuPusas his mother used to make.

It's a thick tortilla, almost like flatbread,

filled with refried beans, cheese and sometimes pork. She sold them on the street at a local shopping plaza, one of the family's primary sources of income. He explained the dish is a traditional street food, "like the American hot dog or the American hamburger." In the last few years, his mother flew to Fort Myers and saw the restaurant. "She's very happy because we are from a very poor family," he said.

Outside of the business, Mr. Dominguez helps make ends meet hauling citrus in a semi-truck. He had it parked out back behind the restaurant last Sunday night. After the last customers were served and the floors were swept, the money counted, and the dishes washed, he drove it home. In the morning he took it to pick up and deliver a load of citrus while his wife went to open the restaurant.

He has seen a lot of open American road, and gotten in a few binds, driving his semi-truck. On one trip to New Jersey, lost in a small town, he tried making a U-turn in a field, the property of a defensive owner. Before the misunderstanding was cleared up, a man with a shotgun appeared, ordered him to get out of the truck, and took his keys.

"It was a very bad day," Mr. Dominguez said.

But most days he's happy, which he says is his nature.

"I feel proud of what I've got, what I do, what I am now," he said. "Because this kind of dream where I came from is not easy to get. Where I came from, they are far, far away from it." ■



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