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American dream is alive at Empanada Stop in city

Owner named Hispanic Business Person of Year

By Daniel Wallace
Staff writer

Though small in size, Juan & Maria's Empanada Stop has become a celebrated treasure of Rochester, and on Thursday the couple who run it were honored by the Rochester Hispanic Business Association.

Juan Contreras, 53, part-owner of the eatery at the Rochester Public Market, was recognized as 2007 Hispanic Business Person of the Year.

He, in turn, credited his wife, Maria.

"If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be standing here," Contreras said as they stood together on the dais at the Riverside Convention Center.

Eduardo Navarro, chairman of the Hispanic business group, said Contreras has given back to society. The award's selection committee noted that Contreras came to the United States from Chile at age 16 and has lived the American dream, and it judged him worthy in part because he actively participates in the community.

But the factor that impressed committee members the most, Navarro said, was Contreras' emphasis on family.

"He has a great value and appreciation for family, and that's what pushes him to succeed," said Navarro.

In addition to Maria, his wife of 30 years, their children Daniela, Carolina, Benjamin, Patricio and Marianela have been involved in the family's business opportunities.

The most successful has been the Empanada Stop, which the family is preparing to expand into a franchise.

"It's not a question of whether people like our food or not, it's a question of how fast we can bring it to them," said Contreras.

The plan is to open six Empanada Stops around the city and branch out to other parts of the state. He said he is lining up potential investors, insisting that they exemplify the same community-mindedness for which the Contrerases are noted.

"We want to do business with people just like us," Contreras said. "Our food comes with a relationship."

The couple started out selling about 10 or 20 empanadas a day at the Public Market, and have increased that to more than 800. On Memorial Day, they sold 1,025 of the stuffed pastry turnovers, a record.

"We've been at this for seven years, and just as I knew Maria would someday be my wife, I know this franchise deal will take off," Contreras said.

There's a lot of planning going on at the Empanada Stop as the family gears up for mass production of some of its food items, which might be sold online as well as at retail locations.

Rochester-based Zweigle's has started producing and packaging the Empanada Stop's pork loin sausage.

The Contrerases also plan to bottle three of their homemade sauces.

For the last several years, the family has worked on perfecting a microwaveable empanada that won't lose flavor.

"I'm a visionary and I like to dream big," said Contreras, whose biggest dream is to expand the Empanada Stops across his adopted country.

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Juan Contreras

Age: 53.

Place of birth: Santiago, Chile.

Residence: East Rochester.

Family: Wife Maria, five children.

Businesses: Juan & Maria's Empanada Stop, a Spanish food takeout restaurant at the Public Market; Spanish International Marketing, an advertising and public relations agency.

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