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## CoCo's Tamales: serving fresh, handmade and delicious

By LYNDA WALLIS Special to the Daily News

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Blas Guzman and his mother Maria Guzman of Coco's Tamales show off their tamales during the Downtown Beloit Association's (DBA) Indoor Winter Beloit Farmers' Market in late November.

Hillary Gavan/Beloit Daily News

BELOIT — It's midnight on a Friday, and Maria Perez's weekend is just beginning.

She and various family members—including four sons and her husband, Lazaro—travel to a kitchen in Madison to begin making between 300 and 600 tamales by hand for their business, Coco's Tamales.

It's one of many tasks the Perez family undergoes to keep their business growing.

CoCo's Tamales—named in honor of Perez's beloved mother—is a staple at the Beloit Farmers' Market. The business is also a food vendor for Beloit College and the School District of Beloit.

Perez is carrying on a 150-plus years family tradition. Recipes have been handed down for generations within Perez's maternal family. She has roots in Jalisco, Mexico—a state bordering the Pacific Ocean.

“‘Sazon,’ is the word for regional seasoning. Jalisco, where my family is from, is a melting pot of many different cultures and their foods—Asian, Norwegian, Japanese, Mayan as well as Hindu, and Chinese. Ingredients of each of these different cultures have found their way into our seasoning,” Perez said.

Perez has been teaching her four sons the art of cooking.

“I don't have daughters, but my sons are all learning how to cook,” Perez said. “Each of my sons have a unique palette. They are all becoming foodies.”

Perez said people have come to expect freshness and a pleasant experience when they eat Mexican food.

She serves up several different types of weekly tamales: pork, chicken and two different types of veggies, depending what is fresh and available at the marketplace.

Eleven years ago, Perez introduced the handmade tamales to the Beloit Farmers Market.

To this day, Perez said she is thankful for the early help she received from the Downtown Beloit Association (DBA). Those with the DBA helped her research how to sell food, learn what was necessary in working with the local health department and how to obtain the correct permits.

Since then, her tamales have become a staple at the Beloit Farmers' Market. People line up to purchase her delicious tamales. Pre-pandemic Perez and her family sold between 600 and 1,000 tamales during a weekend.

A few summers ago, Perez started selling her tamales at the Monona Farmers Market, which will open on Sundays in mid-May.

Recently, the Clark Family Market in Brodhead also began carrying her tamales. Open Wednesday through Saturday, from 2–6 p.m. the Clark Family Market specializes in organic and local foods. Perez said she is honored that her tamales are included in the high quality line up offered at Clark's.

Perez wants caterers, restaurateurs and those with brick and mortar stores to know that there is hope and organizations to help those with a passion for food.

She cooks at the Food Enterprise and Economic Development (FEED) Kitchen in Madison, a food business incubator that rents out affordable, certified kitchen space. Bakers, food truck operators and meat processors can come to safely prepare their food for sale to the public.

“The facility is available for rent so that food businesses, nonprofit organizations, vocational training programs and individuals seeking to prepare food to sell to the public have a legal place to prepare their food,” according to the FEED Kitchen website, [feedkitchens.org](http://feedkitchens.org).

The FEED Kitchen provides cold storage, freezer space and dry storage.

“The people at FEED even help with labeling, UPC labels, just everything,” Perez said.

Perez and her family moved to Beloit about 15 years ago, after living in the Chicago area. Perez had a 25-year career in human resources. On weekends, Perez worked part-time doing catering with her mom.



When Perez and her husband learned their fourth and final child was a special needs child with autism, she made the choice to stay home for the first nine months.

It was during that time that the idea of selling her family's traditional handmade tamales took shape.

More than anything, Perez is grateful to the community of Beloit for being so welcoming.

“We faced no racism or discrimination. So many lovely people in Beloit helped us and were so reassuring. We are so thankful to be here in Beloit,” she said.

Coco's Tamales can be found at the winter indoor Beloit Farmers Markets every Saturday from 9 a.m.—12 p.m., at 557 E Grand Ave. in downtown Beloit. The indoor market will continue through the end of April. The outdoor Beloit Farmers Market will return to the streets from May—November.

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Hillary Gavan