



A Market-to-Farm Story

BEGINNING IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION, FARM-TO-MARKET ROADS were built to pave the way for rural farmers and ranchers to carry their goods to market. Those same roads have been used by generations of young people to travel away from their country roots for careers. Thankfully, those asphalt thoroughfares are two-way and serve as a path home for many. That's the case for Spur 514 in Yantis, where a vibrant peach orchard is growing.

In 1978, the week after graduating from Yantis High School with her eight-member senior class, Sheilah McAfee married dairyman and high school sweetheart Craig Rushing. In addition to running the dairy, Craig also worked various odd jobs to put food on the table and, at times, to help shore up the dairy. A jack-of-all-trades, Craig worked in construction, performed electrical work and even drove a truck. "I did whatever it took to pay the bills," he said.

Eventually, in 2001, he sold the dairy, "so I'd only have to work one extra job," he said with a laugh. Then, in 2003, when Enron offered him a job in California, he went, and Sheilah joined him there the next year.

The Rushings enjoyed their time in California, particularly visiting vast orchards and farm regions, where they gained an appreciation for some of the freshest fruit available on the planet. But then homesickness set in. "We realized we would do just about anything to get back to Texas," Craig said. Luckily, in 2005, he acquired a job at the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, near Austin, and Sheilah went to work in nearby Williamson County. And much like in California, they enjoyed visits to the well-known flower farms, peach orchards and grape vineyards surrounding nearby Fredericksburg.

Of their long-range plans after moving back to Texas, Sheilah said they always intended to return to Yantis for their retirement years, to live on the land that has been in the family for generations. "Farming is in our nature and in our blood," she said. "Both of our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were farmers."

Also in their blood is a strong work ethic. "As silly as it sounds, working is our entertainment," Sheilah said.

So, in December 2013, as they prepared their "entertainment" for their retirement years, the Rushings planted their first peach trees at their farm, the Peach Orchard at Lake Fork. Their first harvest was in 2018.

"People came out to get peaches that I had not seen in 20 or 30 years!" Craig said. "It has been a lot of work but also a lot of fun. I just wish we'd started earlier."

One of their very first customers was an old classmate of Craig's, Kathy Gilbreath. "Craig has been interested in growing peach trees since elementary school," Gilbreath said. She remembers him telling her way back then that he wanted to have a peach orchard so that once he started getting peaches, he could quit working. "But the truth is," Gilbreath said, laughing, "he probably works harder on that peach orchard than he ever did before."

Dream or not, when they first planted their peach orchard, neither of the Rushings envisioned the amount of labor and financial resources it would require. "The peaches aren't native, so you're battling nature the whole way," Craig said. "Every animal and pest loves to eat peaches, so you are battling them the whole way, too." To combat those threats, they plant



1-2. Sheilah and Craig Rushing are living their dream of returning to their family land, and they're enjoying every minute of developing their peach orchard.

3. At the Peach Orchard at Lake Fork, many customers opt to pick their own fruits.

4. Sheilah's homemade jams are for sale at the orchard.

5. Peaches ripen at the orchard in Yantis.

THE PEACH ORCHARD AT LAKE FORK

992 Spur 514, Yantis 75497
For availability, text or call
(512) 964-9206

enough so the animals can have what they want.

While the animals get their share, the Rushings' objective is to deliver large, juicy, ripe peaches directly from the tree for people to enjoy. A fair amount of careful planning and management are required to reach that end—and to steadily maintain yields from May to the end of July.

First, they've planted many varieties of peaches, some of which bear fruit early and others later in the season, thus ensuring a staggered crop so all the peaches don't ripen at once. Their orchard comprises cling peaches, where the pit clings to the fruit, like their earliest peach, Flavor Rich, as well as several varieties of freestone peaches, where the pit is separated from the flesh, such as Red Haven, La Feliciano, Majestic, Bounty, Dixieland, Redskin and others.

At the Peach Orchard at Lake Fork, planting is probably the easiest part of the process. "The primary focus of a peach tree is to make a seed," Craig said. "It is the tree's only goal."

But the Rushings' goal is to get as big and juicy a peach as possible. To do that they have to manipulate nature. A peach tree can have up to 10,000 blooms, and each of those blossoms wants to grow a seed, but it's a complicated process to grow a sizable, fleshy peach. After planting, proper pruning is needed to produce a tree with an open center. This allows for good air-flow and sun exposure to the interior of the tree. Peaches bud only on 1-year-old wood, so timing of pruning is essential. Proper pruning also reduces the number of blooms on each limb, which helps keep limbs strong and peaches large.

In addition to pruning, many of the smallest peaches are culled to leave 6-8 inches on the limb between the remaining peaches to ensure each grows to a good size. In the end, the mature trees are trimmed and coaxed to support 600-800 peaches each.

"Most people have never eaten a truly ripe peach," Craig

said. That's because ripe peaches bruise and tear easily. Store-bought peaches are picked well before they ripen because it's hard to transport them without damaging them.

The Rushings not only provide customers the opportunity to taste a fresh peach but also delight in letting them pick their own fruits from the orchard. "I remember picking peaches at my grandmother's," Sheilah said.

They've had a lot of fun with their pick-your-own customers, such as a memorable group of home-schoolers and a couple from France, who said it brought them back to their childhood days of picking peaches at home.

If you don't want to pick your own, don't worry. The Rushings also offer boxes of prepicked peaches and, depending on the time of year, blackberries and figs. Sheilah also makes homemade peach jam, blackberry jam and fig preserves.

Because the peaches and other crops are dependent on nature, producing ripe fruit isn't an exact science but an art. Depending on weather and other circumstances, the first fruit at the Peach Orchard at Lake Fork starts ripening around mid-May. A short lull follows, and then in June and July, things get very peachy. The best way to ensure your trip is fruitful is to text or call the orchard in advance or to check out its Facebook page, where Sheilah posts regularly about what's available.

When the Rushings originally crafted their marketing plan, they believed that to sell their peaches, they would need to bring them to farmers markets. They only had to do that once, however. They were happily surprised to find that their customers are more than willing to visit the farm to take in the buzzing bees and heavenly aroma.

It's a business success story but also more proof that the farm-to-market road is a path to success, in whatever direction you may travel.



Pining for Tex-Mex? Visit Los Pinos

DELICIOUS TEX-MEX FOOD DOESN'T GROW ON TREES, BUT IT CAN be found in an unassuming orange building beneath a line of pine trees in Ben Wheeler. In days past, the building was a church that was eventually converted to a diner. Since 2009, it's been home to Los Pinos, a favorite Tex-Mex dining spot for locals and travelers who are in the know.

Between them, the owners of Los Pinos, Guille and Sergio Delgado, have 40-plus years of experience preparing and serving Tex-Mex cuisine. The couple met more than 20 years ago at a restaurant in Mesquite, where Guille was a waitress and Sergio was a cook. After honing their expertise, they began looking for a spot to open their own restaurant. One day, on their way to visit First Monday Trade Days in Canton, they spied a building they felt would be perfect. "More than anything, we said, let's give this a shot and see what God has in store for us," Guille said, remembering that day.

Guille, a self-described "people person," takes care of the front of the house while Sergio commands the kitchen. Owing to its out-of-the-way location, Los Pinos has been lovingly called a hole-in-the-wall. But since opening, customers have flocked to the restaurant seven days a week to enjoy Sergio's flavorful take on Tex-Mex.

When they opened, "it was hard at first," Guille said. "We'd only have six, seven or 10 customers a day." The couple tried advertising, but what really put them on the map was the

word-of-mouth of satisfied customers. Most of them are local, Guille said, but the restaurant also sees regulars that travel from Grand Saline, Tyler and Van.

Guille and Sergio are first-generation Mexican Americans. Both were born in Mexico and came to the United States as children. While they were building their job skills, they were also adding to their family. When they opened Los Pinos, their three children were ages 6, 7 and 10.

"They grew up in the restaurant, and many of our customers have known them from when we first started," Guille said. The kids are now 16, 17, and 19. The Delgados continue to emphasize that Los Pinos is a family-run restaurant, and they treat their employees and customers as such. "Our customers have watched our children grow up," Guille said, "and we've had the same employees for a long time. Most have been here over 10 years."

This family atmosphere is part of the reason they have been so successful. The other reason is the quality of the food. "We want to deliver the best customer service we can, and I believe we have great food," Guille said. "We have worked hard to make it consistent. You have to make it the same every time to meet what a customer has come to expect."

The menu is extensive and primarily Tex-Mex, with the expected enchiladas, fajitas, tacos, burritos, tostadas, chiles rellenos, chalupas, chimichangas, flautas, tamales and tortilla



LOS PINOS MEXICAN RESTAURANT

15821 Highway 64
Ben Wheeler 75754
(903) 833-5444

Open seven days a week:
10 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Saturday
10 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday
Find their full menu on Facebook at
facebook.com/LosPinosMexicanRestaurant1.

1. Husband and wife Sergio and Guille Delgado have worked together to build the growing reputation of their Ben Wheeler restaurant, Los Pinos.
2. To find the delicious Tex-Mex at Los Pinos, look for the unassuming orange building under the tall pines on Highway 64 in Ben Wheeler.
3. One of the customer favorites, the fajitas at Los Pinos gets rave reviews.
4. Diane Miller and her husband, who visit Los Pinos two or three times a week, dine with two men who were performing some work at their house.

soup. Guille is hard-pressed to say what the bestsellers are. All of the dishes are favorites, she said, but she conceded that her fajitas sell quite well.

Wood County Electric Cooperative crew members, who've been known to flock to Los Pinos for the Wednesday lunch special of fajita skillet with salsa, guacamole and pico de gallo, agree. "Get stuffed at fajita Wednesday. It's delicious!" said David Spindle, a WCEC serviceman.

Diane Miller, a customer from Van, holds the same sentiment. "I was a restaurant manager for 30 years, and I'm very picky about what I eat," she said. "Their food is excellent." She also recommends the fajitas: "It's all I ever eat."

Los Pinos offers a lunch special every day of the week, such as Taco Tuesdays. On Fridays, it's the Ben Wheeler Special, a variety plate that includes a taco, beef enchilada and tamale. Though the restaurant specializes in Tex-Mex, it also serves a range of American favorites, like chicken-fried steak, fried catfish, shrimp, hamburgers and fried chicken. Children's favorites include chicken nuggets, burgers, corn dogs and smaller versions of the Tex-Mex plates. If you're up for dessert, there's cheesecake, sopapillas and churros. And in November and December, the restaurant offers homemade tamales by the dozen for those family celebrations.

"I have a lot of people that come here to eat twice a day," Guille said. "That's one of the reasons we have variety."

Thinking about those very customers, she smiled and said, "We love Ben Wheeler, and we love all of our customers. Because of them, we're still here!"

The Delgados' ultimate goal is to build a bigger and better building to house their restaurant. In the meantime, the word-of-mouth generated by customers who have visited will continue to build their growing reputation as one of the best Tex-Mex spots under the pines of Northeast Texas.

Wood County Electric Cooperative

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