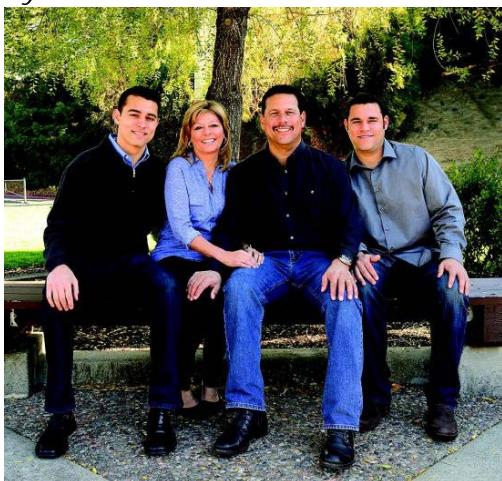


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## Thoughtful Food

By Susie Iventosch



The Berber Family from left, Alex, Carol, Manuel and Andrew at Saint Mary's College. Photo provided

As a kid growing up in the Lamorinda area, Alex Berber always had the feeling that he would join the family business one day. "I never wanted to admit it, but deep down I always knew. And, here I am! The one thing I did not know or understand at the time is how incredibly fortunate I was to have this opportunity later in my life."

That family business is Mi Rancho, a thriving tortilla company that sells more than 4.5 million tortillas to the combined retail-foodservice markets on a daily basis. Mi Rancho has been owned and operated by the Berber family since 1954 when Alex's great-grandfather, Robert Berber, Sr. and his grandparents Robert Berber, Jr. and his wife Ofelia moved to Oakland from Los Angeles to purchase the only Mexican grocery store in the area. The store, originally located on Seventh Street in Oakland, drew crowds from all around the local area for the fresh handmade tortillas, chilies, spices and hot foods.

When the Berber family took over, Ofelia's cooking turned the place into a favorite local haunt, with lines forming around the block to purchase her famous lunches. Eventually, when the company began selling its premium tortillas and chips to local food service

establishments, it finally outgrew the building and moved to a much larger facility in San Leandro.

Today, the business is run by the third and fourth generations of the Berber family - Manuel and Carol Berber and their sons Andrew and Alex. Both boys are graduates of Campolindo High School and the University of Colorado, Boulder. Manuel, who said it was a given that he would join the family business when he came of working age, is especially proud of the fact that the boys have chosen to come into the fold of the family business.

"College was our primary goal for Andrew and Alex, and after earning their degrees, both of them worked for other firms outside of the tortilla business," he said. "But now that they are fully invested in the family business, it means so much more. We are passing the torch to the boys for the continuation of the Berber family business."

Andrew Berber, the elder son who is primarily focusing on the operations side, says that growing up in a family business taught him the importance of relationships and connecting with people. "Being the fourth generation to run, operate and work at Mi Rancho is a huge milestone that hopefully one day will be surpassed by the next (fifth) generation of tortilla lovers."

Mi Rancho produces organic tortillas the old-fashioned way, using whole kernel, non-GMO corn locally sourced in the Sacramento valley. They use a process called nixtamalization whereby whole corn is cooked, steeped and rinsed (the nixtamal) and then ground into fresh masa using authentic hand-carved lava stones. According to Mi Rancho production manager Julio Sandoval, the company has a person dedicated to sharpening the lava stones, because properly carved stones create the best masa texture.

Manuel Berber says this is the traditional way that dates back to the Aztecs, but today most tortilla manufacturers shorten the process by using masa to begin with instead of whole kernel corn. "By beginning with fresh corn, you can achieve a tortilla with a truly rich corn taste," he pointed out.

An additional benefit of corn tortillas is that they are gluten-free, which is a huge plus for so many on wheat-free diets these days.

Carol Berber, who is of Italian heritage, loves the idea that there are so many ways to use tortillas in cooking. She has shared with us her recipe for Carne Asada and Charred Vegetables on Parmesan-crust Tortillas for what she calls "pure tortilla joy."

"Tortillas are so diverse and have so many uses, such as pizza crust or even crackers," Carol noted. "We don't even know how many ways they are being used out there!"

Mi Rancho also makes flour tortillas as well as their Organic Ancient Grain tortilla made with amaranth, millet, flax and quinoa. Mi Rancho moved into the mass retail market just six or seven years ago, and now sell their goods locally at Diablo Foods, Whole Foods, Safeway and Lunardi's markets.

For more information, visit [www.mirancho.com](http://www.mirancho.com).

Cooking Term of the Week

Invert Sugar

Invert sugar is the result of the breakdown of complex sugar into its component sugar molecules of fructose and glucose. The result is a sugar that is half of each. This is used in certain products to improve shelf life, and it can also be used in candies to make them smooth and in cookies to keep them soft and chewy. It can also be used in home brewing. If you find a recipe that calls for invert sugar, honey is the best substitute. For more information on invert sugar and its uses, properties and how to make it, visit:

[http://www.pastrysampler.com/Articles/Pastry\\_Baking/Invert\\_Sugar.html](http://www.pastrysampler.com/Articles/Pastry_Baking/Invert_Sugar.html)

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