

My Grandmother's THIRD STREET

FOR 40 YEARS my grandmother sat by the register of her Mexican restaurant on Third Street and watched Los Angeles slowly spread westward “to the end of the country,” from Grand Central Public Market in downtown through Hancock Park and West Hollywood to Beverly Hills, where it joined Santa Monica Boulevard and curved south to the Pacific.

When Mama first opened her place, in 1929, Western Avenue marked the border of major commerce. The yellow streetcar line from downtown zigzagged a north-and-south path that ended at Third Street and La Brea. The corner had an edge-of-town, intimate feeling, and that was where Encarnación Elias Gomez, who had never before worked a day in her life, decided to start El Carmen Cafe.

Two years before, Mama had been preparing to return to Mexico as its first lady, but her husband, General Arnulfo Gomez, had fallen victim to Latin American politics. Their property and bank accounts were confiscated, leaving Mama with two options—return to Mexico to live on the cattle ranch where she was born, or do the unthinkable for a widow: go into business. She gathered recipes from friends, hocked her jewelry, and chose the unthinkable. Six weeks before the stock market crashed, she opened El Carmen.

Cooking on a stove in the middle of a 24-seat counter, the General's Widow offered 12 items, including tostadas with French dressing, *albóndigas* soup, homemade tamales, and soufflélike chile rellenos. Cecil B. DeMille, Frank Borzage, and D.W. Griffith were early clients who made El Carmen their favorite hole-in-the-wall eatery, and these names lured others to the diner.

The Depression controlled the '30s; World War II took half of the '40s. During the war, supplies were rationed, and some customers would bring in their allotment of butter wrapped in wax paper with their name written on it. Mama Gomez would dutifully store the bundles in the refrigerator; when the family came for dinner, they had butter for their tortillas.

Mama said Los Angeles and El Carmen (she always linked the city with the business) really grew after 1947. By then Mama's elegant yet warm personality had won her a loyal clientele that waited in a line around the block. Among the regulars



were Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, up-and-coming singer Mario Lanza, and actors Loretta Young and John Wayne. Aunt Martha fondly recalls a visit by Anthony Quinn and his wife Katherine DeMille, daughter of Cecil B. He had a big plate of Mexican food while she ate fresh strawberries from a basket.

El Carmen never was a fancy place, nor was it stereotypically decorated for atmosphere. But in 1947 people were ready to put drab war outfits in mothballs, and Mama's clients dressed up for dinner. Ladies and gentlemen wore hats; ladies wore gloves, which they often forgot. Mama stored the left-behind gloves of various colors, lengths, and textures in large clear hat boxes. My cousin Louie and I, her grandchildren, were never allowed to touch them. “My people will come for them,” she'd say.

All the local business owners knew us. We traded tacos for coffee cake with Mr. Nagel, owner of the Spic and Span Bakery. Life moved at a predictable pace and any deviation became legend. Such was the case when a private plane made a forced landing in the middle of Third and La Brea. While waiting for the plane to be towed away, the pilot came into El Carmen for a snack.

Louie and I had license to roam west to Fairfax, where Mama's friend and client Earl B. Gilmore kept expanding the Farmer's Market. Mr. Gilmore was generous with passes to his drive-in theater, to Gilmore Field (home of the Hollywood Stars baseball team), and to the Pan Pacific Auditorium, where I remember attending dog and flower shows. Only one area was forbidden to us: the La Brea Tar Pits. Mama's rule came from customers who warned her that it was a dangerous place. “Children disappear there,” she'd tell us. “They fall into the tar and can't get out. So they fall and fall, forever.”

In the '50s larger enterprises forced many small businesses to move. A furniture store absorbed several addresses, including El Carmen's. Mama moved west on Third to a location near Crescent Heights Boulevard, and her clientele followed. The register still faced Third Street and the glove-filled hat boxes remained stored in the back room.

—Montserrat Fontes