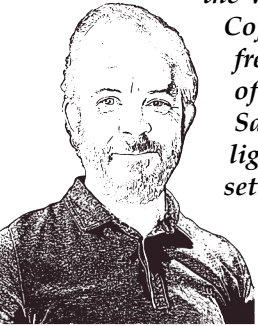


In bold letters: let's elevate local

Looking for an inviting patio on a sunny day or warm evening? May 1st marks one year since Tim Hines and his wife Monse replaced what was previously the Wild Goose Meeting House with The Best Coffee and Lounge. Artful coffee drinks and fresh smoothies made with real fruit (one of the unique touches that reflect Monse's Salvadoran heritage) are served up with light bites in a comfortable indoor-outdoor setting on eclectic North Tejon. The couple also operates Monse's Taste of El Salvador and are busy renovating two other locations, each with a distinct personality. Here, Tim shares more.



TELL US MORE ABOUT THE COFFEE SHOP.

There's a lot of coffee places around, but we wanted to focus on the lounge aspect. We wanted to create a casual environment where people can stop in who just want a quick business meeting or to celebrate a birthday without renting a place, just a relaxing atmosphere where you can get a cocktail or wine or non-alcoholic drink. The age range is everybody. We coordinate with local musicians to offer live jazz on the first and third Saturdays, and free salsa classes on Friday night. Those are open to anybody who walks by. It's fun.



IS IT SAFE TO SAY YOU'RE A FAN OF RANCH FOODS DIRECT?

I'm a fan of Ranch Foods Direct in big, bold letters. It's the community focus. I think Mike does a great job with his brand. But it's not just about a quality product, it's the quality of a local person that supports local. I can tell we have Mike's support. He eats with us, he sends his team to check on us. That's part of the story of what community means. People are the key ingredient. That's true in any industry. And that's what's missing in the corporate world. It's too standardized and focused on convenience, without necessarily investing back in the customer experience. A lot of tourists come through this city, and they like to know what's local. I drop the Ranch Foods Direct name all the time. I tell them to go to the website and check out all the businesses that Ranch Foods Direct supports. Those are the places they'll want to go to get a taste of the true local flavor.



WHAT'S THE STATUS OF YOUR OTHER CONCEPTS?

We're so grateful for the support we've had for the pupuseria in Old Colorado City. That's really been our flagship. It's kind of a unique building layout, and we've repurposed the west side of it in several different ways, including using it as an incubator for other local businesses or as an admin area. We wanted to expand the dessert and drink menu with smoothies and other fresh drinks, so we turned it into a grab-and-go area. For the drinks, Monse is using some fun molds, cold foam, popping pearls for boba and things like that. We also do cake by the slice. Everything is made in-house, and it's all 100 percent gluten free.

The Saigon Cafe downtown has been closed for renovations for the last 11 months. We didn't expect it to be that long, but we wanted to take our time and do it right. We're converting it into a second Monse's with a whole new vibe, hopefully launching by early June. It will be another location to get Monse's great food, but we hope people will enjoy the blend of elevated atmosphere with cultural awareness. We're bringing in artwork and style and design from Latin locations around the world. It will have a tropical feel, lots of wood, stone and other neat elements. We plan to highlight the locals we've been working with on that. And right behind that project is a full makeover of the old Mountain Shadows in Old Colorado City. The building itself will be a complete transformation, with an elevated cabin feel. We hope to have it done by the end of year.

Monse, left, got her start sampling and selling pupusas at the original Ranch Foods Direct store on El Paso. Now she and her husband Tim operate several popular standalone restaurants.

