



AMANDA SMITH/The Register-Guard

Owner Sam Recinos got the idea for Plaza Latina Supermarket when he first lived in Eugene in the early 1990s and could not find some of the foods he grew up eating.

Plaza Latina market gaining new customers

Owner Sam Recinos appreciates Eugene, where the people "like to try new things"

By TINA OREM
For The Register-Guard

If Sam Recinos ever decides to produce TV commercials for his business again, they might be animated.

Before he opened Eugene's Plaza Latina Supermarket in 2002, Recinos was in California creating special-effects animation for some of Hollywood's biggest movies, including "Ghost Busters" and "Die Hard."

"Everything used to be done by hand," said Recinos, who worked with Warner Bros., Disney and DreamWorks. "When we did 'Die Hard,' all those explosions, we created those."

Like many entrepreneurs, he has followed a zigzag path in life.

One of nine children, Recinos and his family came to the United States from Guatemala when he was 17.

He originally wanted to be a pediatrician. But while home on break from Charleston Southern University in 1982, he met his wife, Gisele, who is Lebanese and speaks five languages. Smitten, Recinos transferred to California State University at Northridge and decided he'd rather get a business degree anyway.

His subsequent career at Hanna-Barbera paid well, but it was the family trade.

"That's what we did back home in Guatemala," he explained. "We had our own animation business over there for commercials and TV. So I grew up in that, but I wanted to do something different."

PLAZA LATINA SUPERMARKET

Address: 1333 W. Seventh Ave., Eugene
Employees: 25
Founded: 2002
Annual revenue: \$3 million to \$5 million
Secret of Success: "Do your homework"

The couple moved to Eugene in the early 1990s.

Eager to put his business education to work, Recinos purchased a 7-Eleven store in Springfield.

Later he purchased a second convenience store.

That's when Recinos got the idea for Plaza Latina.

"When we were here in the '90s, we didn't have any Latin stores," Recinos recalled.

"There were certain things that I wanted personally; things from back home like certain fruits, certain frozen stuff, different products that I was able to find in California but not here, not even in Portland."

Six years went by, and then Warner Bros. called with a job offer.

"They actually called me at my 7-Eleven," Recinos said.

He had increased his sales by 25 percent, but Recinos was tired of the 24-hour business, so he took the job and sold the stores.

He soon got more calls, including from DreamWorks. "I even had to get an agent," he said, "and he was negotiating for me. It was amazing. It was crazy."

But as computers permeated the special-effects industry, studios began sending work overseas. Recinos knew it was time



The market stocks a wide variety of packaged and fresh foods.

to make his move. His last picture was "The Emperor's New Groove."

"After I finished that project, I said, 'That's it, I'm going to work on my own project,'" he said.

Recinos is a relentless researcher who once got a real estate license just to be sure he knew what he was doing during a rental property purchase. So to learn the grocery business, he eagerly went from being a player in the movie industry to being assistant manager at Gigante, a Mexican supermarket chain in California, for six months.

He toured Latino grocery stores and spent six months preparing a business plan. "It was like a book when I finished," Recinos said.

Then he applied for loans from three banks and from the city's Business Development Fund. "Everybody I applied with, I qualified," he said. The two lenders that Recinos chose required him to put nearly all of his personal assets on the line — a move he said made him

"very nervous," considering he and Gisele had two small children at home.

"It was really scary," he recalled. "That's why my business plan was like my bible. I had to really make sure that we covered everything. And even then, we didn't cover everything."

In particular, the remodel of the former Craft World store on West Seventh Avenue went \$200,000 over budget.

"There was one point where we were almost halfway through the project and I thought, 'Wow, are we able to do this?'" Recinos said.

But Recinos is a prodigious saver. Even in his early twenties, he lived frugally and saved enough to buy a house just a year after moving out of his parents' home. He also purchased his 7-Eleven store with savings.

So when remodeling costs jeopardized his ambitions, he used backup money.

By his count, more than 1,000 people came to the store's grand opening.

Today, from his small office above the store, Recinos hovers over aisles filled with Peruvian olives, cans of mole, an assortment of dried chilies, halal items and some of the most exotic produce in town. Spanish music, cooking aromas and elaborate piñatas add to the flavor.

Recinos, who as a boy liked playing "store" with his sister, said he works six or seven days a week and does the books himself.

Despite the recession, Plaza Latina's sales are up 8 percent from last year, Recinos said.

"We've grown every year, which is great," he said. Though a 41 percent rise in Lane County's Hispanic population between 2000 and 2007 may have something to do with it, Recinos said more non-Hispanic customers also are coming through the door. He estimates about 60 percent of his customers are non-Hispanic, with about 10 percent being of Middle Eastern origin. The kitchen, which serves Oaxacan-style food made from scratch, has a particularly large following among non-Hispanics, he said.

"This is why I like Eugene, and I guess the university is a big part of that. People are educated and more cultured. ... They travel, and they like to try new things."

Recinos said he may open a second location or maybe a restaurant.

"I have some things in mind," he said. Most recently, he subleased the meat department to its employees — a move he has made in some of Plaza Latina's nongrocery areas, such as the computer-repair shop and the money exchange. He noticed that sales rose when the employees became owners. "When it's yours, you really pay attention to it," he said.

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