

TRIUNFADORES—MELANIE FARKAS AND ZOILA ALDANA

by

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In 1982, while on their honeymoon, Melanie and Peter Farkas of San Francisco were walking through a plaza in Puerto Vallarta when an unusually long line caught their attention. As they got closer, they saw an old man sitting on the floor cooking something in a pot full of oil. They also noticed a woman holding a plastic bag full of dough and a young girl with a pan full of sugar and cinnamon working along side the man. Melanie and Peter had no idea what they were making, but they decided it would be worth waiting in line to try it.

If it weren't, then why would there be such a long line? They waited patiently for their turn and when they finally tried the long pieces of fried dough sprinkled with sugar, they were amazed. "They were the most delicious treats we have ever eaten," said Melanie. They then asked what the name of this crispy delicacy was and the people responded, "Churro." They returned to the line and this time asked for twenty. The old man began to laugh and told them that he could not give them so many because there were a lot of people waiting. This experience led Melanie to take a risk and establish her own Churro business. People told her it was a crazy idea, but the forty nine year old woman is the one laughing now, because her business has been an absolute success.

When Melanie and her three sisters were little girls living in Akron, Ohio, their parents always told them that they could accomplish anything if they set their mind to it, worked hard and defined their goals. However, they also told them they could change their goals and experiment with new ideas until they found something they were passionate about.

Melanie was sure she had found her vocation in life when in 1980, she earned her degree as a gerontologist (the study of aging) from the University of Southern California. Among her most cherished memories are the times she spent in the kitchen with their grandparents hearing them telling stories while they baked cookies or bread.

Melanie stood out immediately in her specialty. She was only 22 years old when one of the largest companies of nursing homes in the country put her in charge of a home in Sonoma. Here she was a kind and efficient administrator: she spent most of her time outside her office, talking with patients, nurses and other employees; she always insisted that all of the halls and rooms were immaculate and that the residents be treated with respect, dignity and compassion.

In 1986 she was hired to as the administrator of a rest home of fifty residents in Mill Valley, California. It was there that she met Zoila Aldana, a nursing assistant from Zacapa, Guatemala. Melanie was impressed with Zoila's professionalism and dedication: the residents in her care were always the cleanest and happiest in the rest home. Zoila would not tolerate incompetence from fellow employees. "She always worked her hardest and stood out," says Farkas.

When Melanie became pregnant with her first child, two years after working there, the owner of the home built a small nursery for Melanie's baby, and told Melanie that she could pick any of the assistants to take care of the baby.

It was a simple decision. Melanie chose Zoila, who just a little earlier had a baby girl named Maricruz. During the next two years, Zoila took care of Maricruz and David, Melanie's son, in the nursery of the rest home. Just like their children, Melanie and Zoila became very good friends. "We always support one another," says Melanie.

In 1991 even though Melanie decided to leave work and concentrate on raising David, she stayed in contact with Zoila and their friendship grew.

One custom Melanie and Peter started after their honeymoon was to visit different cities in Mexico every two years. The first thing they would do upon arriving to each new place was to ask where they could find the best churros in the area. They had already visited Ixtapa, Mexico City and Mazatlan. Melanie and Peter maintained this custom for ten years.

In 2001, while vacationing in Cancun with their two children and extended family, Melanie made a three hour round trip bus ride and returned to the hotel with various bags of churros. These churros disappeared in ten minutes. Everyone agreed it was strange that in a cosmopolitan city like San Francisco, it was impossible to find churros.

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That night, Melanie told Peter: "I am going to open a Churro business." Peter, thinking that it was a joke, burst out laughing. But Melanie was very serious.

After their vacation, she began to investigate to be sure that there were no fresh churros being sold in San Francisco or in the Bay Area. After researching all the restaurants and markets in the area, all she found were a few businesses that sold frozen churros distributed by large companies. Many of the people with whom she spoke in the Hispanic communities, like the Mission, told her that they would be willing to buy fresh churros.

Even though the results of her investigation were encouraging, her friends almost always reacted the same way: "It's an absurd idea. How are you going to make money selling churros? People don't even know what it is."

But remembering what her parents said about changing one's personal goals, Melanie decided to move forward. She mortgaged her home for \$120,000 and her mother contributed \$20,000 in addition to her own savings. "It was a risk," said Melanie. "I was very scared."

Determined to open the business in a Hispanic community, she knew that in order to be successful, she needed someone who knew the culture, so she spoke with Zoila. Although her friend owned her own business, when Melanie proposed that she be her associate, she had no doubts. "Of course, I will," she answered immediately. Zoila was familiar with the restaurant business and she loved it: her family had a small one in Guatemala for many years and she had started working there when she was only four years old. Despite everything, Zoila's family advised her not to take part in this business because they knew it was a huge risk.

Then after months of looking for a location, they chose a mechanics garage that was 800 sq. ft. located in a small plaza in an industrial zone of San Rafael. In addition to completely renovating the facility, they also had to find the necessary kitchen equipment. Melanie discovered that it was impossible to find the equipment in this country, so she expanded her search to Latin America. Six months later she bought various accessories and a fryer from a family-owned business, specializing in this type of equipment since 1957. The owner, an elderly man, also showed her everything he knew about the process of making churros and he gave her a special recipe.

In May 2003, only one week before their grand-opening, Melanie and Zoila decided to try the recipe and they prepared their first batch of churros. It was a very emotional moment, the culmination of two years of hard work. They prepared the dough made from flour and other ingredients, and they threw the strips into the fryer.

They couldn't believe what happened in front of their eyes. Upon touching the oil, the dough broke into small pieces. They tried several times, but each time the same thing happened. A tense silence filled the room. "We panicked," said Melanie. "We had invested so much time and money and we could not make the basic product." We assumed that this would be the easy part." They ran to the supermarket, bought various types of flour and tried different mixtures, but their tests did not give the right result.

After a month of intense research and experimentation, they finally resolved the problem. One of the principal reasons the dough broke into pieces was that the flour produced in this country is different than the kind sold in South America, so they had to adjust the recipe.

On June 6, 2003, Churro Station had its official grand opening. To promote the shop, Melanie dressed up in a Churro costume made by a friend, and went all over the neighborhood giving out samples.

The shop filled up quickly; the residents in the neighborhood lined up every morning on their way to work. One day, a forty year old man tried a Churro and began to cry. When Zoila and Melanie asked him what had happened, the man said it was the first

time in fifteen years that he had eaten an authentic Churro. The taste brought back memories of the churros t his mother and grandmother made when he was a child in Mexico.

To run the business, Melanie would wake up at five in the morning and would make a few deliveries to the bakeries and local markets. Then she would return home to take her kids to school.

Two months after the grand opening, they hired their first employee. Now, they have four employees. The news of the delicious churros spread quickly and in that year they delivered hundreds of churros to fundraising events, football games, restaurants and markets. Now the shop serves many, many clients a day and some days during the week, they deliver thousands of churros to various schools, restaurants and theaters in the area. "The children call me, 'Churro Lady,'" says Zoila, laughing.

The first Churro Station franchise will open in Oakland in February and there are plans to open ten more in California, Texas and Nevada in 2007.

Although anyone may buy a franchise, Melanie and Zoila consider this to be an opportunity for Hispanic women to become business owners. They hope these franchises will contribute to economic development and will help Hispanic people attain the American dream of owning their own business, gaining independence and establishing financial security.

Melanie says that she would love to see a franchise run by people just like she and her friend Zoila. They have succeeded in crossing cultural borders that exist to make their business a success. This is something they hope other companies will imitate. "We are acting like a bridge between cultures and it is very gratifying," they say. "It is a microcosm of what needs to happen in this society. The Latinos and Anglo-Americans working together and recognizing up close the culture and community of the other. We know that this can happen in all areas of the U.S."
