

# In Good Company: *Lorenzo's Express*

## Order up

Gone but not forgotten, Lorenzo's makes a comeback

By **David Salcido**  
Las Cruces Bulletin

You can't keep a good man down. It's an old expression, but one that still carries a considerable punch. Especially when used to exemplify a man of Lawrence "Lorenzo" Liberto's character and drive.

For 17 years, Liberto was the owner/operator of Lorenzo's de Mesilla, a landmark Italian restaurant that regularly drew praise, not only from devoted customers living in the Mesilla Valley, but from out-of-town visitors who made it a must-stop on their travel itinerary. Lorenzo's specialty was high-quality ingredients, many of them imported from Italy, combined with recipes passed down from the owner's Sicilian grandmother. It was a combination that was hard to beat.

When Lorenzo's closed its doors on June 11, 2012, the loss was palpable. The question of why was revealed to have been fallout from the closure of an ill-timed expansion effort into El Paso. The restaurant, Pastago's, was opened just as the recession hit in 2007.

"Our economy was at its absolute worst," Liberto said. "Gas was \$4 a gallon and I don't think that people were ready for it in El Paso. It needed time to grow. We probably would still be there today if we'd had some money to weather the storm, but we didn't." Fast forward seven months, and the old adage quoted above is in full swing. Lorenzo's Express has been open for business since September 2012, and that business is steadily growing, mainly through word of mouth.

"A lot of people have been very supportive," he said. "A lot of our regular customers have nothing but good things to say and they keep coming back. They really want to see us get back on our feet. We really appreciate their support."

Whereas Lorenzo's de Mesilla was known for its warm ambiance and charm, which acted as a framework for the outstanding food on the menu, this time around the emphasis is on the food itself. At the top of the list is Lorenzo's winning selection of pizzas, which can be ordered in advance and picked up piping hot within 20 minutes.

"People in Las Cruces have been eating our pizzas for 17



An unassuming exterior belies the wonders to be found inside Lorenzo's Express at 3000 Harrelson Drive.

years," Liberto said. "Basically what we did was take the five top pizza sellers and kept those, then if somebody wants something that's not on the menu, they can always have the option of building their own pizza. The prices are very reasonable because we don't have all that overhead that we had with a restaurant. We were able to lower our prices and our customers love that."

The change has also allowed Liberto the opportunity to exercise his creative nature again.

"I've got my hands on things again, so I've come up with some different ways to do the dough," he said. "I think I've improved, believe it or not, after all these years. People think the pizza was really good before, I think it's better. It's a little bit more crispy and it's almost like it's baked in a brick oven, when in fact, it's not."

Another concept that Liberto is proud of is his selection of take-and-bake items. Everything from pasta dishes such as lasagna and spaghetti to meatballs and homemade Italian sausage are available for purchase. Customers can take the frozen items home and heat them up for family and friends. Even Lorenzo's signature bread is available in frozen quantities, just waiting to be thrown in the oven and served up warm.

"I joke with people," Liberto said. "I tell them, I created the ambiance for 17 years, now it's your turn to light the candles, get your favorite bottle of wine out and some glasses, heat up Lorenzo's food and put it on a nice plate. It's a joke, but really, I'm done with creating ambiance. I enjoyed it, but now it's all about the food."

In time, Liberto would like to begin a delivery service for his pizza.

"I think that we'll do well once we start delivering, because people love our pizza and once they figure out that they don't have to leave their houses to get it, I think it could be really huge for us," he said.

Liberto's wife and business partner, Ali, is also excited by the prospects and reveals that, though they may not be quite ready for the delivery option, a new menu is in the works, as well as more accessible hours.

"Now we're open from Monday to Friday, lunch is 11 to 2 (p.m.) and dinner 5 to 8," she said. "Starting on Feb. 4, we're going to open on Saturdays and close Mondays. We're going to open for dinner at 4, instead of 5."

"I feel like we're finally moving into our own little niche, that's manageable and fulfilling," Liberto said. "I've got a lot of new recipes on the horizon, but I don't want to break them all



Las Cruces Bulletin photos by David Salcido

Lorenzo Liberto is a familiar face in a new location, serving up quality food for consumers on the go.

out at once. I don't want to overwhelm myself too much, but I'm really excited about the recipes that are coming."

The future is looking brighter every day for Liberto and his new enterprise. Stripped of all trappings and distilled down to the basics, the business model comes down to one simple tagline: Taste the quality.

"That's why it's on our new logo," Liberto said. "Your taste-buds don't lie."

As for the future?

"If we ever do another restaurant in the future, it will be an express kind of deal, where people can come in and order and we can just crank them out super fast," Liberto said. "My dream is to do this express concept, but with a drive-thru and with maybe 30, 40 seats. That's kind of where we're headed."

## Details

### Lorenzo's Express

#### Address

3000 Harrelson Drive

#### Phone

522-5522

#### Hours

Lunch - 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Dinner - 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Tuesday through Saturday



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