

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Ninfa Lorenzo, Restaurateur, 1924-2001

The sizzling Tex-Mex dish known as *fajitas*—grilled marinated meat inside a flour tortilla—jumped in popularity after being served in the Houston restaurant of Ninfa Lorenzo. Ninfa grew up in the Rio Grande Valley and married an Italian American. Beginning in 1948, she and her husband operated a pizza dough and tortilla factory on Houston’s east side. At age 46 Ninfa found herself a widow with five children to support. She converted a section of the wholesale factory into a 10-table restaurant and, with her offspring’s help, began serving home-cooked meals in 1973.¹

The rest, as they say, is history. The little restaurant soon gained fame for its tasty fajitas—called *tacos al carbon* in the early days—as well as for its signature green sauce and parrot décor. Ninfa opened a second restaurant in 1976 and eventually expanded her business to a chain-restaurant empire with 51 outlets in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, and Germany. But, along the way, the cheerful family presence and “from-scratch” menu were lost. Overextended, the business filed for bankruptcy in 1996. Another corporation bought the rights to the Ninfa name and logo, although Mama Ninfa and her children and grandchildren continued to operate a cantina called El Tiempo in her later years.²

Ninfa had lost three sisters to breast cancer, including her twin.³ When diagnosed with the disease herself, Ninfa took the offensive in breast cancer prevention. She chaired the Tell-a-Friend campaign, urging women to get annual mammograms. She served on numerous boards and foundations and gave a speech seconding the nomination of George Bush at the 1988 Republican National Convention. The stalwart entrepreneur received many honors including “Woman Restaurateur of the Year” from the Texas Restaurant Association, “Business Woman of the Year” from the National Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and induction into the Texas Women’s Hall of Fame.⁴



Quotations

*I can sleep anywhere. I think if you have a clean conscience and you have faith, there is no need to stay awake.*⁵

*There is an attitude in Texas that makes you feel you can do anything you want to do. I admire so many women who have come out of Texas and done well. I like the image Texas brings to mind—that of bigness, of strength, of goodness.*⁶

Photo

Texas Woman’s University, Denton.

Endnotes

¹ Information is from “Ninfa Lorenzo,” Texas Women’s Hall of Fame, Texas Woman’s University, <http://www.twu.edu/twhf/tw-laurenzo.htm> (March 4, 2005); Virginia B. Wood, “Ninfa-maniac,” *The Austin Chronicle*, Food, June 5, 1998, online <http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/vol17/issue39/food.ninfas.html> (May 4, 2005); Virginia B. Wood, “Food-o-File: In Memoriam,” *The Austin Chronicle*, Cuisine, June 29, 2001, online http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/dispatch/2001-06-29/food_foodofile.html (May 4, 2005); and Brad Tyer, “Mama Ninfa and Her Comeback Kids,” *Houston Press*, Aug. 6, 1998, online http://www.houston-press.com/issues/1998-08-06/news/feature_print.html (May 4, 2005).

² Financial problems of the Ninfa enterprise are detailed in Tyer, “Mama Ninfa and Her Comeback Kids.” Statistic of 51 total restaurants comes from Bill Schadewald, “Mama Ninfa, the mother of all entrepreneurs,” *Houston Business Journal*, June 22, 2001, online <http://www.bizjournals.com/houston/stories/2001/06/25/editorial1.html?t=printable> (May 4, 2005). Locations of Ninfa’s restaurants’ founder dies of cancer,” *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, June 19, 2001, online <http://www.caller2.com/2001/june/19/today/business/3218.html> (May 4, 2001), and Wood, “Ninfa-maniac.” Trademark foods and décor from Tyer, “Mama Ninfa and Her Comeback Kids,” and Wood, “Food-o-File: In Memoriam.”

³ “Mama Ninfa Promotes Tell-A-Friend Campaign to Save Lives,” *Texas Medical Center News*, Oct. 15, 2000, online http://www.tmc.edu/tmcnews/10_15_00/page_06.html (May 4, 2005).

⁴ Honors and activities from “Ninfa Lorenzo,” Texas Women’s Hall of Fame.

⁵ Susie Kelly Flatau and Lou Hadsell Rodenberger, *Quotable Texas Women* (Abilene: State House Press, 2005), p. 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.