



VILLARREAL EDUCATIONAL ENTERPRISES

ENDEAVORS IN PROGRESS

CaCao Mexicatessen: Food, Family, and Cultural Identity in Northeast Los Angeles

Introduction

When people think about history, they often think about textbooks, museums, or famous historical figures. However, history can also be found in everyday places—including restaurants. In Eagle Rock, a neighborhood in Northeast Los Angeles, CaCao Mexicatessen tells a story about culture, family, and the importance of preserving traditions.

Founded in 2009 by Andrew “Andy” Lujan and members of his family, CaCao Mexicatessen was created with a goal that went beyond serving food. The restaurant seeks to educate customers about the deep Indigenous and regional roots of Mexican cuisine. Through its menu, the Lujan family encourages people to think about the history behind the ingredients and recipes that have shaped Mexican food for thousands of years.

The Lujan Family's Vision

Before opening CaCao Mexicatessen, Andy Lujan worked in the mortgage industry. However, he wanted to create a business that reflected his family's cultural heritage and connection to the local community. Along with his wife Blanca and sisters Connie and Christy, he transformed a family-owned property in Eagle Rock into a restaurant that would celebrate Mexican culture through food.

The restaurant quickly became known for offering dishes that highlighted regional Mexican traditions rather than relying on the limited stereotypes that many Americans associate with Mexican food. By introducing customers to a wider variety of flavors and ingredients, the Lujan family hoped to share a deeper understanding of Mexican history and culture.

Their work reflects an important tradition within many immigrant and Mexican American communities: family entrepreneurship. Across the United States, family-owned businesses have

provided economic opportunities while helping communities maintain cultural traditions and identities.

Why Is It Called "CaCao"?

The restaurant's name comes from cacao, the plant used to make chocolate. Long before Europeans arrived in the Americas, cacao was highly valued by Indigenous civilizations such as the Maya and the Mexica (Aztecs). Cacao beans were sometimes used as currency, traded between communities, and consumed during important ceremonies.

For the founders of CaCao Mexicatessen, the name serves as a reminder that Mexican culture did not begin with European colonization. Instead, it has deep roots in the Indigenous civilizations of Mesoamerica. By choosing this name, the Lujan family encourages customers to recognize the long history and contributions of Indigenous peoples.

Food as a Form of Cultural Preservation

Many of the ingredients commonly used in Mexican cuisine—including corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, chiles, and cacao—were first cultivated by Indigenous peoples of the Americas. These foods continue to play an important role in Mexican culture today.

Restaurants such as CaCao Mexicatessen help preserve cultural knowledge by introducing new generations to traditional ingredients, recipes, and cooking techniques. In this way, food becomes more than nourishment. It becomes a way to pass down history, values, and traditions from one generation to the next.

Ethnic Studies scholars often describe food as a form of cultural expression. Just as music, language, and art can communicate cultural identity, food can tell stories about where people come from and how communities have adapted over time.

The Importance of Community Spaces

Local restaurants often serve as gathering places where people connect with family, friends, and neighbors. In neighborhoods such as Eagle Rock, family-owned businesses contribute to a sense of belonging and community identity.



CaCao Mexicatessen demonstrates how businesses can play a role in preserving cultural heritage while also creating economic opportunities. The restaurant is part of a long tradition of Latino entrepreneurship in Los Angeles, where families have built businesses that strengthen local communities and celebrate cultural pride.

For Ethnic Studies students, places like CaCao Mexicatessen remind us that culture is not something that exists only in the past. Culture is created, shared, and preserved every day through the choices people make, the traditions they maintain, and the stories they pass on to future generations.

Connecting to Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies examines how race, culture, identity, and community shape people's experiences. The story of the Lujan family and CaCao Mexicatessen connects to several important Ethnic Studies themes:

- Cultural preservation and resistance
- Indigenous contributions to modern society
- Family entrepreneurship and community development
- Mexican American identity
- The role of food in expressing culture and history
- Community spaces as sites of learning and belonging

By studying local businesses such as CaCao Mexicatessen, students can better understand how culture and history continue to shape the communities around them today.

These discussion questions are designed to move beyond simple comprehension and into the core inquiry themes of Ethnic Studies: identity, culture, power, community, resistance, and cultural continuity. They could be added as the final section of the reader.



Discussion Questions: Connecting CaCao Mexicatessen to Ethnic Studies

1. **Why do you think the Lujan family chose to focus on the Indigenous roots of Mexican cuisine rather than simply opening a traditional restaurant?**

Consider how their decision challenges common stereotypes about Mexican culture and history. What message do you think they are trying to communicate to their customers?

2. **How can food serve as a form of cultural preservation?**

Think about the ingredients, recipes, and traditions discussed in the reading. How might restaurants like CaCao Mexicatessen help preserve cultural knowledge for future generations?

3. **The reading describes CaCao Mexicatessen as more than just a restaurant. In what ways can local businesses become important community institutions?**

Discuss how businesses can contribute to cultural identity, community pride, and economic opportunity.

4. **Why is it important to learn about the Indigenous origins of foods such as corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, chiles, and cacao?**

How does this knowledge change the way we think about American history, Mexican history, and the contributions of Indigenous peoples?

5. **Ethnic Studies often examines how people maintain their cultural identities while adapting to life in the United States. How does the story of the Lujan family illustrate this idea?**

Use examples from the reading to discuss the relationship between entrepreneurship, cultural heritage, and community involvement.

Extension Activity

Look around your own community and identify a family-owned restaurant, market, bakery, or business that reflects the history and culture of a particular community. What stories, traditions, or values does that business preserve? How might an Ethnic Studies class use that business as a way to learn about local history and culture? Be specific.

