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Growing El Mazatlan chain adds WKU location

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Store managers Ulysses Hernandez (left) and Cesar Martinez are overseeing the new El Mazatlan restaurant on Alumni Avenue.

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MORE INFORMATION

El Mazatlan expanding Fairview location

Western Kentucky University students and staff as well as downtown Bowling Green residents won't have as far to go now for their nachos and chimichangas.

El Mazatlan, the Mexican restaurant chain that already had four locations in the city and had expanded one of those just last year, has opened a fifth store at 268 Alumni Ave. on the WKU campus.

Located in the former Chili's restaurant space between the Martens Alumni Center and the Alumni Square parking garage, this new "El Maz" represents the latest expansion for a homegrown restaurant chain that started with a single location in Glasgow in 1998.

Ulysses Hernandez, who shares management duties at the new location with Cesar Martinez, said the move to what had been an empty space on the WKU campus demonstrates the entrepreneurial drive of El Mazatlan founders Victor Garcia and Jesus Camarena.

"I've been working with these guys for 10 years," said Hernandez, a 28-year-old native of El Salvador. "They work hard every day, and they keep innovating."

Those innovations have made El Mazatlan a growing part of the southcentral Kentucky restaurant scene.

Garcia and Camarena opted to expand the Fairview Plaza El Mazatlan last year, bringing it to nearly a 500-seat capacity. The business partners also have Bowling Green locations on Cumberland Trace Road, Nashville Road and Dahlia Way off Louisville Road.

That omnipresence can only help the WKU eatery that opened Nov. 16, Hernandez reasons.

“The El Mazatlan name helps us a lot,” he said. “Right now, our major customers are WKU students, but we expect that to grow.”

Growth has been a theme for the chain that now has 10 total locations, including one in Lincoln, Ill. The original El Mazatlan, in fact, will soon be moving from its location on W. Cherry Street to larger quarters on Happy Valley Road in Glasgow.

While not as extensive as last year's \$450,000 renovation of the Fairview Plaza eatery, Hernandez said the Alumni Avenue space was remodeled to make it what he calls a "family restaurant with a fun, safe environment."

Hernandez said the newest El Mazatlan location has a seating capacity of about 115 and will be open seven days a week from 10:30 a.m. until around 10 p.m.

"The hours may change some later on," he said. "Every location is different."

Hernandez, who began working at El Mazatlan while a student at Warren Central High School, said the new store has drawn heavily on WKU students and some high schoolers to fill a staff that numbers "25 to 30" workers.

While many restaurants have had problems filling openings in the post-pandemic environment, Hernandez said that hasn't been an issue for him.

“I haven’t struggled to find employees,” he said. “That’s a blessing.”

Now operating in what will be its first full week, the WKU El Mazatlan might not remain the chain’s newest location for long, Hernandez hints.

“When there’s an opportunity, I think they (Garcia and Camarena) will take a chance,” he said.

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