

# A TASTE OF CULTURE

Photograph by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66



**R**oute 66 is home to a bountiful share of amazing dining experiences, there is no doubt of that. And the diversity of food selection is just as great, but it would have to be. The historic highway cuts through eight distinct states that each boast of their own history and culture and of course, culinary delights. But down in Tulsa, Oklahoma, among the many choices in the “Oil Capital of the World,” a local family-owned eatery, nestled in between downtown and mid-town Tulsa, stands apart. Right on Route 66, the El Rancho Grande, housed in a 1920s era red brick building, with its iconic neon sign of a colorful vaquero, spotting a sombrero, lassoing the eatery’s name, while forming the letters ‘EL’, has been feeding both locals and travelers at this location for 70 years.

First opened in 1950 by Spanish national Ruby Almendares Rodrigues, the original location of the venue started off at 621 S. Boulder Avenue near the Holy Family Cathedral, a little ways from the then-busy Mother Road. Rodrigues had immigrated to Tulsa from Sonora state in Mexico and her new venture was considered the first Latino-Latina-operated restaurant in the city, serving authentic Mexican food. A few years later in 1953, in a move that would ultimately pay off, Rodrigues relocated the eatery to a building at 1629 E. 11th Street, aka Route 66. This was the time when Tulsa was growing into a thriving metropolis, when the Golden Driller statue was created and displayed at the International Petroleum Exposition and when the Mother Road was a magical stretch of mom-and-pop stores, gas stations, motels, and diners. The El Rancho Grande fit right in.

The eatery’s new home, a picturesque two-story building, was originally built and operated by John J. Leyh and his wife, Maude, in 1921. Leyh had his grocery store on the first floor and apartments above. It then became the Theo Wilkes barbershop, followed by a restaurant — House a Plenty — before finally becoming home to El Rancho Grande. The location couldn’t have been more perfect; as the first Mexican restaurant that motorists heading West on Route 66 would encounter in Tulsa, it became a pivotal opportunity for travelers to sample Tex-Mex cuisine for the first time. With the help of the late Inez “Larry” Lara, a San Antonio native who became the main cook, the El Rancho Grande became a local and traveler must stop, and one of Tulsa’s most respected eateries.

The early 1970s saw a lot happening in the Rodrigues family. Rodrigues’ husband, Francisco, a railroad worker by profession, sadly passed away in 1971, and Rodrigues retired, leaving her two daughters and Larry to carry on the businesses. In her retirement, Rodrigues devoted much of her time to volunteer work with churches, before she herself passed in 2005 at age 96. It was during these early 1970s that Jeff Walden Sr., businessman and a petroleum engineer who would start his own company, Walden Oil Co. in 1980, bought the old Leyh building.

“My dad bought the building in the mid-70s as a real estate investment,” said current co-owner John Walden. “He rented out the four upstairs apartments and rented the restaurant to the Rodrigues family. On occasion, I would collect the rent from Mrs. Rodrigues.”

By this time, the star on Route 66 had been falling fast. The interstate system diverted traffic from the old road and

many businesses on that stretch and all along the Mother Road went into decline. Tulsa’s 11th Street became a sort of Red-Light District. By 1982, the El Rancho Grande, the onetime Route 66 icon, had closed, seemingly for good. That is until Walden Sr. decided to buy the restaurant which had gone into auction. In 1984, Jeff Walden Sr., together with his wife Ann, moved his oil company’s office upstairs, and reopened the El Rancho Grande on the first floor, carrying on its tradition of serving great Mexican food fare.

“When my dad transitioned as the owner of the restaurant in 1984, everyone in our family worked there on and off during different periods of time. My brother, Jeff Walden Jr., and I took on the challenge of ownership in 2006. We always knew the potential of this business, with its history, food, and people,” explained Walden.

The Waldens attempted to retain as many of the original employees as possible through the transition, with one in particular remaining a significant factor in the restaurant’s popularity. Salvador Gomez’s welcoming attitude and ability to greet customers by name made him incredibly popular with the regulars. “He retired in 2018, after 41 years of amazing service,” said Walden. “He is a great man, and we are so honored that he dedicated his career to El Rancho Grande. That is really unheard of today, in any field, especially in restaurants.”

Though the ambiance has stayed the same, the building has undergone some renovations. In 2009, the distinctive sign was taken down and the neon removed from it long enough to give the sign some needed work. Repainted and reinstalled, a sign re-lighting celebration was held in August 2009. Being former remodeling contractors, the Walden brothers have done a lot of interior work, removing the dark carpet and paneled walls, laying the floor tile, and chipping away the plaster to expose the original brick walls. Their genuine passion project, however, took place between 2016 and 2017, when they gutted the four apartments above the restaurant to create the upstairs cantina, which can now hold another hundred patrons. The restaurant’s small outdoor patio overlooks midtown in three directions.

What began as a modest establishment in the 1950s has become a true Tulsa institution. In 2019, *Tulsa World* celebrated the eatery as having the best margarita in Tulsa, in the paper’s “Best in the World” competition. Celebrities including Frank Fritz of *American Pickers*, Leon Russell, and even Elvis Presley have visited. But that’s not to take away from the locals who stop in weekly, some of whom grew up with El Rancho Grande in the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, who now bring in their own kids and grandkids, a privilege that is not lost on the owners.

“El Rancho Grande will be celebrating 70 years of service in this same Route 66 location in 2023,” said Walden, “We are proud to continue the Tulsa tradition of true Tex-Mex with friendly service in a great atmosphere. The addition of our upstairs cantina gives Tulsans a whole new reason to come back.”

The restaurant may have gotten a facelift, but its food, service, and reputation as a true family-owned restaurant would make Ruby Rodrigues proud, as her original El Rancho Grande sign continues to glow like a beacon on Route 66.