

EL DIARIO

‘Arepa Lady’: Colombia in Queens

BY ANA NIETO



María Piedad Cano stands alongside her daughter-in-law, Nelly, at the door of their restaurant, Arepa Lady.

In the world of street food vendors in Queens, Colombian María Piedad Cano is known as “Arepa Lady”. The cart where her delicious hometown specialties are prepared is an institution, and New Yorkers have learned about it from the great reviews written throughout the years in the press and the Internet.

Cano, who parks on Roosevelt Avenue and 79th Street on the weekends, says that she is well-known among non-Hispanic customers. “If fame meant money, I’d be a millionaire,” she laughs.

“They know me because I have been in the English-speaking press a lot,” says Cano. In fact, it was an American journalist who gave her the nickname and suggested that she should open a restaurant.

Today, that restaurant is open, although Cano — who is 70 years old — prefers to stay in the cart. “It’s hard to leave the streets,” she says with a wink. Although she admits that it has been hard, she says that the cart has

allowed her to make a living and raise her four children for almost 30 years.

Arepa Lady, the restaurant, was opened just a few weeks ago by two of her sons, Alejandro and Douglas, and Alejandro’s wife, Nelly.

Cano has lent two essential elements to this business venture spearheaded by the second generation: her name and her famous arepas. These are the pillars of the enterprise located two blocks away from where Cano parks her cart.

Nelly says that business is good. “We are not known in the neighborhood as a new business but as an expansion. It is new, but we have credibility,” says the co-owner. Cano — or Doña Piedad, as everyone calls her — agrees: “I help them out.”

“The idea is not to make me work more than I already do, but they are starting out, they have bills to pay, and we mothers can’t just sit and watch,” she says. “The deal is that they will help me out when I move back to Colombia to retire.”

Cano arrived in the U.S. from Colombia in 1984 with her four children and her husband, from whom she separated shortly after. They all came without documentation, fleeing the extreme violence that plagued their country.

Back home, Cano was a lawyer who had worked as a public servant, a judge and even as the mayor of two towns in the region of Antioquia, Colombia. Her job became increasingly dangerous as the violence became widespread, and they decided to move abroad.

Her titles were not validated in the U.S., so a friend connected her with another Colombian who was well known in the neighborhood for his own food truck. Cano started to work with him, but he soon suggested that she should start her own business.

Cano perfected a friend’s arepas recipe, and started to work as she waited for decades to receive the license that allows her to have her food truck legally. In the meantime, the police confiscated her truck and grill at least three times. The permissions were finally granted just five years ago.

“It has been a hard life,” she admits, “but you cannot just throw in the towel when you have four children to feed.”

It was her children who suggested going ahead with the restaurant idea. For them, it has not been easy either. Aside from the high cost of space rental, they had a bad experience with a sloppy contractor who delayed the opening for months.

They finally turned to the New York City Department of Small Business Services, an agency that serves entrepreneurs, and their counselor helped them expedite their licenses in time for opening day.

Doña Piedad looks happy when she is at the restaurant and, as a business savvy person, she has a suggestion for her children: "Now, you must innovate."