

# With Sabrosa Cafe and Gallery, Frankie Sanchez branches out from his Latino roots

Kristine M. Kierzek, Special to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | Published 9:03 a.m. CT Aug. 17, 2018 | Updated 8:59 a.m. CT Aug. 20, 2018

*Fork. Spoon. Life. Frankie Sanchez*



*(Photo: Submitted photo)*

Frankie Sanchez has always been one to embrace challenges. He's worked in restaurants and kitchens for his entire adult life.

He helped his father open Taqueria Azteca, the Bay View restaurant that closed in 2008. His brother, Sal, opened Cempazuchi on the east side.

Shortly after he decided to buy the building and open [Sabrosa Cafe and Gallery \(https://sabrosa.cafe\)](https://sabrosa.cafe), 3216 S. Howell Ave., with his partner, Ruben Piirainen, he also faced life-threatening health issues, including open heart surgery. He also lost his big brother, Sal, the person who taught him to scramble eggs and inspired his entry into the restaurant world.

But Sanchez kept moving forward, creating a breakfast and lunch spot with an art gallery, highlighting all his influences. Sabrosa marked its one-year anniversary in July.

**RELATED:** [The art of brunch at Sabrosa in Bay View \(/story/entertainment/dining/carol-deptolla/2017/11/21/art-brunch-sabrosa-bay-view/861059001/\)](#)

**RELATED:** [Brunch spot Sabrosa Cafe now serving \(/story/entertainment/dining/carol-deptolla/2017/07/06/brunch-spot-sabrosa-cafe-now-serving/454584001/\)](#)

**RELATED:** [Selling egg rolls at the West Bend Farmers Market preserves ties to woman's childhood in Laos \(/story/life/food/fork-spoon-life/2018/08/03/selling-egg-rolls-west-bend-farmers-market-revisits-hmong-childhood/825884002/\)](#)

## Cooking connection

Being Mexican, you go to a Latino's house and you're going to eat. I come from a long line of cooks and chefs. There were six of us in my family. My mom worked, my dad worked. We each had our daily chores, one of them was to make dinner. We took turns.

My brother first found out about his calling to food. I just followed. He was four years older. I remember him waking up on a Saturday saying, "Lets make scrambled eggs."

## His roots

We moved here to Milwaukee in the late '60s. My dad was the first director of UMOS (United Migrant Opportunity Services, a nonprofit).

## Getting saucy

I wanted to be my own boss again. I worked under the pickle bill with Ruben. We canned sauces for the farmers markets. Our first one was at Cathedral Square. We started under a pop-up tent with a camper stove. I was kind of embarrassed. Is this what I resorted to? Then I thought, sometimes you need to return to your roots to discover where you want to go next.

## Recipe roots

Recipes, everything was handed down, nothing is written, just shown. When we opened up Taqueria Azteca, my dad called me and said I want to do this family thing. A month in, my brother decided to do Cempazuchi. That left a vacancy in the back of the house. My dad brought my cousin up from Mexico. She was a great cook, and she knew all the family recipes. She taught me everything. We introduced Milwaukee to fish tacos and chipotle mayonnaise.

## Change and challenges

I had open heart surgery right before we opened. I was going in for stomach surgery, then they discovered I had a bicuspid aortic valve that was leaking. I've spent the last two Christmases in the hospital. I had to release myself like I never had before, to that moment and that hill I had to climb. You just have to get through it.

That was an a-ha moment: controllables and uncontrollables. Let's control what we can control and let go of the rest. I couldn't even sit up on my own.

## **Sabrosa style**

I came out of the Mexican corner. It is being able to show others on a public level I can do things other than enchiladas: scones, grits, biscuits, pancakes, crepes. I can do anything, and I'm having the time of my life.

## **Back to Bay View**

I went to Tenuta's. I wanted a part-time gig until we opened here. Customers would recognize me from Taqueria. We (had) closed in 2008, but they'd start screaming in this tiny restaurant. Frank Tenuta was so supportive.

## **Art After Dark**

We launched Sabrosa After Dark. Every other month we change the artist. It is always on a Monday from 6 to 9. There's a free wine tasting, live music and small plates. That's my opportunity to do Mexican. I've been doing street tacos and it has been going super well.

## **Meaningful things**

Our piano is from the Marian Center, as are the plates, the cups. The tables and chairs are from Cempazuchi. The bakery counter is from the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's prop sale. The black granite is from Mike Ditka's bar (in Chicago), do I dare say this? It took like six people to hoist it up there. Everything we have is repurposed. I love that, because I have a repurpose in life.

## **Logo love**

The cempazuchi (flower) is for Day of the Dead. My brother always loved Oaxaca and the Day of the Dead. That's why he named (the restaurant) Cempazuchi, and why I chose the flower (for [Sabrosa's logo \(https://sabrosa.cafe\)](https://sabrosa.cafe)).

## **What's next**

I'm going to be on Food Network ("Bite Club"). I was recruited to do a local show with five chefs from here. Three became contestants and two were judges with chef Tyler Florence. We filmed at Lake Park Bistro and it is supposed to air soon, in September. It was an experience, something every chef dreams of.

Will I do it again? Probably not. It is the single most difficult thing I have done in my career.

*Fork. Spoon. Life. explores the everyday relationship that local notables (within the food community and without) have with food. To suggest future personalities to profile, email [nstohs@journalsentinel.com](mailto:nstohs@journalsentinel.com) (<mailto:nstohs@journalsentinel.com>).*