**Exceptional Alumni: Alyssa Cantu, the Star of Street Food**

Alyssa Cantu’s road to culinary expertise came by way of a punk rock band.

“Back in high school, I wanted to be a singer in my friends’ band, but I needed a microphone and amplifier,” Cantu laughs. “My mom said I’d have to earn the money myself, and somehow we came up with the idea of selling breakfast tacos to the kids at school.”

Those one-dollar tacos quickly caught on, and pretty soon Cantu and her partner were also peddling a lunch option that proved to be especially popular with teachers. Cantu became known as the kid who walked the hallways with thermal bags full of breakfast in the early mornings and an ice chest with lunches a few hours later.

The punk rock dream eventually faded, and Cantu found herself at South Texas College a few years later, taking classes and trying to find her passion. She started out by studying radiology, but it didn’t stick. After making the decision to switch to journalism, she thought she’d take a cooking class “for fun.”

“It ended up consuming my life!” she admits. “I knew I could cook, but the culinary program brought me to a whole different level. I learned knife skills, how to plate food, and all about the development of flavors. Before, I was definitely an amateur. Now, the flavors in my dishes are much bolder.”

After graduating from South Texas College, Cantu worked for several restaurants in the thriving dining scene in downtown McAllen. She had accumulated plenty of experience, but eventually knew it was time to make a change. When her friend Antonio Reyna brought up the idea of turning a nearby 100-year-old house-turned-art-gallery into a restaurant, she offered to help him, and the two quickly became partners. Their restaurant, The Gremlin, opened in 2018. Its eclectic vibe has attracted a lot of attention, along with a disparate bunch of regulars. There are families that come in early in the evening, lots of millennials, and “industry” people who hang out after their shifts end at McAllen’s tonier restaurants.

Though The Gremlin is just one alley over from the restaurant scene on 17th St., the area is definitely grittier. Cantu decided to play on that theme and give The Gremlin the cozy, understated, thrift-shop ambiance you’d expect to find in a century-old house.

“None of the pillows match. My parents made the benches. Antonio and I took the tops off old tables and refinished them,” she says. Lighting consists of pendant lights diffused with a Pinterest-inspired combination of yoga balls, glue, and netting. The backyard (yes, there is a backyard!) has a bocce court, dartboard, and a stage for entertainment. Depending on the night, diners might happen upon a guy with a guitar, a band, or open mic night. DJ Antonio often takes to the stage to spin.

As for the menu, Cantu had to create one that she could create in a tiny kitchen. She hit on the idea of international street food, like a Nashville hot chicken sandwich (chicken dipped in a hot oil infused with cayenne, paprika, and garlic) or the Miami 88 (fried pork belly topped with an egg, reminiscent of the after-hours food eaten in the Philippines and Thailand once the bars close down). And it’s safe to say The Gremlin’s Korean fried wings are legendary.

“They’re fried in batter until they’re really crunchy, and covered with a sauce made with fermented chili paste and garlic,” explains Cantu. “Crunchy, hot, spicy, and very complex, they hit all your flavor receptors!” Hand-tossed pizzas, rice bowls, and lobster tacos are perennial favorites. Washing those heady flavors down is a rotating variety of reasonably-priced craft beers – most of them brewed in Texas – which the patrons seem to relish at the end of the day.

Though Cantu strives to make it all look simple, “it’s really not,” she admits. “All the sauces are made here, the spices for each type of food are completely different, and the staff doesn’t have the luxury of specializing because they’re asked to do very different things each night.”

Cantu still maintains close ties to South Texas College, especially with Culinary Arts Department Chair Jennifer Guerra. “She has solid advice. She always has,” says Cantu. “In the beginning, I’d call her up and say ‘Help! What do you know about payroll and overhead?’” Cantu is on the college’s Culinary Arts Advisory Council, working with faculty to discuss new trends and specific skills that should be addressed in the curriculum. She visits classes to talk about the restaurant business, and offers her time to judge culinary contests.

“Having a successful restaurant is like catching lightning,” says Cantu. “A lot of them are fly-by-night. But we went into this determined to be here for years, and we work hard to respond to customers and give them what they want.”