



# FROM THE HOSTESS CITY TO HILTON HEAD

*A long-time staple of Savannah's reinvigorated historic district, Carlito's Mexican Bar & Grill continues a family legacy on Hilton Head Island.*

BY BARRY KAUFMAN • PHOTOS BY ROB KAUFMAN

There's more on the menu at Carlito's Mexican Bar & Grill than simply delicious food.

Of course, that's not to say the food doesn't tell a story all its own. Spanning Tex-Mex and old school Mexican cuisine, it expands on the typical rundown of burritos, tacos, quesadillas and enchiladas with recipes treasured by the Ortiz family who founded it. Here discerning diners can go beyond the usual with Molcajetes brimming with authentic ingredients, ceviche, mussels, steak, and more prepared in methods that span the entire spectrum of Mexican food.

It's a dedication to elevated ingredients and techniques that made the original Carlito's Mexican Bar & Grill an immediate hit when it first opened in the heart of Savannah's downtown. Opening their doors in 2004, when revitalization was still transforming the former red-light district into a hopping cultural hotspot, the Ortiz family knew their new location was a gamble.

But they also knew the rewards would be rich.

"We saw the potential in downtown Savannah when others didn't," said Gustavo Ortiz. "We weren't just opening a restaurant—we were investing in a neighborhood."

Gustavo was just nine years old when his family launched Carlito's, naming their restaurant after their youngest son Carlos. His sister Kayla was just 3. And yet the two of them have not only taken the family legacy in hand, they've moved it forward in ways that have set the restaurant apart.

"It wasn't just a business," said Kayla. "It was our second home. Every member of our family played a role."

She means that. She and her brother came into management from the ground up, bussing tables and greeting customers before helping out in the kitchen. As they got older and the restaurant's profile grew in the now-bustling downtown area, each got a chance to step in and help manage here and there,

giving them a holistic education on how the restaurant works.

And that family atmosphere soon extended beyond the Ortizes. The loyal and ever-growing customer base soon embraced Carlito's as a hub of the community, deepening local ties not only between the family and their customers, but also throughout the community. Kayla added to the hospitality by expanding the menu into vegetarian and vegan realms, creating plant-based options that still adhered to the family's time-tested techniques.

"That was a huge point of pride," she said. "We wanted everyone to feel welcome, and that meant making space for different dietary needs without sacrificing flavor."

Once again, the menu played a large role in the restaurant's success, but their commitment to community set it apart. The Ortiz family could be found at nearly every community event, from SCAD food festivals to the Savannah Latin and Jazz Festivals. They partnered with area schools and neighborhood organizations to host fundraisers and give back. And the community responded, bestowing on them awards for "Best Margaritas" and "Best Mexican Restaurant." But the family was never in it for the accolades. They were in it for the community they helped establish. During the devastation of Hurricane Matthew, they were one of the few restaurants that stayed open even as the storm hit.

"We had people coming in while the hurricane was still raging," recalled Carlos Ortiz. "We couldn't turn them away. That's the kind of community we had—resilient and loyal."

But that commitment to their customers has always been as important to the Ortiz family as ensuring each dish on the menu is mouth-wateringly authentic.

"We got to know generations of families who dined with us," said Gustavo. "We celebrated birthdays, engagements, anniversaries. We were part of people's lives, and that means everything."

On October 20, 2019, Carlito's closed its Savannah doors, but that didn't stop the Ortiz family's commitment to offering outstanding Mexican food in a family environment. It just shifted it a little further north. The Ortiz family shortly relocated and reopened Carlito's Mexican Bar & Grill in Hilton Head, bringing with them their signature flavors, festive energy, and commitment to community.

The new location has already begun to thrive, but the Ortiz family remains grateful for their Savannah roots.

"Savannah made us who we are," said Kayla. "Without the love and support of our customers, we wouldn't be here today."

While the address has changed, the heart of Carlito's remains the same: family, community, and a passion for hospitality. As Carlito's Mexican Bar & Grill continues to grow in Hilton Head, the Ortiz family is focused on honoring the legacy they built in Savannah—one dish, one customer, and one memory at a time.

"We hope to keep making people feel at home, no matter where we are," said Gustavo. "Because at the end of the day, that's what Carlito's is all about."



---

## CARLITO'S MEXICAN BAR AND GRILL

841 William Hilton Parkway in the South Island Square  
(843-715-2544 • [www.carlitoshhi.com](http://www.carlitoshhi.com))