

BUSINESS PROFILE

It truly is La Familia

Terry Sapp has owned the Gainesville Cuban sandwich shop for the past 20 years

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Every weekday morning at 5:30, Terry Sapp leaves his home in Tampa to pick up fresh bread from a nearby bakery.

He then makes the trek of nearly two hours to Gainesville to ready his business, La Familia Cuban Sandwich Shop, for the 10 a.m. opening. By the time the shop is closed and cleaned, it's about 5:30 p.m. — and that's before even hitting the road back home.

"There's a lot of preparation and a lot of cleanup when you get ready to go," he said. "It's not physical labor. It's just something you got to do to stay in business."

But for Sapp, the customers who have evolved into best friends make the work and traveling worth it.

"I hesitate to call them customers because all the people who come in here have become very good friends of mine," he said. "I've celebrated births and weddings with them, and I've mourned with them when they've lost loved ones, and I've fed their families in times of need."

Sapp, a 66-year-old father of four and grandfather of two, celebrated the 20th anniversary of his shop in November. In terms of survival in the restaurant business, two decades might seem like an eternity.

And Sapp will be the first to tell you he's been marching forward while "never having a business plan, per se."

"I'm probably the thesis of what you shouldn't do," the former Marine said.

La Familia is tucked away in a small shopping strip, built in the '50s, near the corner of Southwest 16th Avenue and 13th Street. It's not that visible from the road, and Sapp has relied only on word-of-mouth advertising.

But Sapp said he compensates by having a simple, streamlined menu, fresh bread



Erica Brough/Staff photographer

Terry Sapp has owned La Familia Cuban Sandwich Shop at 1209 SW 16th Ave. in Gainesville for the past 20 years.

straight from the bakery, friendships with customers and hard-working employees.

"I've been very fortunate to have some great kids from the University of Florida that have helped me over the years," he said.

The result has been a consistent customer base. Among the faithful is Herman Smith, a 48-year-old Gainesville resident who works in recreation for the city of Gainesville and has been eating at La Familia since it opened 20 years ago.

"I go almost every day," Smith said. "There's no dish that's not good. They're all equal."

The inside of the restaurant is lined with old-timey photos of athletes, as well as some items that highlight sports from P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School in Gainesville.

"I support them because they support me," Sapp said of his relationship with P.K. Yonge. "I've kind of adopted them as my home team."

Food options include Spanish bean soup, picadillo, empanadas, black beans, yellow rice and, of course, Cuban sandwiches. The restaurant at 1209 SW 16th Ave. is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday to Friday.

The hours used to extend to 8 p.m., and the shop was open seven days a week. "But I've cut down," Sapp said. "That got kind of old."

But it's not so much the working that he minds. It's just that retirement is starting to look more enticing.

Sapp leases the spot, so he expects that any future tenant probably will bring a new menu with them.

"It's going to be hard to close this place," he said, adding that there isn't an exact timeline but that it will come. "I've just made such wonderful friends up here."

One of those friends is Joe Crevasse, a former Alachua County sheriff and UF's first police chief. Crevasse passed away in 2012 at age 96.

"My dad came here five days a week for 15, 18 years till he died," said Buddy Crevasse, a 68-year-old Gainesville resident. "There's four generations of Crevasses (including my children and grandchildren) that have eaten here.

"There aren't many restaurants you can go sit down and everybody who comes in you know."

And it's that "social club" aspect of La Familia that Sapp said he'll miss most.

"I've got people who have been coming here since the day I opened," he said. "It's not a job. It's something I really enjoy."

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