

FLORIDA WEEKLY CUISINE

In the kitchen with...
SAM SANCHEZ,
 owner of Banko Cantina,
 West Palm Beach

BY STEVEN J. SMITH
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COURTESY PHOTO

Sam Sanchez, owner of Banko Cantina, specializes in the cuisine of northern Mexico.

Just as their contrasting regions define the cuisines of Italy and China, Sam Sanchez insists Mexican cuisine follows suit — which is why his Banko Cantina specializes in dishes inspired by the cooking he grew up on in Nuevo Leon, Mexico.

“Our food is more from the northern part of Mexico’s desert terrain, where you’ll find cattle ranches and meat-based dishes,” Mr. Sanchez said. “So we’re bringing that area to West Palm Beach.”

He said northern Mexico’s ranching culture features wood fire and outdoor cooking, which contribute to the distinct, smoky flavors that serve as the foundation of Banko Cantina’s list of tacos, steak and mesquite-grilled skewers.

Mr. Sanchez has been active in the restaurant business for 28 of his 53 years, starting out as a busboy washing dishes in his uncle’s English pub in Chicago.

“I was 25 and I needed a job,” he laughed. “This is the only industry I know of, where you can start out at an entry level position and work your way up to the top. I started out as a busboy and rose through the ranks to server, bartender, manager, general manager, then owner. This industry is very kind to hard-working people.”

Looking to spread his wings, Mr. Sanchez learned several years ago about the American National Bank building in West Palm Beach — a 1921 landmark that was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1997. He secured the building and turned it into a three-level, 13,000-square-foot restaurant that includes a rooftop bar, lounge, private dining space and 130 seats in the main dining room. The interior retains elements of the historic building, including the original wood — used for tabletops — as well as the chandeliers and tiles.

The restaurant’s second floor was designed for special events, including corporate affairs and private parties. The 3,000-square-foot third floor boasts a partially covered rooftop and a 90-foot bar in the center with a 14-foot ceiling, seating for 150 and a kitchen serving lunch and dinner from a select menu.

An extensive menu, overseen by Corporate Chef Manuel Briseno, includes the Bistec a la Tampiqueña (\$28) — a grilled 6-ounce skirt steak, four oven-

roasted chicken enchiladas, Spanish rice, beans, lettuce, tomatoes, corn tortillas and tomatillo salsa. The mesquite grilled skewers, a specialty of northern Mexico, include carne asada (\$14), camarones con Tocino (\$12), Camarones al Mojo de Ajo (\$12), pollo asado (\$11), and vegetales (\$10). The restaurant uses tortillas imported from the northern region of Mexico and incorporates locally grown and harvested produce and fish as well, varying with seasons.

When he’s away from his restaurant, Mr. Sanchez likes to keep it Mexican at home.

“I like Mexican stews and soups,” he confessed. “I also like to make steaks with special sauces and peppers.”

Although Banko Cantina specializes in northern Mexican dishes, Mr. Sanchez said his restaurant would give a nod to other regions of Mexico over the coming months.

“Starting in November, we’ll bring in guest chefs from all over Mexico — Chiapas, Tamaulipas, Mexico City, Jalisco — to give our customers samplings of what they offer for a month,” he said. “They will cook up samples of the specialties of their regions and each week we’ll feature a three- or four-course meal.”

Sam Sanchez

Age: 53

Original Hometown: Born in Chicago, grew up in Nuevo Leon, Mexico

Restaurant: Banko Cantina, 114 S. Olive Ave., West Palm Beach; 355-1399; bankocantina.com

Mission: “To bring a taste of my region of Mexico to West Palm Beach.”

Cuisine: Northern Mexican

Training: No formal training, but spent 28 years working at every level of the industry.

What advice would you give someone who wants to be a restaurateur?
 “Never stop working at it. It’s a hard job, a 24/7 job. But if you showcase your talent, someone will recognize your ability and reward you for it.” ■