

Serving Food and Family from Sunset Boulevard

Owner David Licht and General Manager Silvia Lopez Aim to Keep Tradition of Kayndaves Alive Through the Pandemic and Beyond

By LILY TINOCO
Reporter

It is sometimes unimaginable what a seemingly simple opportunity can present or become over time: For former Palisadian David Licht, the opportunity for him to acquire a restaurant eventually grew a family.

Licht was a young adult exploring a number of different avenues, from law to land development, when he asked himself, "What's next?"

In October 1991, he began to look for a rundown business to restore—and he found one, a small Mexican restaurant on Pacific Coast Highway called Topanga Beach Cantina.

He bought it with hopes of fixing it up and increasing its value.

"All of a sudden I have this business and I don't know what I'm doing," Licht shared with the *Palisadian-Post*. "I'm lousy at managing, I can't wait tables, I can't cook ... but I was figuring things out, and one thing I did have was I was able to connect with customers."

"I got to listen to them and I got a sense of what they liked, what they didn't ... and from there, the business started to build some roots."

Nine months later, Licht noticed a spot for lease in Pacific Palisades, another restaurant. He met with the owner who told him his concept would do well in the neighborhood.

"But shortly after I opened the restaurant on PCH, I ran out of money, I maxed out my credit cards," Licht said. "The reality [was] I had no money, I [was] in debt."

Licht was interested and he was persistent. He met with the landlord of the building and presented his case.

"She goes, 'Let me understand this, young man, you're asking to take over the space and you basically don't have any money and you can't secure the lease?'" Licht recalled. "I said, 'You're right, that's the truth.'"

Licht said he visited the woman with his then-girlfriend Kay. The woman was widowed, but saw a lot of her and her late partner in the young couple. Licht said she recognized the position they were in, the feeling of starting out and struggling at a young age.

She told Kay and Dave: "I'll take a chance on you."

"And I guess, as they say, the rest is history," Licht said.

Licht opened his Palisades location in July 1992. The concept carried over from the PCH location and it became The Other Cantina.

Licht said as time went on, customers would refer to the location as "Kay and Dave's place," which resulted in the change to Kayndaves.

He said he opened a number of locations over the years, including Brentwood and Culver City, but the Palisades location has truly survived the test of time—and now, the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I think that speaks to the community," Licht said. "The Palisades is a wonderful community in so many respects, and they've always been really supportive of us. It's been a great place from day one."

"We try really hard to do everything safely with COVID ... it's about keeping people safe and having their trust."

Licht said although he is unsure the Culver City location will survive the hit from the pandemic, the Palisades location is thriving.

"We're doing better now than we were pre-



COVID," Licht said.

He said the restaurant has pivoted in ways to make customers feel welcome, safe and comfortable walking in.

Kayndaves also began offering a selection of staff favorites and hand-picked tequilas, mezcal and wines.

Silvia Lopez, who oversees the Palisades location as general manager, passes on her knowledge of spirits to intrigued customers. Her grandfather, Alfredo, who worked with Licht for years before she did, had an agave farm in Oaxaca and Lopez helped him tend the farm. He would make mezcal in their hometown.

Lopez has been a part of the Kayndaves team for years. She said she would tag alongside her grandfather when he worked with Licht when she was only 12 years old. In 2006, she was offered a managing position at the former Pico location and has enjoyed the ride since.

She said most of the current Kayndaves staff has been there for a long time and they've grown to become a family.

"It's my dream job," Lopez told the *Post*. "It's always been."

Recently she has been able to introduce more of her culture and Oaxacan flare to the space and menu. At the end of October, Lopez and her two daughters decorated the restaurant to celebrate Día de los Muertos, with marigolds and a traditional Oaxacan altar. Lopez's mom also contributed to the celebration by preparing traditional family recipes she learned in her small Oaxacan village of San Lucas Quiavini, including hot cocoa and moles.

The community got another taste of the family's traditional recipes during Thanksgiving and Christmas when they prepared different moles and tamales.

"When I started working at Kayndaves, it was Mexican food ... it was good food, but I always thought that it needed to be more authentic," she said. "So I just started bringing more and more of my culture into Kayndaves."

"I'm indigenous, I love my whole indigenous part and ... every time I share something with customers, they are so interested in learning. Sharing that with them and having our customers hear our stories means a lot."

Licht said Lopez is like a daughter to him and his wife Jintana. The two used to own a house in the Palisades but moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and charged Lopez with oversight of the store.

What began as a small cantina has brought together family, both by blood and by choice. The stories that lie within the walls of this small business are not only worth sharing with the community, but worth holding onto.

"We don't have kids, Silvia's in our will," Licht shared. "This is going to be her business, her building. She's wonderful ... and she's just a delight to work with. More and more of the store is becoming her."



Silvia Lopez oversees Kayndaves as general manager.

Photos by Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer



The restaurant has had to pivot operations in response to the pandemic.