

Mojito Restaurant Expanding to New Beginnings

By Joel R. Odegard

If you have had the pleasure of eating at [Mojito](#) Latin American and Cuban restaurant in the Maple Leaf neighborhood of Seattle, then you know that the experience goes far beyond the food and atmosphere.

The owner of Mojito, Luam Werson, started working at the restaurant from its very beginning in 2001, initially as a dishwasher, and even helped with the construction of the original location located just off Lake City Way.

As the years went by, Werson, who is originally from Ethiopia, learned about Latin American cuisine through his travels to South America, and then with the help of his coworkers. In 2010, he became a partial owner of the restaurant and assumed full ownership in 2017.

Mojito has outgrown its original building, and the business has relocated to a much larger facility on Roosevelt Way, across the street from Maple Leaf Reservoir Park. While the old location had a unique and cozy feel, this next step was much needed to accommodate the restaurant's popularity, the owner said.

Werson has a unique ability to make all his customers feel like family and is often heard saying, "Welcome home," when greeting people at their table. He is not the kind of business owner who lets his staff run the ship for him; he works alongside his employees seven days a week.

Werson also runs [Mojito Company Foundation](#), a catering service based out of Mojito that produces 600 meals a week for the University District Food Bank.

The foundation has a goal of increasing meal production to 2,000 meals a week with the expansion of the new restaurant. Werson says Mojito also caters to the Seattle Storm and is contracted by the Mariners to cater to visiting teams during game nights, ensuring that Latino players feel at home on the road with traditional dishes like mangu, arroz con pollo and mofongo.

The original restaurant operated out of a small kitchen, where everything from bartending to meal prep happened. The new location features a much larger commercial kitchen two times bigger than the old restaurant, and a separate bar.

Jesús Alfaro, one of the employees at Mojito, has been working with Werson for six years and says, “This new restaurant has a lot more space.” While the new place presents some challenges, it offers a much more natural workflow for all the people working there.

The catering non-profit used to operate out of a separate building across the street from its original location. Werson said the building owners are going to tear it down and build apartments, which is one of the main reasons for the move. He also mentioned that Mojito is experiencing some challenges adjusting to the new space, including acoustic issues with the restaurant getting loud during busy hours. Minor staffing issues have cropped up, too, he said. However, overall, it has been a pleasant experience for the customers.

Paul Lavrinec, a long-time customer and regular volunteer with the Mojito Company Foundation, said, “Werson’s presence in the community inspires other people to give back.” Leading up to Thanksgiving, they are preparing to give away 50 cooked turkeys in Pioneer Square, which he said is an annual event.

The old restaurant had an interesting triangular shape that contoured to the end of the block on which it was located. It had a beautiful Spanish-style roof and the building’s bright yellow color was punctuated by images of dancing characters on the outside walls. The building was part of what made the restaurant so iconic, but it became too small for everything that Werson wanted the restaurant to do for the community.

It was located just off Lake City Way and had a significant amount of road noise. Werson said he was uncomfortable with how fast cars drove fast through the immediate vicinity.

The new restaurant is in the same neighborhood, but is now located across the street from a bustling park often filled with people.

The exterior of the restaurant features a yellow color similar to the old building and incorporates a new mural of a car from the 1950s, evoking Cuban culture. The interior features a similar color palette to the old location, but has the capacity to seat 90 more customers.

Werson continues to iron out the kinks of the new restaurant while also being a large contributor to the community. No matter who you are or where you come from, Werson will treat you like family and offer a one-of-a-kind dining experience.

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Photo Cutlines

IMG_0036.jpeg: Luam Werson posing with his employees Jesús Alfaro (in the orange hat) and Julio Aveiga (in the black apron) on shift at Mojito. Alfaro has been working with Luam at Mojito since 2019 and loves being a part of the team. (Photo by Joel Odegard)

IMG_0037.jpeg: Luam Werson talks with his customers, keeping the family feel and strong community vibe of his restaurant alive and well. (Photo by Joel Odegard)

IMG_0040.jpeg: The new Mojito restaurant is across the street from the Maple Leaf Reservoir Park in Seattle Washington. This location used to be the Art Tile Co. and closed in August 2023. (Photo by Joel Odegard)



