

# Transforming a Community, One Tamale at a Time

Through a job-training restaurant and kitchen incubator program, Joe Colletti (MAT '84) equips individuals for success and revitalizes a community.

Sandra Romero remembers the phone call that came quite late one night about 10 years ago. Apprehensive about what such a late-night call might mean, she picked up the phone—and heard one word.

“Tamales!” It was Joe Colletti (MAT '84), Romero's friend and business partner, and he had just had an epiphany.

“Tamales? What about tamales?” asked Romero. Colletti believed tamales might be the key to a revitalization effort he and Romero were working hard to achieve in Los Angeles's crime-ridden MacArthur Park neighborhood. What could tamales have to do with it? First, a bit of history.

## THE HOMICIDE CAPITAL OF LOS ANGELES

For much of its history MacArthur Park, two square blocks of greenery just west of Los Angeles's downtown business center, drew tourists and families like a magnet. A vacation destination surrounded by luxury hotels in the early twentieth century, the area was known at that time as the “Champs-Élysées of Los Angeles.” Up through the 1950s it continued to be a family oasis, where residents would picnic and rent paddle boats for weekend rides on its gleaming lake.

That picture was turned on its head in recent decades—as, little by little, years of disinvestment took the MacArthur Park area on a steady decline. By the 1980s, says Colletti, it was riddled with illegal activities going all the way from prostitution, false identification peddling, and drug sales to murder. “The

media started giving the neighborhood such labels as ‘Homicide Capital of Los Angeles,’ ‘Panic Needle Park,’ ‘Illegal Document Haven,’ and worse,” he says. MacArthur Park was also known as “Gang Central” because the area allegedly gave birth to the Mara Salvatrucha—a gang started by Salvadorans fleeing a civil war, and called by Newsweek “the fastest-growing, most violent and least understood of the nation's street gangs.”

Several factors created disinvestment, Colletti explains: residential overcrowding, high unemployment, neglected buildings, trash-strewn streets, and erosion of the area's historic architectural fabric. “It became primarily a transitional neighborhood for low- and moderate-income Latino households,” he says, “and one of the most densely populated areas around: 36,000 people live within a three-block radius of the park, and 60 percent of them do not own automobiles.”

Enter Colletti in 1998, a consultant to the City of Los Angeles charged with developing an economic revitalization strategy to bring about reinvestment—and renewal—to the MacArthur Park neighborhood. This was right up Colletti's alley: Active in community and economic development since the late 1980s, he had worked to combat homelessness and substance abuse and promote access to affordable and fair housing, health services, and mental health care in a number of ways—founding or cofounding programs, coalitions, and initiatives across Los Angeles. Most notably in 1996, with Romero, he founded the Institute

for Urban Research and Development, a nonprofit organization that would come to address a broad range of economic, housing, and social needs through lasting programs—including the effort in MacArthur Park.

## **A COMMUNITY REBUILT, ONE TAMALES AT A TIME**

But the prospect of turning around the MacArthur Park area was, to say the least, daunting. “You would see people openly smoking crack cocaine; there were brothels; there were shootings,” said Romero. “Early on, Joe and I would walk through the park and ask, ‘How are we going to stop this?’”

Not one to shrink from a challenge, Colletti gathered several local agencies into a partnership, Alliance/MacArthur Park, which began implementing a U.S. Department of Justice strategy called “weed and seed.” “The idea is to ‘weed out’ illegal activity while, at the same time, ‘seeding in’ positive community activities—arts, businesses, jobs, recreation,” Colletti describes. The L.A. Police Department led a stepped-up effort to weed out illegal activity, he says, and Alliance/MacArthur Park led the effort to seed in the positive.

That’s where the tamales came in. Colletti sought input from community residents—many of whom were street vendors, selling their wares however they could in the streets lining the park, often without a license. “They wanted to support the neighborhood revitalization strategy,” he said, “but needed to vend on the streets without law enforcement arresting them or confiscating their goods. Most of them were selling tamales on the streets out of shopping carts.”

The light bulb went on for Colletti, and he made that late-night phone call to Romero: Why not create a place of resource for these vendors—and others—that would enable them to grow and thrive in their businesses? And why not give that place a very specific focus on tamales—the unifying food for vendors

and residents coming from a wide diversity of Latin American countries? Thus was born Mama’s Hot Tamales Café: both an approved restaurant and food industry training center, where street vendor apprentices could work, learn safe food preparation techniques, and obtain the permits they needed to legally vend on the streets of the area.

And as a community eatery, Mama’s—colorfully painted, furnished, and decorated to look like a village café you might find in Mexico or El Salvador—would be a unifying force for the neighborhood. “I came up with the name ‘Mama’ based on my experiences going to little Italian restaurants in Chicago where I grew up,” recounts Colletti. “At the end of the

evening, everyone in the restaurant would clamor for ‘Mama,’ who would come out of the kitchen and we would clap out of appreciation for the delicious meal.”

“I asked Sandi to be Mama,” he says. “She agreed.”

Colletti saw Mama’s Hot Tamales as “ground zero” in the MacArthur Park revitalization effort. Soon, instead of shopping carts, elegant wooden tamale carts lined the

streets surrounding the park, each selling its own traditional tamale—some sweet, others spicy; some wrapped in corn husks, others in banana leaves—but most, if not all, prepared under the guiding auspices of Mama’s and its facility.

Slowly, with Mama’s Hot Tamales serving as both symbolic and literal headquarters—Alliance/MacArthur Park based its office there—the neighborhood changed. In addition to the café’s unifying outreach in the community, Colletti and Romero brought arts and crafts events, family picnics and festivals, recreational and educational youth activities to the park. The area still faces struggles—but today, says Colletti, “you can walk through the park—you couldn’t before. And the MacArthur Park neighborhood,” he claims, “now has a crime rate that is lower than the crime rate for the entire city of Los Angeles.” In the words of an L.A. Weekly article about the restaurant and its



**Chefs or “tamaleros” from Mama’s in MacArthur Park**

photos by Don Milici

influence, “Mama’s brings Los Angeles together, one tamale at a time.”

Meanwhile, the Mama’s Hot Tamales outreach has only become broader—with Romero, as “Mama,” interviewed often on television and in print about the café’s work. Classroom instruction and hands-on training are offered to those wanting preparation for work in any sector of the food service industry—as cooks, servers, or baristas—and the kitchen facility is used by those wanting to get a culinary business started—whether tamale peddling or otherwise. “We’ve had people use our kitchen to make pizzas, cookies, jams, drinks they want to market . . . to get a coffee roasting business going . . . even to make dog treats!” says Romero.

A woman named Rocio is one of those people. In the early 1990s, the Mexican immigrant, a single mother with three young children—one of them autistic—was living in the projects and barely surviving by selling chorizo, tamales, and handicrafts from a makeshift cart in the park. Mama’s took her in—and not only trained her in food preparation techniques and regulations, but also helped her get her citizenship, earn her high school equivalency degree, and learn about other resources available to her in the community. Through a first-time homebuyers program Rocio was able to purchase a home and, last fall, she opened her own full-fledged restaurant. Although the work is hard going, Rocio’s joy is palpable. “This is my dream, my goal,” she says. “I have learned that with love and work, all is possible.”

## EXPANDING TO PASADENA

The next step for Colletti? Mama’s Pasadena, set to open in 2009. Unlike the MacArthur Park Mama’s, the Pasadena facility will, in its first phase, focus on the “small business kitchen incubator” function—serving as a licensed food education and preparation area for small business operators to start their own culinary enterprises. Later, it will expand to become a job-training restaurant and classroom as well.

“Entrepreneurs often have a product to market but no place to produce it,” Colletti says. “We want to help them get their business going—it might be a catering

business, or making gift baskets, or selling at the farmer’s market. They need the kitchen facility, they need to learn how to become licensed—and we’ll give them that support, for as long as it takes them to get established.” It’s the kind of start-up support they’re already providing at the MacArthur Park Mama’s, “but our kitchen area there is much too limited,” he explains; “we needed more space.” The new space is vast and the kitchen equipment state-of-the-art at Mama’s Pasadena, housed in a 6,500-square-foot, barn-like building just off Colorado Boulevard. “We expect to serve more than 100 small business entrepreneurs annually,” says Colletti.

One of the first in line is an entrepreneur-baker named Derrick Dancer. “My family and I have talked for years about putting my great-grandma’s cobbler out there on the market,” he says, using a much-comended secret recipe handed down through generations. With plans to start Mama Green’s Cobbler as a small retail store, Dancer believes that the restaurant incubator is “the vehicle that’s going to give us the opportunity to finally get started.”

## A JOURNEY OF INTEGRATION: FAITH AND SERVICE

Colletti’s is a life of service through and through, coming alongside those who need a boost in increasingly broader, more sustainable ways. The Institute for Urban Research and Development he cofounded with Romero in 1996 is now three entities: the Episcopal Housing Alliance, Episcopal Economic Development, and the Institute for Urban Initiatives, each with its own outreaches. As an adjunct professor of



Joe Colletti and Sandra Romero at the new facility in Pasadena.

urban studies at Fuller, Colletti, who holds a PhD in theology from England's University of Birmingham, teaches and mentors others in urban ministry. With his wife, Sofia Herrera (PhD '99), he co-leads Fuller's Office for Urban Initiatives.

What keeps him going? In his teaching and mentoring, Colletti emphasizes integrating the inner spiritual life with the outer life of service by using monastic practices that empower change and healing. He speaks of a time early in his journey of urban outreach: in 1987, when he established a winter shelter for the homeless in Pasadena and struggled to cope emotionally with "the wounds and pains within the shelter, which intensified each evening and culminated in a mass of deeply hurt individuals." In the face of such immense need, Colletti often felt perplexed and overwhelmed—and turned to the "dark night of the soul" experience of St. John of the Cross and the "wounded healer" experience of Henri Nouwen.

In the years to follow, through a transformative personal journey, he discerned a call to do increasingly more than provide that basic emergency assistance of

the homeless shelter. It was a call that led him to program development, grant writing, community organizing, and the development of other urban initiatives to bring about systemic change.

One of those initiatives, with tentacles that reach far and wide, was the establishment of Mama's Hot Tamales Café and the wholesale revitalization of a neighborhood. A transformation of lives on this scale might have been hard for Colletti to envision 20 years ago at that homeless shelter—yet it has all flowed from his personal journey, one that seeks to empower people and places for positive change.

*For more on Mama's and Joe Colletti's other initiatives, visit [www.mamashottamales.com](http://www.mamashottamales.com) and [www.joecolletti.com](http://www.joecolletti.com).*