

DINING



Happy to serve: Philip J. Hickey, president of Rio Bravo Cantina is originally from Redford.

Restaurateur comes home

BY MATT JACHMAN
STAFF WRITER

The debut of Livonia's Rio Bravo Cantina last month was also a homecoming for the chain's president.

Philip J. Hickey Jr., who grew up in Redford Township and graduated from St. Agatha High School and Michigan State University, got together with longtime friends at the Nov. 14 opening of the Tex-Mex restaurant.

One day last week, over the phone from Rio Bravo International Inc. headquarters in Marietta, Ga., Hickey reminisced about suburban Detroit.

"I just thought it was the greatest place to grow up," he said. "Great friendships and great quality of life and a real strong work ethic."

"That work ethic, and the education and values learned at St. Agatha, are important in his career," Hickey added.

"St. Agatha was just a great school," he said. "The nuns were tenacious in their pursuit of

reading, writing and arithmetic, and it's stayed with me ever since."

Though he admitted it dates him (he's 42), he remembers the opening of Livonia Mall, which he said was a prime shopping and hanging-out spot for teenagers.

Hickey graduated from Michigan State University in 1977. He tried several fields of study while at State, but settled on hotel and restaurant management when he found managing an MSU cafeteria to his liking.

His parents live in Farmington Hills. He said they're already regulars at the Livonia Rio Bravo.

"I'm relying on my mom and dad to be the inspectors of the quality,"

Rio Bravo took over and remodeled the former Cantina Del Rio on Victor Parkway when it closed abruptly last summer.

This wasn't Hickey's first Detroit-area ribbon-cutting. Rio Bravo opened a location in Dearborn, in a former Chi-Chi's near the Fairlane Town Center,

earlier this year.

Hickey is also a co-founder of the Cooker Bar & Grill chain, which opened a restaurant on Seven Mile in Livonia in 1989. The company was sold the same year; Hickey is no longer associated with it.

Hickey's H&M Restaurants, founded in 1980, merged with Rio Bravo in 1992, and Hickey became president.

Catering to diners' cravings for Southwestern-style cuisine won't be Rio Bravo's only involvement in the area. Hickey said the company wants to be a good corporate citizen as well.

Rio Bravo raised \$1,600 for the Livonia Community Foundation at a Nov. 13 pre-opening benefit dinner. Proceeds from the evening's drink sales went to the fledgling LCF, which plans to create a permanent endowment for social, educational and cultural projects in the city.

"We intend to be a part of the fabric of the community," Hickey said.

Rio Bravo Cantina touts a can-do attitude

BY MATT JACHMAN
STAFF WRITER

The folks at Livonia's newest Tex-Mex restaurant are betting you'll say "Bravo!" to flavorful food and friendly service.

Rio Bravo Cantina, which opened Nov. 14 in the former Cantina Del Rio on Victor Parkway, touts fresh ingredients, a unique approach to Southwestern cuisine and service that'll get you back.

"We are zealous about making guests happy," said company president Philip J. Hickey by phone from the Marietta, Ga., headquarters of Rio Bravo International.

Rio Bravo offers a varied menu of Mexican standbys — tacos, quesadillas and enchiladas — as well as innovative dishes like the Burrito del Mar (a seafood burrito) and Mexican Pizza (on a tortilla).

Along with the food, a whatever-it-takes attitude is stressed, Hickey said.

"We've won a number of awards in every city we've opened in," he said. "Our mantra is, 'We try to make every guest into a regular guest.'"

Hickey said the chain, founded in 1985, studied restaurants and

Rio Bravo Cantina

19265 Victor Parkway,
Livonia, (313) 542-0700.

Hours: Kitchen, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, Sunday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday, Saturday. Bar open one hour later than kitchen.

Menu: Southwestern cuisine, with a unique flair.

Cost: Appollara, \$2.99-\$7.99; salad, \$2.99-\$7.79, meals, \$5.99-\$12.99. Fully licensed.

Modified reservations: Call ahead to get on waiting list.

Credit cards: Visa, MasterCard, American Express.

Rio Bravo has four vegetable-based entrees, and other dishes can be made meatless as well. There are four soups, including spinach con queso and vegetarian black bean, a number of appetizers, and salads, combination plates and daily specials.

Other broader specials, such as the food of a specific region in Mexico, are offered several times a year, Hickey said.

Rio Bravo also has a fully-licensed bar, with margaritas, domestic and imported (mostly Mexican) beers and wines and tequila.

Hickey, who grew up in neighboring Redford Township, said his company has been keeping an eye on Livonia and is eager to make a go of it here.

"We think it's a vibrant town, perhaps underrated. Between the office and residential growth, it's been very impressive."

He is also impressed by the work ethic of the employees the restaurant has found here. "The crew members that we've been able to attract are wonderful."

This is the second Rio Bravo in the Detroit area. The first opened in August in a remodeled Chi-Chi's near the Fairlane Town Center in Dearborn.

RESTAURANT SPECIALS

Send information for Restaurant Specials to: Kately Wyonik, Taste/Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax (313) 591-7279.

HOLIDAY DINNERS

Schoolcraft College — Madrigal dinners 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday, Dec. 13-14, and invite you to join in this traditional Wassail feast and abundant holiday merriment. Royalty and their guests will dine in the Waterman Center on campus, 18600 Haggerty Road, Livonia. The cost is \$35 per person, call (313) 462-4417 for reservations.

Festivities commence as the Madrigal Singers, under the direction of conductor Steve SeGraves, enter the hall in costume to present the Wassail and toast the season. Diners will then partake of the prime rib menu's many courses, each presented to the court with trumpet fanfare and ceremony. The bill of fare includes assorted breads and rolls, mixed greens with dried fruits and nuts, celeriac and potato gratin, glazed carrots and leeks, broccoli florets, and cranberry and orange steamed pudding with apricot-cinnamon creme glaze. Throughout the evening, the dulcet tones of Good

Neighbors All provide music on period instruments. The Madrigal Singers intone songs of the season, and magician/jester Steve Ryder, a regular performer at the Michigan Renaissance Festival, will amaze and delight.

Henry Ford Estate — Celebrate Centennial Christmas at the Henry Ford Estate on the campus of The University of Michigan-Dearborn, 4901 Evergreen, Dearborn. For reservations/information, call (313) 593-5590.

Breakfast with Santa, 8 a.m. 9:15 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 7 is back by popular demand.

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