

# Arizona Daily Star®

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## Eller degree, creative food make fine combination

By Tiana Velez

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Blending food and family can have harmonious results, but throw in a business relationship and it can go either way.

With equal parts communication, trust and business acumen, the Valenzuela family of Zivaz Mexican Bistro believes it has the right mix to keep its business from going sour.

Since opening in November 2005, Zivaz has received rave reviews for its flavorful menu and muted décor. There are no burritos or strolling mariachis, though you will find dishes such as bacon-wrapped, filet-mignon-style shrimp and an award-winning hibiscus margarita.

Heading up operations is the oldest son, Felipe Valenzuela Jr., a graduate of the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management who nearly ended up crunching numbers as a financial analyst before joining his family in its entrepreneurial pursuit.

"I wasn't going to give up job offers unless I thought this restaurant would be sustainable," said the Mexico-born Valenzuela.

A fast-casual bistro seemed the best fit because, he said, "it's something that we felt we knew how to do."

As a 6-year-old, Valenzuela moved with his family from Navojoa, Sonora, to Tucson, where his father — commonly referred to as Don Felipe — established himself as a food broker. From the beginning, food was a major part of family time.

His father "would come home and make dinner. It was always something fancy," Valenzuela said. "I can cook, but I prefer to be on the fork side of the plate."

Already showing an affinity for food, Valenzuela also displayed an interest in finance. At age 16, he even helped his parents refinance their home.

Upon graduating in 2004 with a bachelor's degree in finance and entrepreneurship, he already had a business plan ready for Zivaz.

Asked why he didn't pursue a career in finance, he said, "I think the creative side of me . . . wanted to go on my own and build something and see it come to fruition."

With the backing of partner Steve Shenitzer and others, Zivaz *did* finally come to fruition.

Shenitzer had some initial hesitation over whether to invest in yet another Mexican restaurant in Tucson. But he explained that his decision to invest was simplified after tasting the food and witnessing the family's group dynamic.

"It was Felipe, coupled with his father Felipe, the chef, and the balance of the family," he said. "They certainly weren't rookies."

A little over a year after opening, Zivaz remains a strict family affair.

In addition to Felipe Jr. and Felipe Sr., mom Cecilia occasionally works the front end, and younger brother

### Profile

Name: Felipe B. Valenzuela Jr.

Age: 25

Job: Managing partner at Zivaz Mexican Bistro, 4590 E. Broadway, 325-1234

Friday On the Job focuses on the people who make Tucson businesses run — those who are in charge, keep a business running, are just starting out or hire workers.

Joaquin, 21, serves as Felipe Jr.'s right-hand man. The family also employs about 25 full- and part-time employees.

"It's great to work with someone you can trust," Felipe Jr. said.

When Valenzuela is not at the restaurant — he estimated he is there "about 90 percent of the time" — he is, well, at other restaurants.

"I know it sounds sad, but I love to go out to other restaurants," he said. Zivaz "is at a crucial point in its development. I don't want to throw up my hands in victory just yet."

Not even a grim forecast for restaurant sales, provided by UA economist Marshall Vest earlier this year, can dampen his spirit.

Sales "may be level, but people will still go out to eat," Valenzuela said, referring to Vest's prediction. "You just need to be sure you're doing something so you stand out."

See on the job, D5

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