

Miami's Versailles restaurant and the entrepreneurial spirit

BY AIDA LEVITAN

aidalevitan@gmail.com

Versailles Restaurant celebrated its 40th anniversary with a big bash. Gov. Rick Scott, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, Miami Mayor Tomas Regalado, county and city commissioners, a former congressman, public officials and celebrities attended the VIP event July 12 hosted by Felipe Valls, Sr., founder of the world-renowned restaurant. So many prominent leaders paid tribute to this Cuban-American patriarch and his family because Versailles is a symbol of Cuban-American culture, a tourism and political destination and living proof of what hard work, vision and sheer guts can generate in a free society.

The Valls empire is emblematic of the remarkable economic success of Cubans in the United States — what some have called “the Great Cuban Miracle.”

Entrepreneurs must have the right motives, preparation, and a certain attitude and propensity to accept risk. The majority of the first wave of Cuban exiles came with little, if any, money, but they had valuable assets: an entrepreneurial spirit, education, organizational skills and an unshakable belief in themselves and what they could achieve as individuals in a free-enterprise system. As Guarioné Díaz points out in *The Cuban-American Experience*, businesses opened by Cuban Americans between 1972 and 1982 had exponential growth — from 5,000 to 30,000 — and they have continued to grow dramatically up to the present.

Felipe Valls, Sr. was one of those early Cuban-American business pioneers. He brought unique entrepreneurial inspiration from Cuba but was also willing to develop new resources in the United States. He had the courage to accept the risk of entrepreneurial action, and that is why he opened Versailles as a Cuban restaurant in 1971, in an area that was not then considered Little Havana. Most of all, Valls was willing to work as hard as necessary to achieve his goals. Felipe Valls, Jr. and other members of his family have inherited these qualities and values.

This story of Felipe Valls, Sr. and his family is not unique among Cuban Americans. First, there is the question of motive. What is an exile to do when he or she cannot return to the homeland? Valls understood that in order to make it in this society, owning a business could be one of the best paths to wealth and success. He also had the vision of what this business could be: not only a restaurant chain to fulfill a basic need of Cuban Americans, but also a business that could grow, evolve and diversify.

Like most Cuban-American businesses of the 1970s, Versailles catered to a Cuban clientele, specializing in the most typical dishes of Cuban cuisine. The solidarity of the Cuban community at that time was a source of support for the restaurant. However, by the 1990s Versailles was

attracting more diverse guests. The “Cuban sandwich”, the “cafecito” of Versailles and other delightful dishes became favorites of both Hispanics and non-Hispanics. Finally, Versailles became an obligatory destination for politicians, from candidates for local office to presidents of the United States. Just as important, the Valls family responded to market changes while retaining the pride and traditions of the Cuban-American culture.

Valls has taught his family well. His children and grandchildren have brought new ideas and opportunities to the business, and the patriarch has listened. Now the Valls family owns numerous restaurants, not only in the city but also at Miami International Airport, and their company employs 2,400 people from diverse origins.

During the extensive press coverage of the celebration, organized by another leading Cuban-American marketing business (República), journalists interviewed employees and restaurant patrons. These people who are crucial to the greatness of Versailles expressed extraordinary passion and enthusiasm. Felipe Valls, Sr., Felipe Valls, Jr., Jeanette Valls, and Nicole Valls should be commended for understanding that a company cannot have great, sustained results unless it cares about its employees and makes them feel part of the “familia.”

Sociologist Alejandro Portes has said that, “A number of sites in Miami have been imbued with quasi-sacred meaning in the collective imagination and are, hence, suitable for the celebration of these periodic rituals.” Versailles is one of these “anointed” sites. How the Valls family has achieved this milestone and the work they will do in the future to build on their success is sure to be a case study in entrepreneurship.

Aida T. Levitan is president of The Levitan Group, Inc.