



DAVID VARGAS, CHEF/OWNER
VIDA CANTINA, PORTSMOUTH, NH
ORE NELL'S BARBECUE, KITTERY, MAINE



David Vargas, Chef/Owner, Vida Cantina, Portsmouth, NH www.vidacantinanh.com

Honored by the James Beard Foundation as “Outstanding Chef America, 2023, semi-finalist” and awarded “Chef of the Year, 2022” by the New Hampshire Lodging & Restaurant Association, Chef David Vargas is a talented and respected leader in the kitchen and in the New England community with a mission to bring people together to the table. David is proud to share his Mexican heritage by featuring beautiful local seasonal products on every plate at his award-winning, nationally recognized Vida Cantina in Portsmouth, NH. He is also chef owner of the popular Ore Nell’s Barbecue in Kittery, Maine working with Chef Will Myska, and plans to open a second location Spring 2023. David’s community mission is to bring people together by sharing a respect and appreciation for all cultures and actively supporting those in need.

A James Beard nominated chef, (Outstanding Chef in America semi-finalist 2023; Best Chef Northeast semi-finalist 2022, 2020, 2019) David grew up in Southern CA and has spent a lifetime learning, living, and celebrating his Mexican heritage. David’s mother is from Guadalajara, his father from Jalisco; in CA his parents owned a taqueria and both were police officers. David grew up in the family’s taqueria cooking family recipes with fresh local ingredients while learning all he could about his Mexican culture; it was important to David’s parents that he deeply appreciate his Mexican heritage. Appreciate it he does indeed at Vida Cantina, where with each dish he is “elevating our understanding of what Mexican food is or should be, while elevating our understanding of what New England cuisine is or should be” *The Portsmouth Herald*. According to *The Boston Globe*, David prepares “the best Mexican food north of the MA Border” and is “nearly evangelistic about using local ingredients.” *Boston Magazine* declared “David Vargas, a James Beard award-nominated chef is making some of the best Mexican food on the East Coast at Vida Cantina in Portsmouth, NH.” Locally, regionally and nationally, the critics agree that Chef David Vargas is shining a bright light on Mexican cuisine, and his dishes at Vida Cantina are definitely “worth the drive” to Portsmouth, NH.

COMMUNITY TO TABLE

David's mantra at Vida Cantina, and in all his endeavors, is "*Community To Table*" which he lives every day by bringing his restaurants, teams, farmers, fishermen and communities together. Some examples:

***New England BIPOC Fest:** David co-created and hosted the first annual BIPOC Fest in Portsmouth in September 2021, raising over \$30,000.00 for BIPOC organizations in the region. In September 2022 he led New England BIPOC Fest, expanding the event by inviting chefs and community leaders from throughout New England to come and share their food, art and stories. David believes people come together at the table - and his mission is to provide that space for the New England community. Plans are underway for New England BIPOC Fest 2023, taking place September 24, 2023 outside Vida Cantina, Portsmouth.

***Indigenous Corn Project:** David literally dug into the region's agricultural history with the Abenaki tribe, original settlers of the Seacoast region, and led the way for local farms to now grow original indigenous seeds. "This is the right thing to do" explains David. "I am honored to work with the Abenaki people and to support them and shine a light on their heritage in this region. This is important for all ages to respect and learn from our history so we can move forward to a better community together."

***Tuckaway Farm / Regional Grain Alliance:** David leads the region in working closely with local farms. He created a friendship with Tuckaway Farm and then brought more of the local farms together to grow indigenous corn and other regional varieties for David's tasty tortillas. David personally took on the mission of researching, finding, planting indigenous corn with his grain alliance farmers, to celebrate the Abenaki tribe that first lived here on the Seacoast.

***Diversity BBQ:** David hosted the community's first-ever Diversity BBQ in Sept 2020 at Vida Cantina, inviting chefs from all over New England to come cook and share their stories about their cultural backgrounds and experiences. Each chef was invited to help raise funds for programs that are supporting diversity in the communities. Even in a pandemic, the outside event sold out in a day and raised close to \$10,000.

***Mentorship:** David is a mentor to his team. He has helped his cooks open restaurants of their own; supporting them as chef partner/owner. He opened the award-winning Ore Nell's BBQ in Kittery, Maine with Chef Will Myska, a native of Central Texas who worked with David at Vida Cantina. A second location is in the works, due to open

Spring 2023. Next up was Chef Linda Theth, a former chef at Vida Cantina, whose heritage includes Cambodia and Laos. David helped Lin open her first restaurant, Lin's Little Kitchen, featuring Southeast Asian cuisine, in Newburyport, MA, in summer 2020. (Unfortunately Lin's Little Kitchen closed during the pandemic.)

"I know what it means to cook from my heritage, sharing my parent's recipes and adding to them from my experiences" shares David. "It is important to me to share that opportunity with the incredible people who have worked with me in my kitchen - we all grow together."

***Si Se Puede Immigration Dinner:** David hosted Si Se Puede at Vida Cantina when Immigration policy became front page news. He invited chefs from around New England to help raise awareness and funds for Immigration reform. The event sold out and not only created an amazing dining experience but built bridges within the community, with advocates and chefs.

***Heirloom Harvest Project:** David helps support the Heirloom Harvest Project, a local nonprofit promoting heritage foods, connecting farmers with chefs.

***NH Community Seafood Alliance:** David is a vocal leader in the region supporting NH Community Seafood, creating "*Catch of the Day Tacos*" with whatever fresh fish the collaborative hauls in. "It's all about the community we live in" shares David. "We all have to do our part."

***Former Interim Director of Nutrition, Chef leader, Kittery Public Schools:** David is one of the most talented, committed, energized, passionate and compassionate chefs in New England. He has spent years working with the Kittery Public School system nutrition team; introducing local product and sourcing to the menus, training the cafeteria teams, cooking for/with the students at each school, meeting the students and inspiring them to think / eat / support local; growing gardens at each school; introducing local chefs to the schools with a Guest Chef Series. With two kids in the Kittery School system, David knows what it takes to inspire kids about food and nutrition. At one point, the Kittery School superintendent asked David if he could step in temporarily as the Kittery School System's Director of Nutrition. "It is an honor - of course I said yes" says David. "My mission is to inspire these kids to think about what they are eating, to support local farms and to have fun with it every day. When kids eat better, they do better in school. It's that basic. I am honored to do whatever I can to help to be that link between the Community and the Farms and the Table and the Schools."

VIDA CANTINA, VIDA TORTILLA...and DAVID'S FIRST (AND LAST!) FOOD TRUCK

This James Beard nominated chef first learned how to cook and appreciate family recipes and local farms while working at his family's taqueria, and then in Michelin starred kitchens like Cyrus in Sonoma County. He met his wife Erika on a farm in CA, and they eventually headed to her native NH and where they decided to raise their family. David cooked at the celebrated restaurants Arrows and MC Perkins Cove. Then he decided to buy and operate a food truck, cooking Mexican dishes. David said it was the hardest work he's ever done. "We almost lost everything - it was so tough. It was before food trucks were trending, and I am just so grateful that I met restaurateur Jay McSharry and we got to talking. I came in as chef/owner of Vida Cantina in Portsmouth. I am grateful Jay and I share a vision and determination to bring authentic, bright and beautiful Mexican cuisine to the region and it has just been an amazing experience." It was especially ironic when David welcomed and hosted Food Network's Tyler Florence and the hit national TV show, "The Great Food Truck Race" to Portsmouth - David was a judge and not an operator of a food truck!

Vida Cantina earns awards for its modern, bright Mexican cuisine, and has welcomed visitors such as Food Network's Guy Fieri, Tyler Florence, Roger Mooking to his kitchen, and Yankee Magazine's Amy Traverso/Weekends with Yankee and Alex Thomopoulos/The Moveable Feast. "I am grateful for the honors and the attention; it is great for our business and our staff, and I am happy to make my parents proud by sharing Mexican cuisine" says David.

VIDA TORTILLA

David opened Vida Tortilla so he could continue to make his unique handcrafted tortillas in house, using locally grown corn. Vida Tortilla makes 15,000+ tortillas weekly in a tiny space in Dover, NH, selling them wholesale to restaurants and direct to consumers. Recently David sold Vida Tortilla to his team there, so they can carry on the mission of creating tortillas with indigenous seeds from the Abenaki Tribe, and local corn from the alliance of farmers David brought together.

Respected for his culinary talent and creativity, community-building and mentorship, David is honored to lead his teams at Vida Cantina and Ore Nell's BBQ in the kitchens and by example, cooking acclaimed home-made tacos, pig's head platters, daily seasonal menus, and showcasing his deep respect for local and sustainable sourcing. David is one of the region's most talented chefs creating a vibrant restaurant revolution catching the attention of the national food scene.

AWARDS

- *James Beard Foundation Outstanding Chef in America, 2023, semi-finalist*
- *Chef Of The Year, 2022, New Hampshire Lodging & Restaurant Association*
- *Outstanding Business Owner, Black Lives Matter Seacoast Excellence Awards, 2023*
- *James Beard Foundation Best Chef Northeast, semi-finalist nomination, 2019, 2020, 2022*
- "This is one of the most beautiful presentations of roasted pork I have ever seen!", *Guy Fieri, Food Network*
- "Vida Cantina is a modern cantina puttin' out the pork, from belly tacos to a pigs head platter..." *Guy Fieri, Food Network*
- The East Coast's Best Mexican Food, *Boston Magazine*
- Best Mexican food north of the MA border, *The Boston Globe*
- One of the best, most authentic Mexican restaurants in New England, *The Boston Globe*
- Exceptional house-made tortillas with freshly milled local corn...prompting the kind of gut-deep, intangible warmth, *Boston Magazine*
- Highest standards ...his future is rooted in corn, *Yankee Magazine*
- One of the Top Ten Restaurants in the Greater New England Region, *The Portsmouth Herald*
- Top Portsmouth Restaurants Worth The Drive, *Eater Maine*
- Hot New Restaurant, *NH Magazine*
- Best New Restaurant, *Taste Magazine*
- Best Mexican Brunch, *NH Magazine*
- Best Chef, Seacoast, Nominee, *Spotlight Awards*
- Collaborator of the Year Award/Chef David Vargas, *honored by The Chamber Collaborative of Greater Portsmouth, 2022*

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