

## HCEDC Small Business Spotlight Casa Cubana, A Family's Journey



(Picture L-R): Diana Mastrodimos, Executive Chef & General Manager; Mercedes Castex, Owner; Gerardo Perez, General Manager

Located in the heart of Jersey City, Casa Cubana has become a cherished local business, a testament to a family's entrepreneurial spirit and unwavering dedication to owning and operating a catering company for future generations. As a woman-owned Hispanic business, Mercedes Castex proudly works alongside her son, General Manager, Gerardo, and daughter, Executive Chef & General Manager Diana Mastrodimos. Working together as a family, they ensure that every dish reflects Cuba's authentic flavors and traditions. This vibrant takeout café and catering business celebrates not only the rich tapestry of Cuban cuisine but also the resilience and heritage of the family.

The roots of Casa Cubana trace back to the 1960s when Mercedes immigrated to the United States, settling in the bustling streets of Miami. Her husband, Rene Perez, no stranger to the restaurant industry, carried the family's culinary traditions with him. Gerardo and Diana grew up immersed in a world of Cuban flavors, savoring authentic dishes daily. The techniques and stories passed down from their "abuela" through generations ignited the family's culinary passion and inspired them to bring the authentic essence of Cuban cuisine to the forefront.

What was once a shared family dream became a reality five years ago when they opened their catering business and café in Jersey City. "When we began, we had experience in the kitchen but needed to learn how to make our vision an operational catering company/takeout café. We started with catering, serving large corporations in the area, and became really well-versed with managing large client accounts," Gerardo shared. "When we decided to open the doors to our business, the choice of location was an easy one. Jersey City provides proximity to NYC and offers a vibrant, culturally diverse and growing community."

Despite the unexpected challenges posed by the pandemic, the family remained resolute in their commitment to their customers. Navigating the complexities of operating a business during the pandemic, Gerardo connected with community organizations online to find the resources needed to grow Casa Cubana. By attending various networking events, he met Michelle Richardson. This initial conversation led him to discover a program that aligned with his goals: Hudson County Economic Development Corporation's (HCEDC) partnership with Rutgers University, The Center for Urban Entrepreneurship & Economic Development's (CUEED) Black and Latino Urban Entrepreneurship – Retail Acceleration Program (BLUE-RAP), a model of their award-winning Entrepreneurship Pioneers Initiative (EPI).

### Why Hudson?

**"...Vibrant, culturally diverse and growing community."**

"At Rutgers, we strongly believe in delivering entrepreneurial education with award-winning programs in curriculum and business sustainability. As a leading academic institution, it is our responsibility to share available resources and knowledge with the community because that is what ultimately strengthens New Jersey," stated Jasmine Cordero-West, Associate Director, Rutgers University, CUEED. The partnership with HCEDC started as a way to build capacity with businesses located in Hudson County. Together, the program evolved to provide retail and restaurant entrepreneurs with a roadmap to grow through management training, business and financial coaching, and training workshops. "At HCEDC, we focus on building sustainable businesses that can withstand global pandemics and recessions. It is our top priority to partner with the best programs in the state to meet entrepreneurs where they are and get them to the next step so that they can thrive," shared Michelle Richardson, Executive Director, HCEDC.



*Inspiring the next family generation at Casa Cubana, Jersey City*

When asked what advice Gerardo could offer other entrepreneurs, he shared, "Be ready to pivot. Stay updated and aware of everything going on in your community. Engage with professional organizations on social media, sign up for workshops, and educate yourself on all the available resources and offerings. These organizations are here to help achieve your goal."

**For more information about how we can help grow your business,  
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