



Carlos Tamayo died July 29 surrounded by family members at home in Santa Rosa. He was 76.

The eldest of five sons of La Tortilla Factory founders Mary and Jose Tamayo, and also the couple's original partner and business guru, Tamayo was known as fiercely competitive yet caring, generous and down-to-earth. His fingerprints were on all of the business decisions that made La Tortilla Factory the country's largest nationally distributed tortilla maker, with a workforce that grew from two to about 300.

All of Tamayo's brothers were active in the business at one time or another, but he and brothers Willie and Mike were chiefly responsible for innovating a line of better-for-you, creative tortillas. The brothers invested profits in their employees and the employees' children, and in a host of Sonoma County community endeavors and nonprofits.

"He was just real," said Carlos Tamayo's son, Sam Tamayo of Santa Rosa, who grew up in the company and serves on its board. "He treated people so well. Nobody was bigger or smaller than him. He saw them as equal."

Jenny Tamayo, of Forestville, now the tortilla company's people and community engagement manager, said her father "had humble beginnings and he remained humble."

Carlos Tamayo was from the outset the prime visionary and strategic force behind the family enterprise that began modestly as a "Mexicattessen" on Santa Rosa's Dutton Avenue. He worked in every aspect of the business and over the decades bore the title and responsibilities of CEO, president and chairman.

In January 2021, his family sold a majority interest in La Tortilla Factory to the Idaho-based Flagship Food Group. Carlos Tamayo then retired from his final remaining role — chairman of the board of directors — after having guided the company for most of his adult life.

At the time of his retirement, he was fighting back from the paralyzing effects of a stroke that occurred in May 2019. "One of the more difficult things was to see him sitting down, because he never sat down," Sam Tamayo said. Carlos Tamayo's health declined in recent months. He was under hospice care when he died. "We were all there, right by his side," Jenny Tamayo said. "He wasn't afraid. He had a very strong faith and he knew where he was going."

Carlos Guadalupe Tamayo was born in 1946 in North Platte, Nebraska. His Mexico-born father, Jose, came to the U.S. through the Bracero labor program. His mother, Maria, was born in Kansas to parents who were Mexican immigrants.

The Tamayos had relocated to Omaha, Nebraska, when Carlos graduated from high school. He then studied political science at Arizona State University. "He thought he was going into government," Jenny Tamayo said. It was at ASU that Carlos Tamayo met Alayne Wagner. Both were in their early 20s when they married in 1969. That same year, Tamayo enlisted in the U.S. Army. The Vietnam War was on, but his college education allowed noncombat assignments that took him to Germany.

Upon his honorable discharge in 1971, he returned to school, earning a master's degree in international business from Arizona's Thunderbird School of Global Management. He launched his career by moving to Hayward and training to

become a branch manager for First Interstate Bank. His daughter Jenny said he liked bank work, which deepened his grasp of what he called “the language of business.”

But he also found himself drawn to the prospect of helping Latinos and others improve their lives through entrepreneurship, so he left the bank and hired on with the National Economic Development Association in Fresno. He became a financial analyst tasked with assisting Latinos who sought to go into business. Among his discoveries was that new entrepreneurs were doing well producing traditional Mexican foods for aficionados that included the state’s growing Latino population.

Tamayo was just 29 when, in 1975, his father was laid off from the Union Pacific Railroad in Nebraska because the job he’d worked for 30 years was eliminated. So as a young, well-educated man pursuing a career in business nearly a half-century ago, he paused to help his folks open a modest taqueria and tortilleria in Santa Rosa. Then he joined them and became key to growing La Tortilla Factory into an entrepreneurial and community phenomenon familiar to supermarket shoppers in all 50 states and Canada.

Jose and Mary Tamayo told their son they were going to send him their life savings, and they’d like for him to help them start a business in California. Carlos Tamayo did some thinking and some research. Aware of the growing demand for tortillas and other Mexican foods in California, and discovering that there was little or no competition for such business in Sonoma County, he advised his folks to move to Santa Rosa.

“It was like the stars aligned,” Jenny Tamayo said. Here her grandparents were good cooks and hard workers, they liked people and they’d long dreamed of having a business of their own. And her highly educated and driven father had his finger on the pulse of business opportunities for Latinos in California.

Carlos helped his parents obtain a \$75,000 loan from the Small Business Administration. He was with them in Santa Rosa when, in 1977, they opened the door to La Tortilla Factory, their Mexicattessen.

“In the front, you could order burritos and tacos from the deli,” Carlos once said. “In the back, there was one corn (tortilla) machine and the bags of masa.” La Tortilla Factory was also something of a Latino mini-market. Maria and Jose sold spices, jarred salsas, Mexican chocolate, packaged pastries, pinatas, candles, corn husks, you name it.

Carlos Tamayo sensed an opportunity to do something grand with his parents. He changed career plans, and immersed himself in La Tortilla Factory, helping out with and refining every aspect of the operation. Said Jenny Tamayo, “When they started delivering (tortillas) to grocery stores, guess who made the deliveries?”

As the business grew, Tamayo recruited brother Willie to come on board to oversee sales, and brother Mike to head up manufacturing. The family closed the Dutton Avenue Mexicattessen in 1988, just before Jose and Mary retired, and then switched the company’s focus entirely to the production and sale of tortillas. And not just the traditional corn tortillas it had begun with. Sensitive to health trends and consumer preferences, the Tamayos in 1992 introduced whole wheat, fat-free tortillas. To follow were the first low-carbohydrate tortillas, then organic corn tortillas, gluten-free tortillas, handmade-style corn-and-wheat tortillas, extra-virgin olive oil wraps, non-GMO tortillas, plant-based protein tortillas and grain-free cauliflower tortillas.

In 2001, the company removed all hydrogenated oils, trans fats and high-fructose corn syrup from its products. Carlos Tamayo said at the time, “We want to be part of the solution, not the problem.”

La Tortilla Factory had moved into several successively larger buildings when in 2005 it opened a state-of-the-art plant near the Sonoma County Airport capable of producing more than 1 million tortillas a day. The business and the Tamayos have garnered many awards for their products, their community service and the way they treat their employees. Only weeks before his stroke in 2019, Carlos Tamayo and brother Willie traveled to Las Vegas with a family entourage for the pair’s induction into the Tortilla Industry Association’s Hall of Fame, where his son Sam had previously served on the TIA board of directors from 2022-2015 .

Prominent among the family’s contributions to Sonoma County was its support of Social Advocates for Youth. The organization, in turn, gave the name Tamayo Village to a residential complex in Santa Rosa that provides homeless or at-

risk youth and young adults an affordable place to live and receive essential supportive services. Herman J. Hernandez of Guerneville, a founder of the Sonoma County Latino leadership nonprofit Los Cien, said he thought of Tamayo as “a brother.” He added that Carlos was “such a sincere, compassionate individual who empowered everyone around him.”

Among the benefits of working for Tamayo at La Tortilla Factory was a scholarship fund established for employees and their children. “His relationship with employees was amazing,” said El Salvador-born senior plant manager Carlos Mojica, who also later served on the TIA board of directors including one term as Chairman. Most of the production workers at La Tortilla Factory are Latino. Mojica said such workers are accustomed to bosses keeping to their elevated world. But Tamayo, he said, conducted himself as if he was one of them. “Carlos always parked with the employees,” Mojica said. “And he brought his lunch and always ate with the employees.” Mojica, who’s been with company for 20 years, credited Tamayo with encouraging him and other employees to improve their training, education and leadership. He said he earned a college degree while working, and La Tortilla Factory covered most of the cost. “The first day I met him, I knew he was an amazing man,” Mojica said. If Tamayo wasn’t working, he loved to fish, tend his garden and spend casual time with Alayne and their large, close-knit family.

Tamayo was preceded in death by his parents and his brother, Bernie Tamayo. In addition to his wife in Santa Rosa, he is survived by daughters Katie Tamayo of Santa Rosa and Jenny Tamayo of Forestville, son Sam Tamayo of Santa Rosa, brothers Willie Tamayo of Orinda, Mike Tamayo of Windsor and Tico Tamayo of Petaluma, and seven grandchildren. His family, which plans to host a public celebration of his life, suggests memorial contributions to Tamayo Village/Social Advocates for Youth, saysc.org or 2447 Summerfield Road, Santa Rosa CA 95405.