

Nicaraguan Immigrants Build New Lives Here

By Amanda Roberson

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Pork rinds for *vigorón* sizzle, cassava is molded into *buñuelos* and *ropa vieja* simmers to perfection every day in the kitchen of owner Elizabeth Vivas at Sabor Nicaragüense restaurant. These traditional dishes bring a taste of Nicaragua to downtown San José, just as Nicaraguan immigrants infuse elements of their culture in their adopted homeland.

Immigration's last count in December 2006 showed 222,419 Nicaraguans residing here legally, according to spokeswoman Heidy Bonilla. Countless others live here under the radar, but neither Bonilla nor others questioned recently would venture a guess as to how many undocumented Nicaraguans are in Costa Rica.

While the lives and experiences of Nicaraguan immigrants vary greatly, some common threads unite them, as The Tico Times recently discovered while sitting down with three Nicaraguans who now call Costa Rica home.

As an immigrant, "you have to be more Nica than the Nicas and more Tico than the Ticos. It's very overwhelming," said Roger Bonilla, a researcher at the University of Costa Rica (UCR) in the eastern suburb of San Pedro who moved here in 1988 from León, Nicaragua. "You always have to prove yourself and give the best of yourself."

Bonilla (no relation to Heidy Bonilla), 35, attended elementary and high school here and later earned a scholarship to study at UCR. While getting his degree, he worked as a research assistant at the university's Central American Population Center (CCP), where he stayed on after graduation and has conducted several studies on immigrants and public health.

"I've lived here most of my life and have a lot of friends here, but I still have parts of me that are Nica, certain sayings I still use, certain things I haven't forgotten," he said.

Like Bonilla, restaurant owner Vivas, 34, said she's become a sort of cultural hybrid, retaining elements of her Nicaraguan culture despite considering herself half Tica.

"It's in my blood," she said, referring to her family's culinary tradition that's been the heart of her successful restaurant. Also like Bonilla, Vivas fled to Costa Rica during Nicaragua's violent political turmoil of the late 1980s. Both made the trip with their families and were granted refugee status.

Of the 222,419 Nicaraguans residing here, 615 are refugees, and most of them fled here during this period, according to Immigration's Bonilla.

Newly arrived, Vivas opened a small eatery in La Carpio, a San José shantytown that's home to many Nicaraguans. It became so successful that seven years later she opened a larger restaurant downtown, near San Juan de Dios Hospital, which still thrives today. She's stuck with the name, Sabor Nicaragüense.

Today, three of her six children ages 18, 16, 12, 10, 6 and 4 help out at the restaurant, which is packed during lunch hour, especially on weekends. Nicaraguan Ambassador Harold Rivas is known to be among diners.

During the past couple of years, she has opened two more San José branches, near La



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Cultural Expression: Nicaraguan immigrants from all walks of life have brought their culture and experiences with them to their new country. Clockwise from top left, Elizabeth Vivas, 34, shows her Nicaraguan recipes featured in a Tico magazine; the menu at her restaurant, Sabor Nicaragüense, provides many immigrants the tastes they crave from home; Roger Bonilla, 35, has spent most of his life here and works as a researcher at the University of Costa Rica (UCR) conducting studies on immigrant issues; Francis Rodríguez, 40, participates in an art project at a women's support group in the impoverished neighborhood of La Carpio, in western San José.

Merced Park and near the Radiográfica Costarricense S.A. (RACSA) office.

"I've always had the desire and the will to work and to continue moving forward in life," Vivas said, offering an explanation for her success.

Asked what words of advice she'd offer a newly arrived immigrant, she said, "First of all, you have to work hard and honestly, with punctuality, and be humble. Above everything, you have to accept people."

Acceptance was a common thread in conversations with Vivas and Bonilla that also emerged when speaking with Francis Rodríguez, 40, who talked with The Tico Times after the meeting of a women's group in La Carpio. Run by Gail Nystrom, director of the nonprofit Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation, the group unites about 10 women to talk about issues affecting their lives.

"This small space has helped me think about a better future; it's something spiritual," Rodríguez said.

A mother of four, Rodríguez's reasons for coming to Costa Rica are more personal than political. She left at age 23 to escape a father who had sexually abused her since she was 7.

She and her husband, a carpenter who's also Nicaraguan, are raising their children in Costa Rica in hopes of giving them a better life.

"I want to see my children grow up, prepare for the future and study so they can take advantage of the opportunities they have," she said.

Through the women's group, she's found friends, both Tica and Nica. She said there's little tension between the two groups in La Carpio, a phenomenon Bonilla has explored in his studies.

In La Carpio's "extreme environment, there's less discrimination," he explained, referring to the community's poverty. "There's a feeling that people have to share instead of fighting."

However, Bonilla, Vivas and Rodríguez

do agree xenophobia is a part of life for Nicaraguan immigrants around Costa Rica.

It's fueled by common "myths" about Nicaraguans here, such as the belief that they're "invading" Costa Rica, overwhelming the public health-care system and committing the bulk of crimes, Bonilla said. "Really, there is no empirical evidence to support these myths."

Vivas said she's aware of the misconceptions out there.

"Something bad happens here and it's always 'El Nica' who did it," she said.

Still, she said Costa Ricans are important customers at her restaurant.

"Ticos have always accepted us, and so have other foreigners who come to eat here," she said while proudly fanning out two editions of Costa Rican women's magazine *Perfil* featuring her and her recipes.

Back in the kitchen, her staff was busy cooking up these recipes to feed the lunch crowd that began to trickle in. ■