



Garcia's Restaurant

## Description

Quirky and Comfortable with Great Food  
(2021 ©donnliston.co)



As owner of Garcia's Cantina in Eagle River, **Joel Rivas** does it all.

Some years back I remember standing in the parking lot of **Garcia's Restaurant and Cantina** when a parade of antique automobiles pulled in, one of which included a teacher friend and her **Anchorage Assembly** member husband, **Peggy and Ken Stout**, driving a Ford Model T. The

group had just come back from the Mat-Su Valley and were not familiar with Eagle River, so Peggy asked me about how the food was at this restaurant. I assured her it was very good. Afterward she thanked me for the appropriate recommendation.

These were the parents of Iditarod Sled Dog Race runner and authority, **Deedee Jonrowe**. Their other daughter was Juneau teacher **Linda Schultz**, whom I had known when I lived there. Ken Stout was active in the **Republican Party of Alaska**. Peggy died in 2015 but we had shared the fact she had served on the board of the teacher union, **NEA-Alaska** at the same time as I had worked for that organization in Juneau, and we were both Republicans.

This was a rare phenomenon in the early 1990s and is unheard of now.



<https://www.facebook.com/GarciasCantina/>

**With an old motorcycle mounted on the wall and an old truck front artwork, Garciaâ??s has enough quirkiness to make it fun and lively.**

*We have a very high volume business, explained owner **Joel Rivas**. One thing I believe, as a restaurant owner I must know everything there is to know about how to run this businessâ??washing dishes, bartending, managing, cookingâ??thatâ??s me!*

Originally from El Salvador, Rivas entered the restaurant business at the bottom as a dishwasher in California.

***I grew up in California so most of my early friends were Mexican and I know their cuisine well, Rivas continued. Before this I worked for a major restaurant chain, Taco Bell, and was district manager over several stores. Back in 1988 they ran their business the way I run this oneâ??everything was cooked fresh on-siteâ??but as they got bigger they changed their business model. Here, we do everything fresh.***



That old-fashioned business model has worked well for Garcia's, which was started some 36 years ago by **Rod Muma**. Rivas and some partners purchased Garcia's in 2014. *We all knew the restaurant business very well; I have been in this business almost 30 years. I believe in this business and I believe in my friends so we went together and bought Mr. Muma out*, Rivas said.

Rivas has since bought the partners out and now has only one partner in the business.

**"I have been in Eagle River almost 25 years and everybody knows me around here,"** said Rivas. **"My experience at Taco Bell gave me the knowledge of how to run a business like this. Together with my chef we tweaked the menu to add some additional authentic Mexican dishes but we maintain the successful concept of the business; fun, family-friendly and delicious food."**

Of course, one other key



of customers.





Outdoor seating is featured during summer at Garcia's Cantina and Cafe.

*We have 90 employees. When the Covid Pandemic hit in early 2020 my first concern was for them, said Rivas. The first business shutdown by the **Municipality of Anchorage** was tough. I knew the business was going to be okay, but I worried about my employees. Thank God we were able to pull through it due 100 percent to the support we had from the community.*



***Rivas continues: It wasn't just my business, all of us in this area felt the impact of the decisions of the Anchorage Mayor and Assembly. In Eagle River we were caught in the middle; the valley restaurants were open, we were required to be closed. It was very difficult for us as a business.***

*Rivas had to lay off 30 Garcia's employees in the first Anchorage shutdown, and all but 3 returned. The business was able to hold on to all of them through the next two shutdowns.*

*I don't think they should have ever shut down the economy of Anchorage. The **State of Alaska** didn't, it was the local government that did. We had to follow the rules, and we did it very well, said Rivas. I appreciate my employees and I treat them very well. I kept everybody employed even when we weren't making money. My choice was to lose employees and have to train new ones at a certain cost, or pay the employees I had and hope to recover after the crisis was over. The third shut-down was in December. I was scheduled to go on vacation for a week and I made sure nobody was reduced in pay during Christmas. I took care of my people and I don't regret it.*



**Do you think a local government for Chugiak/Eagle River could have made a difference in this situation?**

*Yes, to be honest with you the people proposing detachment from the Muni are my friendsâ??business ownersâ??and I have been invited to their meetings, but I am busy, said Rivas. I was not sure exactly what to think about **EagleExit** before the pandemic hit, I wasnâ??t sure. But now I think it is a good idea! I think it is time for ER to be on its own. We need local control. I think we could manage Eagle River better than the Muni does, although I am not actively involved in the movement to detach, but that is my sense.*

*Rivas concluded: I am not a politician, I donâ??t want to be a politician. I prefer to be a businessman and serve my customers. Most of all I appreciate what a wonderful community we have in Eagle River and how supportive it was during the pandemic. I feel blessed.*

**Other Featured Chugiak/Eagle River Businesses:**

How Eagle River Elks Contribute to our Community

<https://donnliston.net/2021/06/quality-of-life-matters.html>

A Happy Place for Woodworkers

<https://donnliston.net/2021/05/veteran-owned-business.html>

Bridging Businesses and Customers with New Payment Options

<https://donnliston.net/2021/04/meeting-economic-challenges.html>

Matanuska Brewing Company Innovates

[https://donnliston.net/2021/03/challenges-from-anchorage\\_20.html](https://donnliston.net/2021/03/challenges-from-anchorage_20.html)

What Happened to Anchorage Hospitality?

<https://donnliston.net/2021/02/the-best-thing-about-being-in-anchorage.html>

The Cozy Side of Eagle River

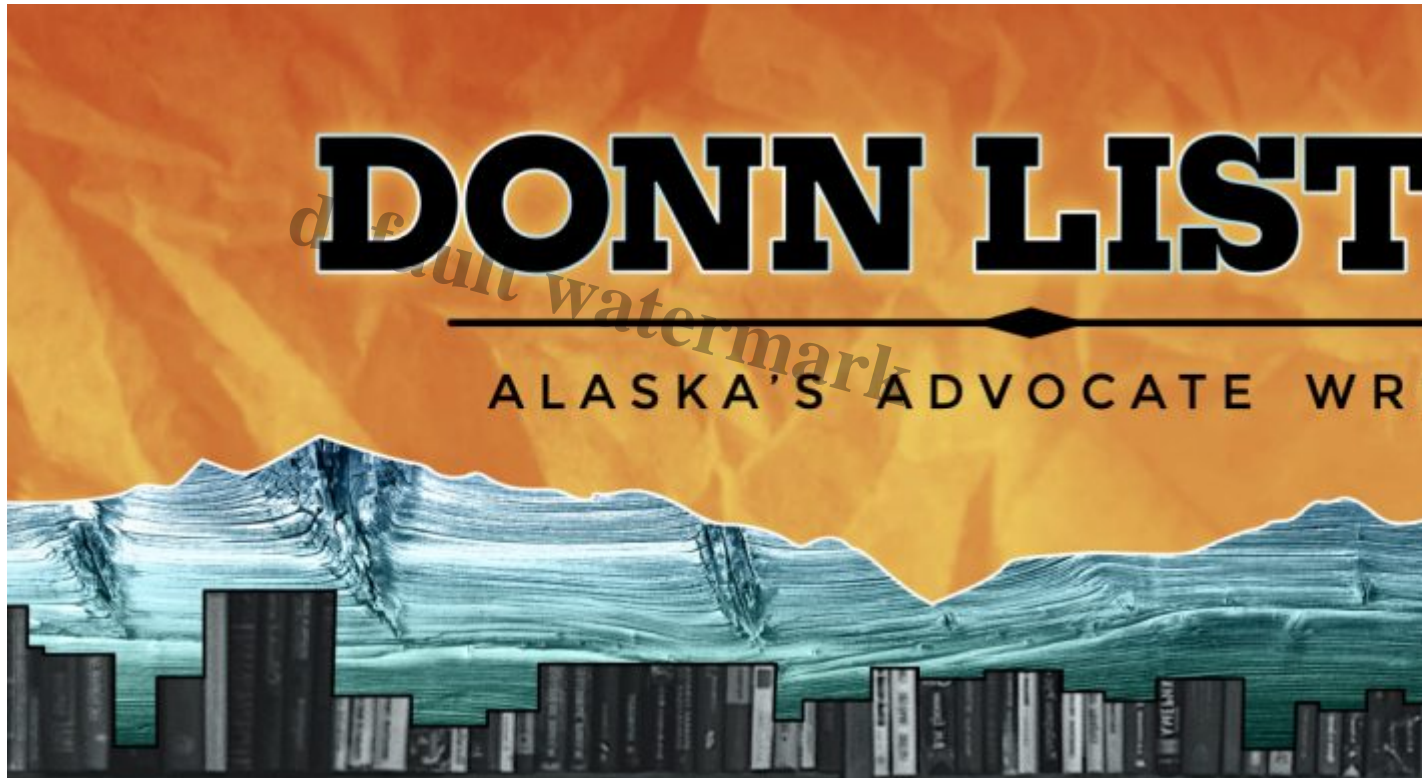
<https://donnliston.net/2021/01/destiny-happens.html>

Pandemic Business Survivor ER Small Engine Repair

<https://donnliston.net/2020/11/the-wonder-of-small-engines-john.html>

How Can Alaska Gain Food Security?

<https://donnliston.net/2020/06/how-can-alaska-gain-food-security.html>



Advertising is available on this website. I will write your story and it will gain continuous clicks through monthly display ads: Contact me at [Donn@DonnListon.net](mailto:Donn@DonnListon.net)

### Category

1. Eagle River/Chugiak Community
2. Pandemic

### Date Created

July 11, 2021

### Author

donn