



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, Garcia'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 business—washing dishes, bartending, managing, cooking—that'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 one—everything was cooked fresh on-site—but as they got bigger they changed their business model. Here, we do everything fresh.

Alaska Chalet Bed & Breakfast
PROVIDING OUTSTANDING ACCOMMODATIONS IN EAGLE RIVER SINCE 1991
Apartment Styled Suites | Centrally Located | Extended Stays Available



Comfort – Spacious – Private
www.alaskachaletbb.com
Brigitte Humphery - Host | 11031 Gulkana Circle, Eagle River | 907-694-1528

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 friends—business owners—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 wasn'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 don'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

What Happened to Anchorage Hospitality?

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

The Cozy Side of Eagle River

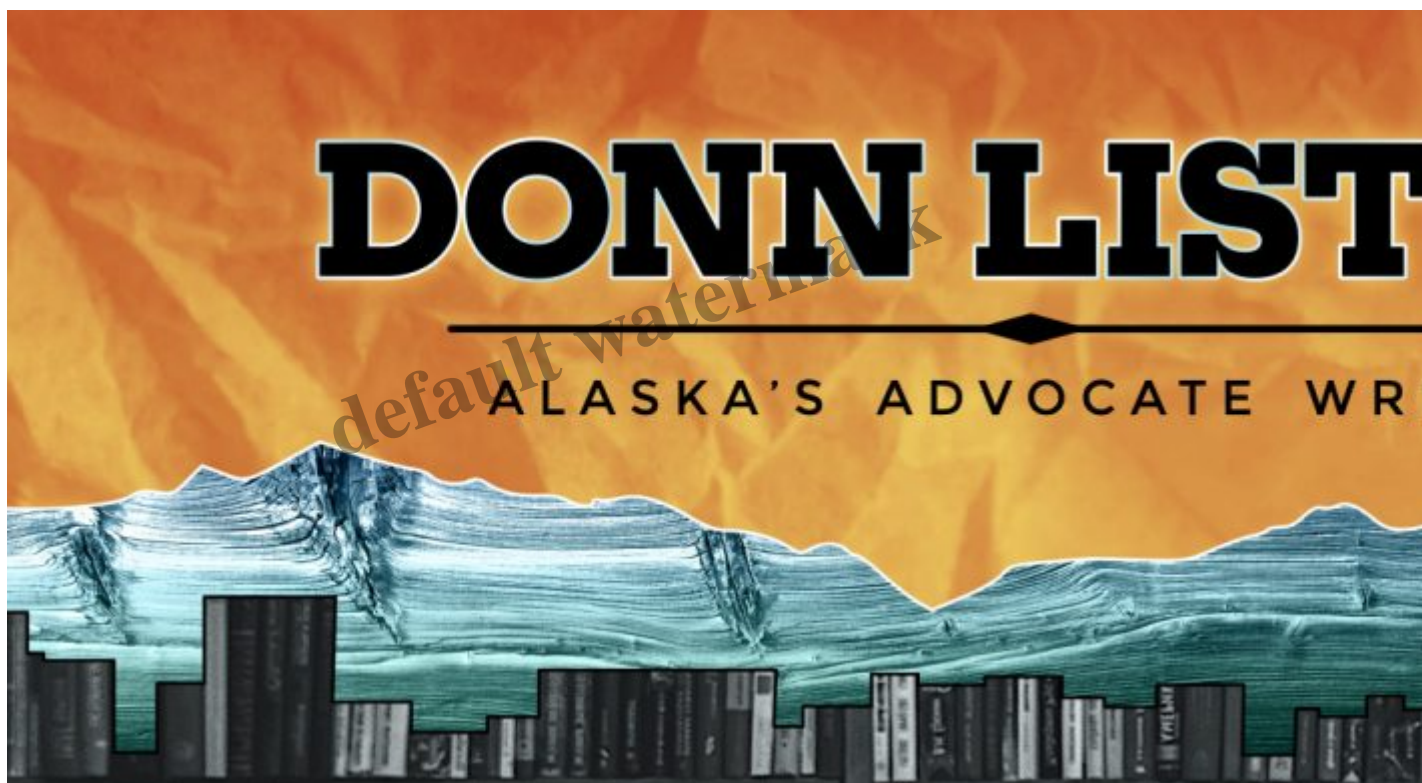
<https://donnliston.net/2021/01/destiny-happens.html>

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

Category

1. Eagle River/Chugiak Community
2. Pandemic

Date Created

July 11, 2021

Author

donn