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## right at home

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**PLUS** JUST HOW SAFE IS IMPORTED FOOD, AND WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

# Caribbean Cool

Puerto Rico-based El Meson Sandwiches puts Caribbean flavor in its deli sandwiches with its trademark sauce. **By Kathryn Jones**



>> El Meson Sandwiches maintains approximately 28 percent of the Puerto Rican sandwich market, appealing to both locals and tourists alike.

**I**n a sea of mass franchised sandwich chains, El Meson Sandwiches separates itself from the competition by offering the finest sandwiches Puerto Rico has to offer, according to President Felipe Perez Jr. He says the Mayaguez, P.R.-based company maintains approximately 28 percent of the Puerto Rican sandwich market, and appeals to locals and tourists alike with its uniquely Caribbean deli sandwich.

Perez's father, Felipe Perez – known among loved ones as Don Felipe – opened the first El Meson restaurant on July 4, 1972. “Don Felipe explains he chose the holiday because he thought it was going to be a slow day,” the company says.

“But to his surprise, it turned out to be quite the contrary. The restaurant was packed, and it has continued this way throughout the years and across the island.”

## Continuous Growth

After attending college in Jacksonville, Fla., Felipe Perez Jr. became president in 1987, and opened the

company's second restaurant the same year. In 1988, El Meson opened a restaurant in Plaza Las Americas, the largest commercial center in the Caribbean, according to the company.

“This was a milestone for our company considering that it was such a small company in size, but big at heart and on customer service,” El Meson says.

“The Perez family continued towards the future with one vision: to offer a product with the highest quality and, above all, with the best customer service in a familiar environment.”

In 1991, El Meson opened a location in Mayaguez Town Center. The next year, “Don Felipe was able to fulfill a special dream by opening a restaurant in a beau-

## company profile

**El Meson Sandwiches**  
www.elmesonsandwiches.com  
2008 revenues: \$48 million  
HQ: Mayaguez, Puerto Rico  
Employees: 1,300  
Specialty: Sandwiches  
Felipe Perez Jr., president:  
“Most of our sandwiches use a special sauce that's more of Latino flavor.”



>> El Meson Sandwiches has found success by offering a wider variety of products and better customer service than its competition. "We also have a more upscale operation than our competition, with wood, marble countertops and carpet in the dining area," President Felipe Perez Jr. (above, right) says. Also shown are Vice President Gil Perez (right) and founder Don Felipe Perez (center).



tiful colonial building in the historical section of the capital city, Old San Juan," El Meson notes. That same year, his youngest son, Gil Perez, joined the company as vice president.

"In the following years, we continued to grow, opening restaurants in different shopping centers like Plaza del Caribe in Ponce, Plaza del Norte in Hatillo, Plaza Carolina, Plaza del Oeste in San German, Plaza Palma Real in Humacao and Las Catalinas Mall in Caguas," El Meson says.

### Spreading the Wealth

Today, El Meson has 30 locations in Puerto Rico. Half are freestanding stores, while the other half are in shopping malls and strip malls.

"We have a more upscale operation than our competition, with wood, marble countertops and carpet in the dining area," Perez says.

The company has three more stores under construction, and Perez intends to continue opening three to four stores annually.

Future plans include expanding into the U.S. mainland, particularly Florida. "We have so many Americans coming down to Puerto Rico, and they love our product," Perez notes.

"We say, 'It's a different taste, but if it was close to your home, would you be our client?' Everyone answers in the affirmative."

El Meson's growth plans have never been limited to territorial expansion, the company notes. "El Meson Sandwiches also grew by offering a bigger variety in products, better customer service and by adapting the latest technology," it says.

"This growth also includes a work force of more than 1,000 employees, a warehouse and distribution center, and the main office."

### Latino Flavor

El Meson offers 35 sandwiches, many with a distinctive Caribbean sauce, Perez says. "Most of our sandwiches use a special sauce that's more of a Latino

# el meson sandwiches

flavor," he describes. "All of our sandwiches are toasted, and most of our meats are grilled."

One example is the All Pro sandwich, which features caramelized onions, cabbage, tomatoes, Swiss cheese, pastrami and Virginia ham. It is served on French bread with El Meson's trademark sauce.

"It's a very hot sandwich – very tasty," Perez says. "Every year, we bring in new products and take away products, so our menu is always changing."

## Breakfast Nook

El Meson also boasts a significant breakfast menu featuring international favorites such as breakfast sandwiches, waffles, pancakes and fried eggs.

"All of our food is made fresh to order," Perez asserts. "We use no microwave – only fresh products. We also have a very nice espresso menu."

Since 1972, the company's commit-

ment to quality and freshness has never faltered. One of the company's missions is to "enhance the art of making a good coffee andalusia gustito Puerto Rican."

El Meson's coffee menu includes:  
> Café Cortado (black with a little milk);  
> Espresso Café Largo (double black);  
> Cappuccino (espresso, milk and whipped cream);  
> Café Latte (espresso with milk, Irish cream, hazelnut, amaretto, chocolate, almond and mocha syrup);  
> Mochaccino (chocolate cappuccino); and  
> Meson Café (double espresso with milk).

## Family and Community

El Meson's mission is to "treat our visitors as members of the family, and I know that we have that culture of treating our clients like family," Perez says.



"Our employees follow it perfectly

because they feel at home – they feel part of the business. Although we have a great product and price, we also have great employees."

The company maintains strong links with the surrounding community. "If you are working in the community, you have to help the community; so we try to contribute to different nonprofit organizations in different parts of the island," Perez says. "We try to be as much a part of the community as we can."

Some of the organizations close to the company's heart are:

- > The American Cancer Society
- > American Red Cross
- > Muscular Dystrophy Association
- > Education Program HIV/AIDS in the region of Mayaguez
- > College of Nutritionists and Dietitians
- > Coalition Puertorriquena to reduce alcohol consumption by minors. **FD**



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