

Milking a classic dessert for all it's worth

By LINDA BLADHOLM

lbladholm@MiamiHerald.com



LINDA BLADHOLM / LINDA BLADHOLM

Enrique and Carlos Somoza flank their father, Luis, at Cuatro Leches cakes, where the namesake dessert is available in individual portions.

Tres leches -- vanilla sponge cake soaked in "three milks" (condensed, evaporated and heavy cream) -- has become a South Florida classic since the Los Ranchos steak-house chain popularized it in the 1980s.

It is usually topped with an Italian-style egg-white meringue similar to marshmallow, but a few years ago Luis V. Somoza, patriarch of the Los Ranchos clan, hit on frosting the cakes with caramelized milk (*dulce de leche*), and *cuatro leches* ("four milks") was born.

That's now the name of the dessert company launched in 1981 by Luis' mother, Leonor Somoza, to supply Los Ranchos, founded by nephews of the late Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza after his 1979 overthrow.

Today Luis runs Cuatro Leches with his wife, Lillian, and their Miami-born sons, Carlos and Enrique. Carlos is in charge of operations and marketing, while Enrique is the master baker. Their products, which are carried by dozens of Latin restaurants, are available retail and wholesale from their South Miami bakery-warehouse.

No one is sure of its roots, but Luis believes *tres leches* originated in Mexico in a simpler form and was enriched with additional milks as it spread to Central America.

Tres and *cuatro leches* are mainstays of the business, but *flan* is huge, too, especially in individual portions for glam parties. There's cream cheese (*queso*), caramel, coconut, *piña colada* with Bacardi gold rum, espresso with Kahlua, orange-vanilla, rose petal and pumpkin with cinnamon. Topping choices include toasted coconut, almonds, dark chocolate ganache, pistachios and seasonal berries.

There's also Caribbean rice pudding, coconut-chai *crème brûlée*, *torta de pan* (bread pudding) and *pio quinto*, a layered rum cake named after a pope that's topped with *natilla* (vanilla custard) and a plump prune, at this made-in-Miami sweet spot.

Linda Bladholm's latest book is Latin and Caribbean Grocery Stores Demystified.