Many years before Melendez opened Coyote Crossing, one of the most popular Mexican restaurants in Conshohocken, PA, he was fourteen years old—and homeless. Escaping a difficult living situation in Mexico City, he traveled across Central America and South America working for food. “That’s how I started in the restaurant community. The experience made me appreciate food, a place to a live, a place to shower. It gave more depth to my emotional, or even spiritual perception of what needed to be done to get ahead.”

And so, Melendez looked ahead. After earning his Mathematics degree in college, he went on to become the youngest corporate director for a chain of Carlos ‘n Charlie’s restaurants in Mexico. Then one day, the restaurant where he’d invested all his money burned to the ground. “My wife at that time said, ‘Look, you’re young. You want to start over, go to the States.’” In 1992, Melendez moved to America and started working as a busboy in a Mexican restaurant. Once he got past one door, he’d find his way through another. He took a second, a third, a fourth restaurant job. When he worked as a dishwasher, he cleaned up the entire kitchen. On his rare free days, he trained at the gym so he’d be healthy and dependable at the restaurant. “Within a couple of months I had bartending and waiting shifts in different restaurants. I was working double shifts Monday through Saturday. They couldn’t keep me down.”

Management opportunities soon followed. After taking over a Korman Suites Hotel restaurant, Melendez tripled earnings in nine months. He won a restaurant in Padaria, PA a Best Spanish Restaurant award. With these accomplishments under his belt, Melendez set his sights on opening his own restaurant in a blue-collar neighborhood in Conshohocken, PA. In those first years, however, it seemed the neighborhood wasn’t ready for Coyote Crossing. “People used to kill animals and spread the guts at the back door of my kitchen and tell me, ‘Get out of our neighborhood you freaking Mexican.’ Even with the police, I ended up having to deal with a lot of raids in the beginning because of the type of neighborhood I was in.”

Despite his struggles, Melendez knew that he was offering people a special culinary experience. As a homeless teenager and struggling immigrant in America, he had come to appreciate food. “When I spent three days without food in Paramount, I begged the chef at a hotel for food. He threw men an onion, and when I took a bite of the onion it tasted so good and I felt like it reset all my taste buds. I’ve developed this taste for food and understanding of how food works.” At Coyote Crossing, Melendez’s dishes draw from memories of his grandmother’s cooking: her roasted poblano peppers, baked pork shoulders with bay leaves and garlic and tomatoes, and spices fried in hot olive oil to relieve their aromas. “I look for freshness and balance of spices first. I use Mexican ingredients—peppers, figs—that I know
are hard to find."

For Melendez, the challenge remained finding people to appreciate his food. When a newspaper reporter came to Coyote Crossing to interview him, the stress got to Melendez and he broke down. “I said, ‘Just do whatever. I mean, I’m broke. My wife left me. Literally I have few customers in my restaurant. People are vandalizing my property.’” To help, the reporter sent a food critic from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to dine at Coyote Crossing. The critic’s review, Melendez knew, would either make or break his restaurant.

The verdict? “He gave me an amazing review that said Coyote Crossing was near perfection.” Soon enough after the review, wealthy foodies began to flood to the restaurant. Melendez started to see familiar faces every week. “You need to believe that if you put out a very good product, charge people a fair amount of money, and never skimp on the quality of your items, sooner or later your place is going to get people.”

Nineteen years after opening, Coyote Crossing has become a staple in Conshohocken, PA. Melendez has gone on to appear in various interviews and videos celebrating entrepreneur success stories. With his Bond Street small business loan, he is expanding his marketing and branching out to an online corporate catering business. And when asked what is the best Mezcal he has ever tasted, he answered, without reservation, Coyote Crossing. “We got involved with the National Mezcal Association in Mexico. We are producing organic Mezcal. The Coyote Crossing brand has just gotten a proof. It’s coming. Coyote Crossing will be the best Mezcal.”