

AKHR Newsletter

Q2 2026



Featured Member: Jalapeños

When Gilbert Ramos moved to Alaska from Mexico at 14, he knew two things: he loved the state and wanted to stay, and he wanted to be a restaurateur. He proceeded to tear up his return flight ticket and never looked back.

While attending school in Homer, he worked multiple jobs — as a roller rink DJ and later at Don Jose’s restaurant — where he discovered his passion for hospitality and restaurants. Even while in high school, he was determined to open up his own restaurant.

“I said I was going to have my own restaurant when I was 21,” Gilbert recalls.

At age 20, he acquired his first restaurant, Dockside, in Homer, with the help of an older partner due to his young age. The business served fish and chips, breakfasts, and charter meals.

Initially, the business did well, but eventually the partnership became strained and left him heavily in debt to distributors. Rather than walking away from the business, he negotiated payment plans with the distributors and spent the next three years repaying the debt.

Gilbert eventually moved to Anchorage where he bartended at Don Jose’s Anchorage location and worked relentlessly to rebuild financially, saving for his next restaurant. He soon married, and his wife, Sandra, became his biggest supporter. She constantly reminded him of his dream, insisting the couple make financial sacrifices to stay on track. They sold their vehicles, downsized from a beautiful home Gilbert had renovated to a mobile home, eliminated debt, and aggressively saved money.

Upcoming Training

Next ServSafe Training:

June 13, 2026 (Saturday) - 8:30am-5:00pm

Next TiPs Recertification:

Thursday, June 4 & June 25 | 5:30 PM - 7:30 PM

Next TiPs Full Class:

Sunday, June 7 & June 28, | 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM

Rserving Online Alcohol Certification:

Tuesday, June 2 & June 16 at 11am AKT

Online Security Training Program (NSC)

- use the discount code on our website

For Members: alaskahospitalityretailers.org/members

Featured Member: Jalapeños

Gilbert worked six, sometimes seven days a week at Don Jose's, not afraid to roll up his sleeves and do what needed to be done.

"If anybody calls in — dishwasher, host, server, cook — I'll do it," Gilbert told his manager.

Eventually, that discipline helped him launch Jalapeños Mexican Restaurant, in 2004, in a strip mall in Eagle River. Always dreaming, he began eyeing property across the road from the strip mall and spent hours imagining building a future Jalapeños. At that time, the landowners wanted about \$1.2 million for the property. The price seemed out of reach for Gilbert, so he redirected his investment capital into opening a location in Wasilla after many requests from Mat-su customers who regularly made the drive to Eagle River.

The Wasilla restaurant opened in 2007 and was successful for a while, but staffing shortages and operational stress presented ongoing challenges. Gilbert recalls one difficult day when the cook, busser, and server all failed to show up, leaving him alone preparing to open the restaurant while customers lined up outside. In 2014, he made the tough decision to close the location.

Meanwhile, the dream property in Eagle River was never far from his mind. Then one day, a friend of his purchased the lot, but instead of feeling resentful, he saw it as a positive sign and hoped the relationship might someday create a new opportunity.

Gilbert's ambitions continued to create opportunities. When he heard that a local Anchorage establishment, Carlos Mexican Restaurant, was up for sale, he declared at a family reunion in Mexico that his New Year's resolution was that he would that restaurant, even though he did not yet have the money.

After returning from Mexico, he approached the owner, who told him he wanted the business to go to "a good family" and not the highest cash buyer. Ramos spent the next year arranging financing before acquiring the restaurant and converting it into the Anchorage Jalapeños location in 2018.

Several years later, yet another opportunity arrived when his friend who had purchased the Eagle River lot contacted him and offered to let him take over the property payments. Gilbert immediately recognized it as the sign he needed to pursue his dream of expansion.

Gilbert partnered with an investor to secure the property, and construction of the new Eagle River establishment began around 2021. The process stretched nearly three years due to COVID-era slowdowns, permits, and licensing delays. Throughout construction, the original Jalapeños location across the road remained in operation.

The expanded Eagle River location finally opened in November 2024, a major leap for the company. Employee count nearly tripled, but sales also tripled, validating years of planning, patience, and persistence.

The new building was significantly larger, more modern, and designed to create an upscale atmosphere while still maintaining approachable prices. Signature dishes include molcajetas made with fire roasted tomatoes, steak, chicken, chorizo, quesadillas, Anaheim peppers served with beans and rice as well as chile rellenos made with fresh Anaheim peppers. Pursuing and exceeding his goals remain themes in Gilbert's life, attributed to a laser focus coupled with an intense work ethic. With those qualities, he turned a teenage dream into a thriving Alaska restaurant business, employing over 100 workers, and committed to helping others make their dreams come true, too.

