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Monthly
Meet Our Makers Newsletter



Meet Maria Jose Cortes

Tucson's business landscape is buzzing this month, with shops and neighborhood markets gearing up for the holidays. At the heart of this momentum is a wave of women-led and Latino-owned businesses shaping the city's creative economy. One standout is Di Luna Candles + Goods, where owner Maria Jose Cortes has transformed her pandemic hobby into a thriving storefront that captures Tucson's essence through scent and community. Keep reading to learn more about Cortes or click on the link below to discover what's new in Tucson.

[What's New](#)



Maria Jose Cortes, owner of Tucson-based [Di Luna Candles + Goods](#), believes in the power of scent to evoke a sense of place. In our conversation last month, she highlighted how creosote, captured in the Tucson Candle: Sonoran Desert Rain, remains a permanent fixture in her lineup.

“Sometimes, you just need that smell to take you back home,” she said.

For Cortes, candles are not just decorative or fragrant objects – they are tiny portals, carrying a piece of Tucson wherever they go. “If someone from Tucson is moving away, they’ll say, ‘I need to get my Tucson candle before I move,’ just to take a little piece of Tucson with them,” she said.

That feeling is tangible the moment you step into Di Luna’s brick-and-mortar space. Sunlight filters through the front windows, illuminating shelves filled with her signature candles and reed diffusers, alongside more than 200 small business products – roughly 90 percent women-owned and a significant portion Latino-owned. The shop is a lively hub where locals and visitors alike can explore scents inspired by the Sonoran Desert and Maria’s favorites memories or pick up handmade jewelry, just as few of the shop’s best sellers.

The scents themselves carry stories. “I grew up going to Day of the Dead festivals in Mexico, and now we have a Day of the Dead candle. We also have a cafecito candle that smells like coffee at my grandma’s house,” she said.

Sustainability is a key part of her ethos: customers can return glass jars for a discount or refill ceramic vessels with a new scent, ensuring each purchase is both meaningful and mindful.

Today, community outreach is a central tenant of Di Luna's business model. Upcoming workshops range from candle-making and body scrubs to mosaics and cookie decorating, while holiday night markets feature about 20 local vendors at a time.

"We teach all kinds of workshops and host markets, because we have a patio in the shop," Cortes said. "It is a lot of fun, and we love seeing people come in and be creative."



Despite the vibrancy of Di Luna today, the business began humbly during the early months of the pandemic. Working at a bank and isolated from friends and family, Cortes sought an outlet to relieve stress. That something turned out to be a candle-making kit she ordered online. What began as a pastime quickly became a passion project. Inspired by her mother, Josefina Cortes, who has run a jewelry business for 20 years, and encouraged by her sister, Maria-Ines Cortes, who provided support through social media, she began to see the potential to turn her hobby into a business.

Initially, she experimented with hand-painting jars, but the process proved too time-consuming. "I needed something to express my creativity without spending hours on

one candle,” she said.

She shifted to decorating candles with dried flowers, fruits, and crystals, a style that remains central to Di Luna today. Along the way, she committed to using natural, non-toxic ingredients: 100 percent soy wax, natural fragrance oils, and cotton wicks.

By June 2020, Cortes had created a logo, designed her Instagram page, and prepared 12 candles for sale, offering free delivery in Tucson, Green Valley, and Nogales. “I just wanted people to get their candle and post about it,” she said. Balancing candle-making with her full-time banking job, she squeezed deliveries into lunch breaks and evenings.

In November 2021, encouraged by her growing side business and overwhelmed by her bank job, Cortes made the leap to full-time entrepreneurship. She began attending farmers markets, pop-ups, and local events, learning firsthand that seeing and smelling the products in person made all the difference.

“Selling candles online is harder than it is in person. When people smell the product and say, ‘Okay, I need this at home,’ that is when it clicks,” she said.



Her grassroots success led to the opening of her brick-and-mortar store in June 2023.

Community support has been central to Di Luna’s story. Just two weeks after opening the shop, a break-in resulted in a \$15,000 loss. “The next morning, people were showing up without being asked,” Cortes said. “Local businesses were doing raffles, bringing jewelry to sell, just to support us. The Tucson community is so great.”

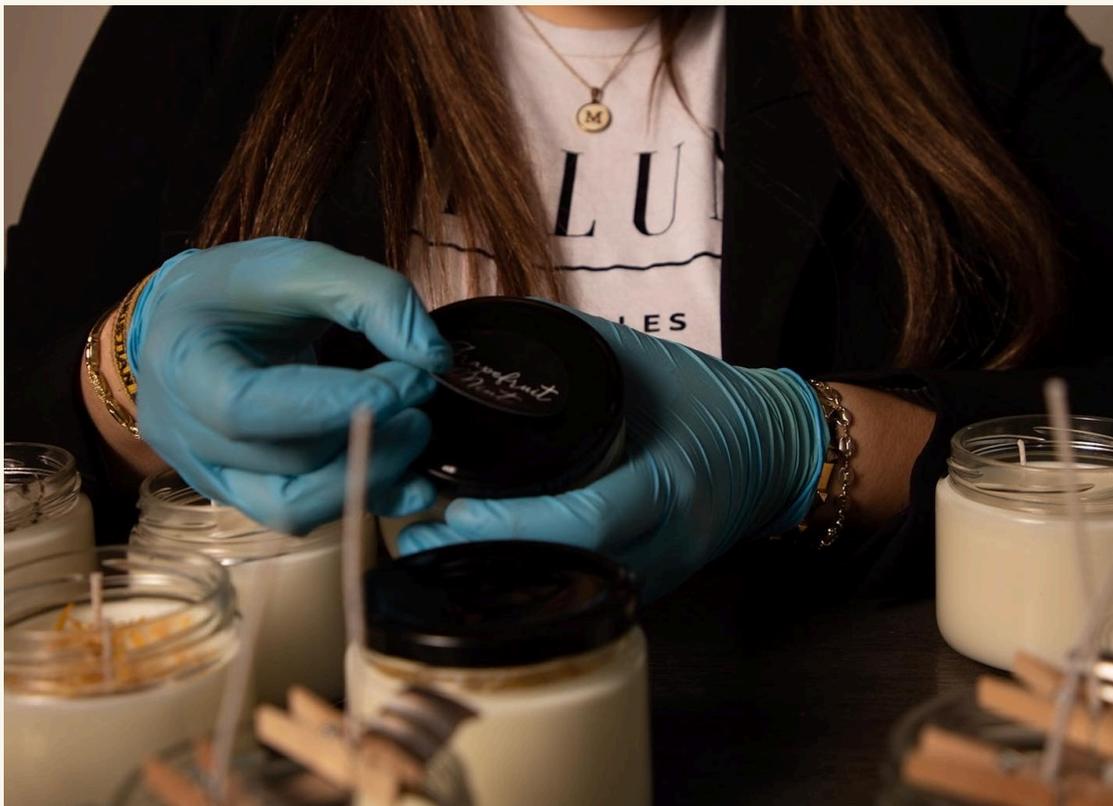
Now, Di Luna thrives with six women on the team, including Cortes’s mother and sister. Cortes remains focused on fostering creativity, empowering her team, and sharing Tucson’s culture through scent.

Looking ahead, Cortes hopes to expand Di Luna beyond Tucson and Arizona. She has already traveled to Chicago and Denver, taking candles and business cards to local shops to explore potential partnerships.

“Selling out of state is tricky because people cannot smell the candles in person, but we are prepared,” she said. “When the time comes, we will have the staff and structure to meet the demand.”

Through her candles, workshops, and markets, Cortes says she hopes to capture more than fragrance, but also memories, culture, and connection. Each product is a small flame with a larger story of resilience, creativity, and community.

“Having a team of all women, where we get excited about our work and feel safe, that is really special,” she said. “I feel blessed every day.”



Maria's Top 5

Jun Dynasty Chinese Restaurant – Her favorite Chinese restaurant in Tucson, Cortes is a fan of the chili oil dumplings, sesame chicken, and the Hong Kong iced lemon tea.

Le Buzz Caffe – A brunch hotspot that Cortes visits for its pastries, seasonal specials, and a standout frozen chai, that's frequented by cyclists and locals alike.

Fourth Avenue – A favorite street to walk around, explore unique shops, and enjoy the local vibe. Cortes' favorite shops include Antigone Books, Pop Cycle, and Hippie Gypsy, and stopping by The Boxyard for a beer.

Tucson Hop Shop – Cortes enjoys going here for a craft beer or glass or wine, to play cards, and grab pizza from Ciao Down Pizza next door. The Bun Bun Vending machine, filled with local goodies and blind dates with a book, makes it even more special.

Locale Neighborhood Italian – A go-to for special occasions like birthdays. She's a fan of the mushroom fusilli pasta, the relaxed atmosphere, and the patio setting, where fiery sunsets take center stage.



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