

BEST PLACE TO GET STRUNG UP

By JOHN CURRY

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(Illustration by Ronald Kurniawan)

With the advent of online music superstores and big-box retailers such as Guitar Center, musicians today have few places to look if they're inclined to deal directly with a knowledgeable craftsman — or any person, for that matter. And when it comes to instruments that are not customarily wielded by guitar heroes and teen idols, the hunt for a quality product and a satisfying experience gets even harder.

So, what to do if you're after a new set of strings for your charango or vihuela? Okay, maybe you can't shred on a harp, but have you been desperately seeking custom-gauge Manouche-Tone strings to fuel an obsession to "play like Django"?

In either case, the answer is go east, young shredders.

Margie Hernandez and her sons, Aaron and Jacob — along with Jose Becerra, "who is like a son to me," says Margie — are the owner/operators of Guadalupe Custom Strings in East Los Angeles. When creating these individually hand-wound strings, they work hard to serve the aesthetics, traditions and musical uniqueness of each instrument and the culture it represents.

The Hernandez family took over the business, originally located in Goleta, from Francisco Gonzalez (who played with the original lineup of Los Lobos) and moved it to East L.A. Francisco had developed his own technique for hand-winding strings, intended for use on a wide range of traditional Central and South American instruments. He passed the craft on to the Hernandez boys after Jacob had served a stint there as an apprentice while studying Chinese medicine in Santa Barbara.

Being musicians themselves (Jacob and Jose are percussionists, and Aaron is an MC doing spoken word with musical accompaniment), the boys put more than just skill into creating their products. They also add a love of music, knowledge of the instruments and, most of all, respect for the musicians who use them. And the end result sounds fabulous!

Guadalupe Custom Strings 418-A N. Ford Blvd., East L.A., (323) 981-7055