



- Customer Service**
- [Subscribe Now](#)
 - [Access account](#)
 - [About Us](#)

Today's Weather
Living Editor
News Sections
Weekly Sections
Featured
Birthdays
Community Guide
Today & Tomorrow
In Our Community
Multimedia
More News Sources

Wednesday, August 11, 2004

Past Issues - S | M | T | W | T | F | S

LIVING

Hispanic tastes fill neighborhoods

Sunday, August 8, 2004

Restaurants serve Mexican and Puerto Rican foods in city and suburbs

By JUDITH W. WINNE
Courier-Post Staff

On a recent afternoon, Symeon McIntosh of Willingboro devours a platter of chicken tacos and a cheese quesadilla at La Esperanza Mexican Restaurant in Lindenwold.

McIntosh, a 26-year-old record producer, had happily picked up a friend in Burlington Township to make a 50-mile round trip for a midday meal.

The voluminous menu at the Gibbsboro Road restaurant, whose exterior is painted a Sonoran sunset pink, is stuffed with such selections as grilled steak on fried plantains with egg and avocado, chicken in mole sauce, baked goat and vegetable fajitas.

"It's a little piece of Mexican-Americana, and it's authentic," says McIntosh.

Throughout South Jersey, Hispanic food - traditional or nouveau - is hotter than a jalapeno.

Hispanic restaurants - many Mexican, some Puerto Rican - dot the landscape. They have cropped up in places many Hispanics live and work, such as Camden, Pennsauken and Lindenwold. But they also line the streets and highways of other communities, as well - Collingswood, Berlin Township, Marlton and Washington Township, for example.

What can you expect to see? Anything and everything. Unlike all-purpose diners, for example, Hispanic restaurants vary greatly.

At the smaller spots in Camden and Pennsauken, non-Spanish speakers may have to point to items on menus. Some are helpfully printed with English, as well as Spanish, descriptions. There are typically few frills in these smaller eateries. Around the area

At Mexico Lindo in Camden, you can munch on a stomach-busting platter of chicken flautas for \$5 in a basic, luncheonette setting.

At Tortilla Press in Collingswood, which bills itself as "Mexican-influenced gourmet cuisine," the walls are painted in sherbet colors and the hardwood floors shine. Here, you can dine on pan-seared tuna in an ancho chili coating with a fresh pineapple and sun-dried chili salsa for \$19.50.

"I'm pretty sure you're not going to find that in Mexico, but it tastes like Mexico," says Mark Smith, the 44-year-old chef and co-owner. Anchoring the corner of Haddon and Collings avenues, Tortilla Press has helped fuel the borough's restaurant renaissance.

At La Hacienda Authentic Mexican Restaurant & Bakery in Pennsauken, Yolanda Babilonia digs into a pretty portion of chicken enchiladas with a cocoa-brown mole sauce.

"It was colorful, that was for sure," says the 29-year-old teacher and mother of two young boys. "And the presentation, that was very, very good. And the food was good. I did like it."

A side dish of beans and rice accompanies the meal. As for the wedge of cheese atop the rice, Babilonia calls it "a



AVI STEINHARDT/Courier-Post
Mark Smith, chef and co-owner of Tortilla Press in Collingswood, shows his sauteed chicken with cilantro cream sauce (left) and pan-seared tuna with fresh pineapple and sun-dried chili salsa dishes.

ADVERTISEMENT - CLICK TO ENLARGE OR VISIT WEBSITE

Featured Advertisers

Advertise with us!

D
Auto I
Const
Coups
End c
(
Subsc
Custc
About
Conta
Adver
Couri
Jobs
Read
Jobs
Subm
Subm

Other Gannett papers
USA Today
Space.com
The Wire (AP)

nice touch."

Babilonia and I recently visited several restaurants to see and sample some flavors of Hispanic restaurants.

In Camden, at Mexico Lindo on Federal Street, we order chicken flautas and a mozzarella quesadilla, both decent meals - and jumbo portions. Babilonia enjoys the pico de gallo ("the tomatoes are fresh"), as well as a mango milkshake.

The Pennsauken/Camden area is speckled with Hispanic eateries, many of them small, family-run places with Puerto Rican food items in glass cases.

"If you go down Federal and Westfield and River Road, you can't miss a restaurant," says Babilonia, a Pennsauken resident whose family is originally from Puerto Rico.

At L&F Catering & Restaurant on River Road, we see morcilla, Puerto Rican sausage, or intestines. Babilonia wrinkles her nose. Fried pigskin, meat pies, roasted chicken and ribs are among the options.

On Westfield Avenue, Latinos Bakery and Restaurant serves pig skin, meat pies, flan and a traditional dish - fried plantains stuffed with beef and other savory items.

Jaritza's on Federal Street features a long menu with goat stew, oxtail, pig feet, tripe and pork chops.

Babilonia says many traditional foods are mostly off limits for her now.

"I'm on Weight Watchers, so I can't eat fried stuff," she says.

At San Miguel in Washington Township, chef and co-owner Miguel Padilla says he strives to introduce his customers to the more complicated flavors of his native Mexico.

Padilla cites his flounder dish, a stuffed-with-crab meat fish that sits atop a poblano pepper sauce.

"My idea is to bring the high end of our cuisine of Mexico (to customers)," says the 33-year-old chef. Refined preferences

At Los Amigos in Berlin Township, chef and co-owner Curt Taylor has seen the sophistication of Mexican cuisine emerge during nearly 30 years in the business.

He describes a grilled tuna with an intricate sauce of coconut and chili habanero with an accompaniment of shrimp risotto, hardly the starch you'd expect to see in a Mexican restaurant. Taylor's risotto is served with black beans and chilies.

"This is happening all 'round the world," he says. "This is a fusion thing that's happening."

At Tortilla Press, Sarah Wilson, a summer intern at the newspaper, and I make lunch selections. Wilson bites into a yummy torta, a chicken breast sandwich with chipotle mayonnaise and a goodly portion of avocado. I dig into the cumin- and chili-marinated Aztec salad, a dish topped with roasted peppers and nuggets of cheese.

We gobble every morsel.

Smith says Mexican cuisine has clearly evolved.

"Everything is not necessarily on a tortilla anymore," says the chef.

Take bites of cuisines around area

Here are some of the restaurants in South Jersey with south-of-the-border cuisines, so you may begin exploring Latin flavors.

- El Azteca Mexican Restaurant. 1155 N. Route 73, Mount Laurel. 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday, noon to 10 p.m. Saturday, noon to 9 p.m. Sunday. (856) 914-9302.
- Jaritza's Restaurant. 2206 Federal St., Camden. Puerto Rican-style food. 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week. (856) 225-1527.
- L&F Catering & Restaurant Inc. 2401 River Road, Camden. Describes itself as "home of the best Puerto Rican food." 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. (856) 342-8707.

- La Esperanza Mexican Restaurant. 40 E. Gibbsboro Road, Lindenwold. 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday. (856) 782-7114. www.laesperanzarestaurant.com.
- La Hacienda Authentic Mexican Restaurant & Bakery. 5708 Westfield Ave., Pennsauken. 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. (856) 488-0315.
- Latinos Bakery and Restaurant. 3220 Westfield Ave., Camden. 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. (856) 963-0400.
- Lola's Mexican Food. 4 White Horse Pike., Lindenwold. 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week. (856) 783-3185.
- Los Amigos. 461 Route 73 N., Berlin Township. 5 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 5 to 11 p.m. Friday, 3 to 11 p.m. Saturday, 4 to 9 p.m. Sunday. (856) 767-5247.
- Macho Taco. 200 Tuckerton Road, Medford. 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. (856) 797-8226.
- Mexican Food Factory. Route 70 and Cropwell Road, Marlton. 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday and Sunday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. (856) 983-9222.
- Mexico Lindo. 3523 Federal St., Camden. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday through Wednesday. (856) 365-9004.
- Ramon's Cafe. 65 High St., Mount Holly. Dominican Republic-style menu. 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday. (609) 267-3488.
- San Lucas II Tierra Mexicana. 115 S. Black Horse Pike, Bellmawr. 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. (856) 931-0152.
- San Miguel. 373 Egg Harbor Road, Washington Township. 4:30 to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 4:30 to 10 p.m. Friday, 3:30 to 10 p.m. Saturday, 3 to 7 p.m. Sunday. (856) 582-1444.
- Tortilla Press. 703 Haddon Ave., Collingswood. 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday. (856) 869-3345. Hispanic fare setting trends

South-of-the-border cuisine has gone mainstream. How can we tell?

- At the recent Pillsbury Bake-Off, one of the nation's oldest and most famous cooking contests, Inside-Out Taco Salad Wrap took the \$10,000 prize in the Dinner Made Easy category.
- Tacos, an oddity decades ago, are now so ubiquitous they are sold nearly everywhere in chain restaurants and school cafeterias, providing children with an alternative to pizza and peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches.
- On a recent week, the Food Network, the popular channel for all things culinary, listed more than 400 recipes for Mexican food on its Web site. Rachaelcq Ray's \$40 a Day, a show on dining out on the cheap in various cities, has featured such dishes as Baja fish tacos and roast corn, asparagus and Maine crab quesadilla.
- Even the most traditional supermarkets stock their shelves with Latin flavors and ingredients, such as cilantro, chili peppers, limes and avocados.

Reach Judith W. Winne at (856) 486-2441 or jwinne@courierpostonline.com

[Print Friendly Version](#) / [Email this story to a friend](#)

Copyright 2004 Courier-Post. Use of this site signifies your agreement to the [Terms of Service](#) (updated December, 2002).
For questions, comments, or problems [contact us](#).

The Courier-Post is a part of [Gannett Co. Inc.](#), parent company of [USA Today](#).