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LIVING

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Family serves up Mexican food at Lindenwold restaurant

By JUDITH W. WINNE
Courier-Post Staff

At La Esperanza, the Mexican-American restaurant in Lindenwold, cook Maricela Cordova hoists a mortar, wields a pestle and concocts a zesty blend of jalapenos, tomatoes, cilantro, salt and lemon juice.

She creates the zesty dip from scratch.

"That's the real way to do salsa," says Maricela's brother, Alejandro.

Alejandro says the 4-month-old restaurant, the site of a former beauty shop, offers food unlike that from other north-of-the-border Mexican eateries.

"It's traditional," says Alejandro. "It's homemade. It's not something that comes out of a box. Most of our dishes are made from scratch. We prepare everything. Everything is fresh."

On Saturday night, the Cordova family of Stratford and their customers will celebrate Cinco de Mayo with salsa and other freshly made antojitos, or appetizers, in an outdoor, picnic setting.

"Appetizers are traditional on the holiday," says Alejandro. "You just eat and pick."

The holiday marks a significant day in Mexican history. On the May 5, 1862, the Mexican Army fought victoriously against the French at the Battle of Puebla. The Mexicans won the battle and lost the war, but the battle came to represent a symbol of Mexican unity and patriotism.

The Cordovas, who come, coincidentally, from the state of Puebla, arrived in South Jersey from different directions. The 30-year-old Alejandro, who went to college



CARLOS J. ORTIZ/Courier-Post
Alejandro Cordova serves up nachitos (left) and tortillas at his family's Mexican restaurant.

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in upstate New York, works as a network computer engineer for Cigna in Voorhees. About a year ago, he began to notice more Spanish-speaking people, particularly seasonal workers, in the area. He spotted a few Spanish groceries.

And Alejandro had an idea. His parents and two sisters, who were working in the restaurant business in New York, could come down here and open their own restaurant.

And so they did. The Cordovas dubbed the place Esperanza, Spanish for hope.

"I joke around and say this is the retirement plan for my father and mother," Alejandro says.

In addition to cook Maricela, father Saul handles the kitchen prep, slicing and dicing. Sister Claudia juggles waitressing chores. (There are three other siblings, one in college, one in New York and another in Mexico.)

At the Gibbsboro Road restaurant, just off the White Horse Pike, diners can sink their teeth into a number of antojitos, including:

- Tortillas with beans and beef or chicken (sopes).
- Fried corn tortillas filled with chicken and served with lettuce, guacamole and sour cream (taquitos fritos)
- Crispy tortillas with beans, lettuce, tomato, sour cream and cheese or meat (tostadas).

Some menu items, like quesadillas, may be familiar to north-of-the border tastes. Others, like goat stew (cabrito guisado), tortilla with fried pork skin (pupusas de chicharron) and a salad's boiled-until-tender prickly cactus leaves (ensalada de Nopalitos) may be less well known to American palates.

Jim Spitler of Clementon, a fan of La Esperanza, says the restaurant was recommended to him by a friend who is a former gourmet chef. He says the cuisine brings back memories of a childhood in El Paso, Texas.

"It was wonderful," says Spitler, who adores the beef fajitas and pork stew. "The food's delicious."

Jill Blatcher of Collingswood, no fan of chain-style Mexican food, accompanied a Mexican-American friend to La Esperanza and was won over to authentic-style cooking.

"I was really surprised, because I liked the dishes they had," says Blatcher, who praises the chicken quesadillas and fajitas, the staff's friendliness and the modest prices.

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Alejandro concedes that a few menu items didn't go over. Ribs, tomato soup and baked chicken fell as flat as burned flan - perhaps because customers were looking for more authentic fare.

The menu offers Spanish, as well as English descriptions, except for such universally known phrases as Pepsi and kid-friendly cheeseburgers.

Cordova helps out at the restaurant. He went to college in upstate New York and is thoroughly fluent in English. His relatives speak a halting English, but Alejandro says they give it an enthusiastic try.

La Esperanza's 24-seat dining room features colorful serapes on the wall. Off the stairway is a nook with a makeshift shrine. There, in front of a religious statuary, Alejandro's mother has placed a candle on a can of Goya tomato paste.

Alejandro says the 12th of December, a holy day honoring Mexico's Virgin de Guadalupe, is a far bigger holiday than the 5th of May.

"Our society," he says, "is very religion- oriented."

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This recipe is from Cordova.

Guacamole

2 avocados
1 small onion, finely chopped
1 clove garlic, minced
1 ripe tomato, chopped
1 lime, juiced
Salt and pepper to taste

Peel and mash avocados in a medium serving bowl. Stir in onion, garlic, tomato, some lime juice, salt and pepper. Adjust seasoning with additional lime juice, salt and pepper. Enjoy with tortilla chips.

Where to celebrate

Among the local restaurants hosting special Cinco de Mayo festivities are:

Los Amigos Restaurant, Route 73 and Franklin Avenue, Berlin Township. Offers pig roast, mole poblano and other traditional foods Sunday, plus deejay and outdoor dining. Call (856) 767-5216.

Don Pablo's Mexican Kitchen, 1860 Deptford Center Road, Deptford. Special drink prices Friday, Saturday and Sunday, live entertainment, and on Sunday, a special family celebration, including pinatas, giveaways, etc. Call (856) 374-3841.

Don Pablo's Mexican Kitchen, 1361 Nixon Dr., Mount Laurel. Special drink prices, pinatas, raffles Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Call (856) 642-6160.

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