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## From pizza to cactus: S.J. diet turns exotic

By JIM WALSH  
 Courier-Post Staff

Hungry for a taste of South Jersey?

Local restaurateurs can recommend all sorts of local staples — like pizza and pasta dishes, cheesesteaks and Chinese food. But more and more, they say, the region's menu is dishing up exotic fare — like nopalitos, or boiled cactus.

Ahhhh, the spice of life

"The palate of the people in South Jersey, it has become a little more open," observes Saul Cordova, whose family-run restaurant, La Esperanza in Lindenwold, is expanding to meet demand for Mexican fare, including the cactus salad.

"The area is becoming diverse," he says, noting an upsurge in new eateries that offer authentic versions of exotic fare.

"It's good to have a little bit of everything," Cordova says.

Still, traditional tastes remain strong.

"South Jersey has a lot of Italian, a lot of good Italian (restaurants)," notes Cordova. "Steakhouses are big, too."

"The most popular dish has to be either pasta or steak," says Dave Vitarelli, who has run Vitarelli's Restaurant in Cherry Hill for 32 years.

"Pizza still flies out of here," adds Vitarelli, who notes that lasagna and baked ziti are staples of the buffet lines.

Not everyone aims at a broad market, however.

Getting crabby

Robert Sliowski recently opened the fifth South Jersey outlet, in Mount Laurel, for his Bobby Chez Seafood chain. The take-out business now sells some 25,000 crabcakes a week. Taste buds can take a vacation at Jersey Shore resorts, where boardwalk shops draw crowds with funnel cake, cotton candy, macaroons — and plenty of pizza.

Another category is diner food — like snapper soup, rice pudding and breakfast at any hour.

But even those favorites are evolving, says Peggy Grossmick, general manager of Silver Diner in Cherry Hill.

"The big thing for us is burgers," says Grossmick, whose menu offers seven versions of the sandwich. "People's tastes are all over the place. "When we opened up (three years ago), we had to explain a lot of our dishes," says Cordova, noting local patrons seemed unfamiliar with entrees like chiles rellenos de queso, or roasted peppers filled with cheese.

"Now, it's like there's a little network where people tell their friends. We get people with the same kind of taste buds," says Cordova, whose restaurant is more than tripling in size, to about 70 seats.



Burrito, ceviche and guacamole are among the fare with Maricela Cordova, and her brother, Saul, in their family Restaurant La Esperanza, Mexican Restaurant in Lindenwold. Our continuing proclivity for cheesesteaks is reflected at left in hats created by Runnemed's Rasta Imposta crew.

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