

Taquerias grilling for health

By VÍCTOR ALMAZÁN
The Salinas Californian

Santiago Contreras encourages customers at his east Salinas taquería to choose "frijoles de la olla" - whole beans - instead of fried beans. With such small changes in his business, he said, he's making a big contribution to efforts to improve Salinas residents' health.

"We don't tell people what to eat, we just offer different options," said Contreras, owner of Mi Ranchito Taquería, 45 S. Sanborn Road. He says he was already selling healthful dishes when he met Elán García, who works with the Steps to a Healthier Salinas program.

"Some of my clients are diabetics, and they ask for good food," Contreras said. The program helped him by producing photographs to promote his dishes.

"She (García) was just who I needed," Contreras said.

Steps to a Healthier Salinas is a program of the Monterey County Health Department that promotes eating healthful foods and doing more physical activity as a way of preventing diabetes, obesity and asthma. Funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Steps is working in 40 cities in the nation, Salinas among them.

"We work in schools, churches, businesses," García said. "We are trying to reach people on different levels."

The program is working with taquerías in east Salinas to address two related health problems: bad nutrition and tobacco use. About 32 taquerías are participating, García said.

Taquerías are a kind of fast-food restaurant, she said. And they have characteristics that make them easily accessible to the program.

"They are not expensive, use fresh ingredients, sell home-made food, and are flexible," García said.

The taquerías in the program are displaying and distributing brochures to make people aware of the target diseases.

Mi Ranchito Taquería distributes the brochure titled "Could you be at risk for diabetes?" and has a sticker on its front door banning smoking within 20 feet of all entryways and windows. "Secondhand smoking is very dangerous," García said.

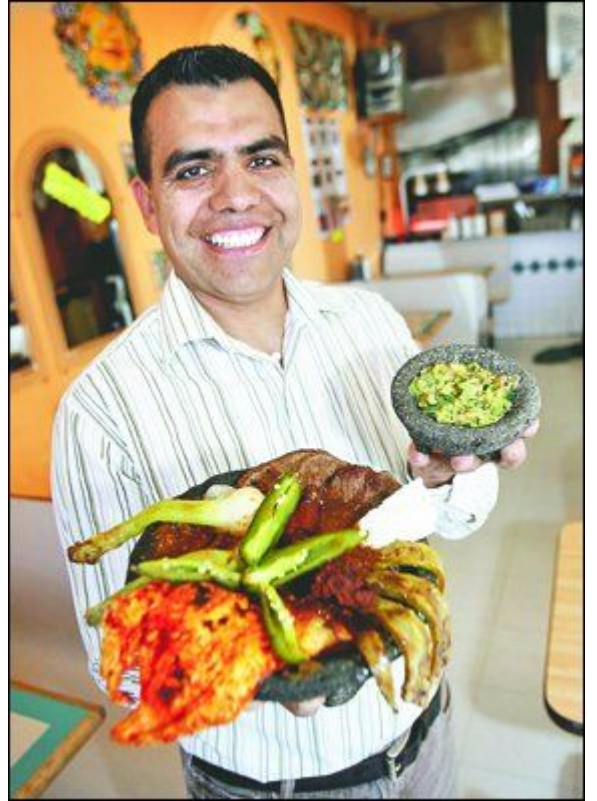
The changes in the menu are small but noteworthy. Mi Ranchito now offers whole-wheat tortillas, more balanced dishes (with more vegetables and less rice, beans and meat), freshly squeezed juices, a salsa bar with more vegetables, including *nopalitos* (tender cactus) salad, and *filete a la plancha* (broiled fillet). French fries are available only by request.

"I would like for people to eat the way I eat," Contreras said. The experiment appears to be working: Francisco Aguilar works in the area and visits Mi Ranchito twice a day to have breakfast and lunch. He thinks the idea offering healthy food is important.

"So one doesn't become like this," Aguilar said, drawing an imaginary round belly on his stomach.

The main thing is to give clients the power to choose, García said. "People should ask for healthy food," he said.

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RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Santiago Contreras, owner of Mi Ranchito Taqueria, holds a platter of grilled food and a 'molcajete' of green salsa on Monday.

TO GET INVOLVED

To participate in the Steps to a Healthier Salinas taquerías program, contact Elán García at 755-4625