

## Latino diets get a makeover

By DAVE NORDSTRAND  
The Salinas Californian

In their village in Mexico, Esther Marshman's family - she was one of 11 brothers and sisters - lived frugally but ate healthy foods.

"We didn't have much money," said Marshman, who owns Ole Taqueria and Grill, 1927 Natividad Road in Salinas. "We couldn't afford much meat."

Yet when watermelon, beans and other fruits and vegetables arrived on the kitchen table, they came fresh cut from the vine and with the sun's warmth rising from their core.

Only when Marshman moved to the United States, only when she drifted from that traditional village diet, did she develop diabetes.

That is why today her taqueria menu carries such healthy options as "Grandma's Beans" - whole Peruvian beans, bean broth, cabbage, cactus, pico de gallo and avocado.

Marshman's menu, which is mostly traditional Mexican fare made from fresh ingredients, is but one indicator of what amounts to an aggressive local and national campaign to get many Latinos to include healthier foods from their natives diets.

"I'm diabetic, and I have to be on a special diet," Marshman said. "So I figure there are many others like me."

"Also, I hope I can help people from getting diabetes."

The effort also includes non-profits such as the Boston-based Oldways Preservation Trust and Latino Nutrition Coalition, which on May 2 posted online an updated version of its 1996 Latin American Diet Pyramid. (Oldways is the umbrella group for the coalition.)

The aim is to help Latinos, and all Americans, protect their bodies from the ravages of serious, diet-related illnesses.

Scientific evidence, for example, shows that being overweight or being obese is a factor in diabetes, cancer, stroke, heart disease and other ailments.

As one way to counter such threats, the Latino Nutrition Coalition offers its pyramid and a 16-page guide to shopping for healthier foods.

The guide and pyramid tout the staples of traditional Latin-American cooking, such as grains and tubers, as the road, the "Cambio Magico," to a healthier body.

The effort to shift diet choices stems from alarming statistics about weight gain, especially in the Latino population.

Up to 69 percent of Latinos in California, for example, are overweight or obese, a 2003 state Department of Health Services survey shows.

A non-profit based in Watsonville and funded, in part, by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Latino 5 A Day is also focused on that excessive weight problem.

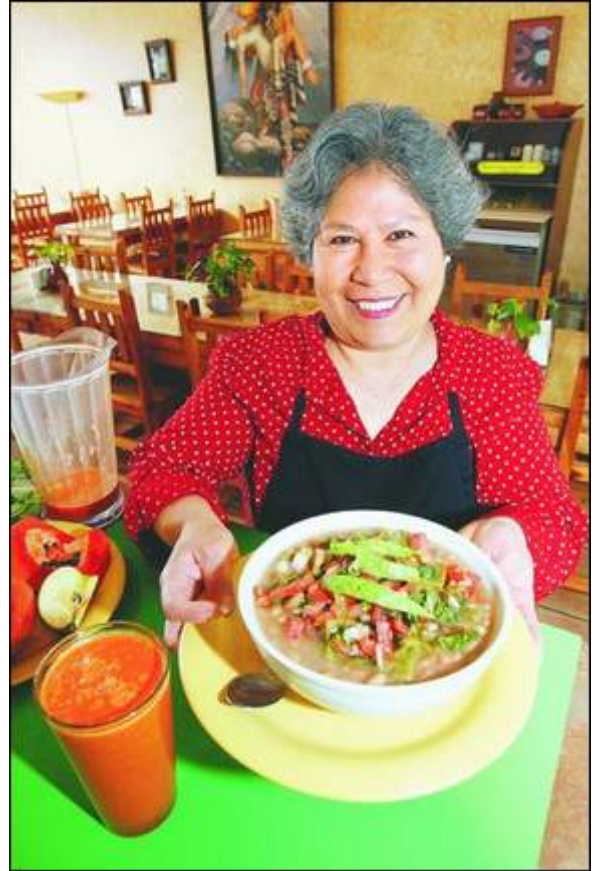
Making healthy diet choices is more complex than simply deciding to put blueberries and non-fat soy milk on Cheerios, said Gabriela Lopez Chavez, coordinator for Latino 5 A Day.

The higher cost for those foods is one factor.

"Also, many Latinos in California don't live within walking distance of a grocery store selling high quality and affordable fruits and vegetables," she said.

And poorer families may not have the benefit of safe recreation areas in which to exercise near their homes, Chavez said.

Observers, meanwhile, are beginning to understand why the waistband of



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Esther Marshman, owner of Ole Taqueria & Grill, offers healthy choices at her Mexican eatery. Marshman showcases a bowl of her 'Grandma's Beans,' whole Peruvian beans in their own broth with cabbage, nopales, pico de gallo and avocado. Also pictured is a glass of her fresh-squeezed juice.

### TO GET INVOLVED

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

many Latinos expands.

Once they enter America, many Latinos abandon the healthier diets of their native regions. They switch to greasy fries, super-sized vats of carbonated sodas and other cheap, but fat-, salt- and sugar-laden fast foods, Chavez and others said.

Also, Mexican foods as prepared in the United States are often less healthy than those same foods in Mexico, Marshman said.

"A lot of food in (U.S.) restaurants may look and taste Mexican, but it's made out of ingredients that come in packages and cans," she said. "It's processed."

Yet simple changes can make the diet healthier, she said. Substitute corn tortillas for flour tortillas, for example. Choose whole beans over fattier, refried ones.

Steps to a Healthier Salinas works with taquerias and many others to promote healthier menu choices. Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Steps is part of a national program focusing on prevention of diabetes, obesity and asthma.

"If people shifted to french fries, there's no reason they can't shift back to fruits and vegetables and corn tortillas and natural juices," Susan Stuart, Steps community coordinator, said.

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