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### Mexico Meets India

Cocina Linda owner adds fusion specials to her daily menu

July 9, 2008 By Karla Sluis | Herald Staff Writer

What happens when a Mexican cook combines recipes with a friend from India who was raised in Africa and trained in England?

Cocina Linda's tacos are some of Linda Illsley's new Mexican-Indian fusion specials, clockwise from the beans: "Sabzi" mixture of carrots, potatoes and greens; roasted eggplant with tomato, cilantro and onion; and curried potatoes.

"Con-fusion" food.

That's what Linda Illsley, owner of Cocina Linda in Durango, jokingly calls her new blend of Mexican and Indian cuisine.

She is introducing the food in a couple of specials every day, in addition to her regular menu of Mexican food. The restaurant is located at 309 W. College Drive, in the Albertsons parking lot, behind Liquor World.

"The concept is to take proper Indian spices and combine them with Mexican ideas and flavors," said Illsley.

The result is the familiar textures of tamales and tacos with an unexpected depth of flavor, such as the Sabzi Quesadillas (\$9.75). The corn tortillas are filled with roasted potatoes and carrots, spiced spinach and a sprinkling of Oaxaca cheese.

Other new creations include Pork & Poblano Chile Curried Tacos (\$10.25), Chicken Tikka with a curry sauce and rice, and margaritas flavored with tamarind (\$4) or mango and chile (\$6).

Illsley gives the beef tamale an exotic makeover with garam masala - a "hot mixture" of spices - folded into the moist, homemade masa.

The new menu creations are spicy, but not hot. A searing heat is not ideal in a good curry, Illsley said. "The goal is that no one flavor dominates the others."

Although authentic Mexican food is her passion, Illsley said she enjoys a good culinary adventure. She was inspired by Jeedi Bassan, the friend from India, who is co-creating the recipes with her.

The two friends have a long history linked by food. They met while working at a whole-food co-op in England in the late '70s. Illsley was a baker, and Bassan was teaching classes in the shop's whole-foods education center. Their connecting force was Bassan's

late mother, Manohar Kaur, who exposed Illsley to Indian food culture and treated her as one of the family.

"No one in my family really likes to cook," said Bassan. "So this is my way of passing on my mother's recipes."

There are no shortcuts in the food preparation. Masa takes two days to make, starting with grinding the corn by hand, and Bassan says it takes time to cook good Indian food. But Illsley said from her years in the restaurant business, she knows how to adapt the recipes to her take-out business.

"It's slow food, served fast," she said. "It's stupid from a business point of view, but there's no comparison for things like grinding your own corn."

Some people will be confused by a Mexican-Indian blend, said Illsley, who thinks that 90 percent of people veer to familiar tastes in food. But she's confident that her fusion food will appeal to open-minded customers.

"You can follow your same old routine, but when the world is so full of possibilities, why not try something new?"