

What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

Reprinted from the May 9, 2012, issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper

Six Ethnic Restaurants: Small But Proud

by Pat Tanner

Lambertville: El Tule

The Egovil family emigrated from Peru 20 years ago, but when they opened El Tule in February 2011, they offered what they thought most people would want: Mexican food. They still do, but in short order added the fare of their homeland as well.

Jack Egovil, who is general manager of an enterprise that includes his mother, Carmen, father Fausto, siblings Silvia and Mechelle, and brother-in-law, Said Anguino, explained how the restaurant came into being. "My family used to go to church in Lambertville and through that came to know the town," he says. "My mom has always had a thing for cooking. One day we heard that a space that had been restaurants — first, 49 North Main and then a taqueria for a year — that the guy wanted to sell. We started with Mexican and saw the opportunity to offer Peruvian. Little by little, we tested to see how people would respond." He adds that the timing was right, since Peruvian cuisine — with its ceviches, many varieties of indigenous potatoes and chile peppers, quinoa, and complex culinary tradition going back to the Incas — seems to be having its moment in the spotlight.

As for the location, Egovil points out, "Lambertville is rich in ethnic restaurants of every variety and we find this appealing. We are very taken by how welcoming everyone in town is, and we're so happy that people have responded to us." Many of El Tule's regulars became fans of the cuisine on their travels to Peru. Until now, they have had to travel to New York or far-flung corners of New Jersey to find it. "Some drive two hours just to try our food," he says. "A lot of others are what I would call 'foodies' who are interested in whatever's new."

One of the factors Egovil thinks adds to the restaurant's popularity is, as he says, "you can come and have a few tacos, or you can impress a date with a fabulous meal." Everything on the Mexican side of the menu is traditional. "My older sister, Mechelle, is married to a Mexican," he goes on. "Her husband, Said Anguino, is our Mexican cook, so everything on that side of the menu is authentic. Me, before now my experience with Mexican food was really Tex-Mex, which I didn't care for. Too heavy, greasy. Said's is authentic Mexican, which is neither."

As for the Peruvian offerings, these are the bailiwick of his mother, Carmen, and they combine the traditional with modern twists. Chief among these are a selection of ceviches, considered the national dish of Peru, but also classic potato dishes like papas rellenas and papas a la Huancaína, and a host of traditional soups, stews, and grilled meat and seafood dishes.

"Everything on our menu is what you'd be served in Lima today," Egovil says. "Peru is very rich when it comes to food. There are different styles from the coast, the Andes, and the tropical forests. My mom's been returning to Peru to check out things and to take classes." He adds that other hallmarks of Peruvian cuisine are that "it's very fresh and very nutritious, while being delicious." Hence, everything is made a la minute. As if that's not enough, the Egovils continue to innovate. "Every three weeks we add new things," he says. "Before we decide to add a dish to the menu, we all try it and offer our opinions."

For such a small, casual place, the care taken with presentation is startling. An Inca-style quinoa salad, for example, comes on a stylish white porcelain rectangle with edges that curl upward. The salad is formed into a precise pyramid and is artfully accompanied by a colorful tangle of baby lettuce with tiny boiled potatoes and a dollop of cream. "My mom is pretty much an artist when it comes to presenting the food," says her proud son.

The Egovils want their customers to go beyond simple enjoyment of their food. "I want people to have a cultural experience when they come here," Jack Egovil says. "We're proud of our family's roots." So the deep-orange walls are decked out with traditional artifacts, and under each glass-topped table is a brightly colored woven fabric of traditional design. Each of the tapestries on the wall is from a different area of Peru. "People ask about them and I like it when they do," Egovil says, "that way they can experience our culture, too." He was 16 when his family came to the U.S. in 1992, and he returns there often.

The family is from Lima, although mom Carmen's family is from northern Peru. Jack Egovil is currently working on his MBA and also works for the Bucks County Department of Health. Each evening he goes over the restaurant's receipts, and reports that the split between Mexican and Peruvian food served is 50-50. "Peruvian is what attracts people to the restaurant. But you can't believe the amount of tacos we sell by the end of the night," he says with a laugh. At this point, El Tule is so popular that reservations are strongly recommended on weekends to dine at this intimate place, which seats 35 inside and 25 to 30 on the patio.

Still, Jack Egovil says, launching and running a restaurant has been a roller coaster ride. "It's a lot of hard work, but that makes us want to innovate even more." The family completely redid the space when they took it over at the end of 2010, and another renovation — the installation of a kitchen ventilation hood — is just about finished. The restaurant has been operating on weekends only on a special temporary permit, and is scheduled to return to normal operations on May 9. (Calling ahead to confirm is highly recommended.)

El Tule Authentic Mexican and Peruvian Restaurant, 49 North Main Street, Lambertville, 609-773-0007. www.eltulerestaurant.com