

# Authentic Mexican food finds a home in Stafford

By JULIAN WILLIS

Correspondent

Set against the tall reeds and green marshland of East Bay Avenue sits a Gulf gas station. To the left of the gas pumps, tucked inside the Gulf Express convenience store, you will find the culinary jewel that is El Jose.

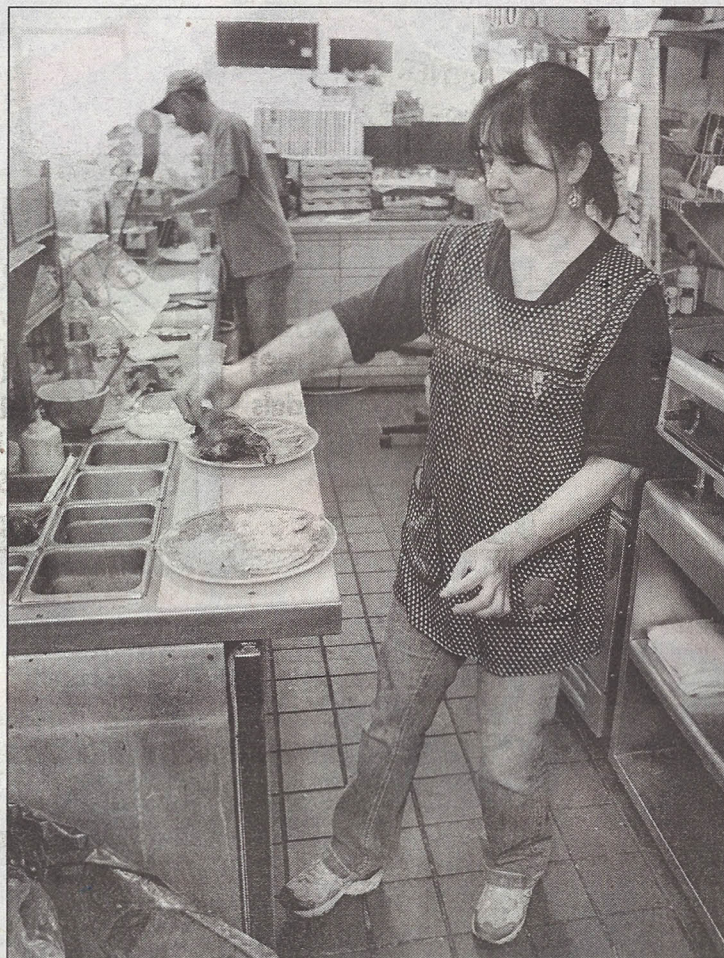
A take-out establishment owned by husband and wife Jorge and Elsa Salazar, El Jose has quietly been producing some of the finest Mexican cuisine in New Jersey in the most unlikely of locations. Some of the best food, especially when it comes to ethnic cuisine, is made at home, and El Jose's dishes, despite being prepared in a commercial kitchen within a bodega, is reminiscent of how enchiladas, tacos and tamales might taste if you were eating them in the south of Mexico.

## How it all began

Elsa Salazar, who was born in the mountainous region of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, was raised by a family of cooks (her brother Romeo Robles manages the Tuckerton Beach Grille). She and Jorge married in 1983 and traveled to Long Beach Island on their honeymoon to visit relatives. Within a year, they, too, had moved to the island, where they've raised three children and lived ever since.

After relocating to Beach Haven and dealing with the newfound distance from her immediate family, Elsa became interested in the cuisine of her birthplace.

"My mother and sisters all have restaurants in Mexico," she said. "When I really began cooking in 1985, I started asking my mother and aunt for help. Eventually, my aunt began to say, 'I'm



**Elsa Salazar prepares food at her Mexican restaurant. In the background is her husband and co-owner, Jorge.**

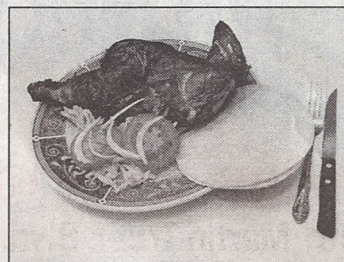
the teacher and you are the student, but now the student is doing a better job than the teacher.'"

Elsa, according to Jorge, has a talent for improving and tweaking family recipes, creating fresh and memorable dishes. This commitment to what she calls "authentic, homemade Mexican" is not without its challenges. As with most home-cooked meals, the details make the dish, and in the best Mexican cooking, those details require significant labor.

In addition to managing the Gulf gas station and their business, Jorge Salazar is the primary food prep.

"Everything here is made from scratch, nothing is pre-made," Jorge remarked. "Our half chicken, for example, is marinated for two days to bring out the flavor."

He showed off a vat of three different types of peppers soaking in garlic, salt, pepper and a few secret ingredients, awaiting use in El Jose's tamales. Even the refried beans, which accom-



**Marinated half chicken is one of the dishes served at El Jose in Stafford.**

(STAFF PHOTOS: TIM MCCARTHY)

pany entrees alongside brown Mexican rice, are hand-mashed by Jorge on a daily basis.

And then there are the difficulties of sourcing the spices and ingredients that are integral to true Mexican cooking. Back in 2004, when the Salazars opened El Jose, this meant a regular two-hour drive to a specialty Mexican food distributor in Passaic County. The company eventually decided to deliver to Stafford.

## Making their mark

The authenticity of the restaurant's food has led to devoted customers, the Salazars believe.

"That's why we've been getting busier and busier," Elsa said. "It's word of mouth. Every day, we have two or three people who come in and say, 'My friend told me you have the best food.' People are more familiar with real Mexican these days, and they have an idea of how authentic Mexican should taste."

Douglas Buchan, owner of the Sur La Plage apparel store in Beach Haven, is a longtime El Jose regular and has been a fan of Elsa's cooking for years. He's more than willing to make the drive over the bridge for the marinated half-chicken and remarked that the salsa verde — a green salsa made from tomatil-

los, onions, chile peppers and cilantro — "is to die for."

Jim Tily, another frequent customer and self-confessed foodie who summers in Loveladies, says El Jose is the best authentic Mexican food he has found.

"I found El Jose last October. I heard about it from a friend at work in Philly who grew up in Manahawkin. She told me that when she drives back to the area to see her parents, her first stop is El Jose, even before she says hello to mom and dad," Tily said. "You would never think of pulling into that location for great food, but it's the best take-out and great for a family dinner. When you see cars and trucks lined up at the Gulf, they're not there getting gas."

## EL JOSE

**Location:** 980 East Bay Ave. in the Manahawkin section of Stafford.

**Phone number:** To call ahead for large take-out orders, call 609-597-5099.

**Atmosphere:** With a Mexican-infused bodega look and feel, in addition to the restaurant, El Jose carries specialty Mexican groceries and products, including Jarritos soda, spices and hand-made Mexican bread from Lynn's Bakery in Camden.

**Hours:** From 8 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays for take-out cuisine. The Gulf Express store is open until 8 p.m. in the summer for Mexican products.

**Price range:** El Jose's authentic dishes, such as enchiladas, tacos and chimichangas, start at \$7.95. Spicy baby-back ribs and marinated chicken are \$9.50. Breakfast burritos are \$3.45, Mexican sandwiches are \$5.95. ✨