

New Orleans in Eugene

LONGTIME EUGENE CHEF
JORGE NAVARRO STARTS
ANEW WITH FOOD TRUCK

BY DAEMION LEE

According to Jorge Navarro, everyone should go to New Orleans at least once. He traveled to the Louisiana hot spot when he turned 40, and soon after, started Café Navarro, which served New Orleans-inspired dishes in Eugene until 2001.

“I consider New Orleans-style food to be the real American culinary tradition,” Navarro says, explaining how the city’s famed Creole cuisine incorporates European, African, Native American and other influences, turning them into something new.

His new food truck, Navarro’s Latin Creole Kitchen, pulls its origins from a different American city — it’s influenced by the family meals Navarro ate as a kid in the Latino communities of East Los Angeles. But, he says, he still aspires to that same mentality, a New Orleans-style sense for the mixing of diverse traditions — hence “Creole.”

Or, as Navarro puts it, “The reason I went with ‘Creole’ is it allows me to cook anything I damn well want.”

That means this food truck has untraditional choices. Like *torta de jefe* — the boss’ sandwich — a combination of Cuban sandwich and *torta*, the Mexican sandwich. Or *mole-que* sauce, a mixture of mole sauce and barbeque sauce made with cashews, pumpkin seeds, garlic, molasses and four kinds of chilies. And then there are the Cuban pork sweet potato fries, with complex and surprisingly light flavors.

Navarro says he found inspiration for this latest culinary adventure while working with Latino immigrants. He served as executive director of Centro Latino Americano and later worked with Huerto de la Familia, a nonprofit that helps Latino families start gardens and launch small businesses.

He recalls how a Latina woman in one of his programs cultivated a Mexican squash plant in an alley where formerly there was trash. She made tortillas and black bean paste dribbled with *asiento*, which reminded Navarro of the food he grew up with.

It was a rediscovery of what he calls his “culinary cultural food identity,” the connection between food, family



CHEF JORGE NAVARRO AND LINE COOK JOSE PEREZ

and self-identity. It’s what keeps immigrants healthy, he says, at least as long as they keep cooking at home.

“I think food’s the center of the universe, culturally, politically, economically,” Navarro says.

And that’s what he is trying to capture with his Latin Creole Kitchen — traditional Latin American food, adapted to the unique mix of traditions in the U.S. It’s an alternative to corporate food and an attempt to create a truly American cuisine.

Navarro himself brings together many elements of the Eugene universe, if not the cosmic one. He made the trek north from East L.A. in 1973 as a musician with the band Mithrandir and that same year opened the first burrito stand at the Saturday Market. Later he gathered culinary expertise from Hilda Ward of Hilda’s Latin American Restaurant, a Whiteaker staple that closed in 2001.

These influences and more are part of the Latin Creole Kitchen, and Navarro brims with new ideas. The menu will grow in the future, he says — Middle Eastern influences might show up. He talks about finding the perfect corn variety for the Willamette Valley in order to produce all-local tortillas.

And plans are in the works to partner with ColdFire Brewing. “They’re invested in food,” Navarro says about the new brewery’s owners and adds that his food should go well with their European-style beers.

Navarro’s truck is hard to miss. He explains that his partner went to a workshop involving South American devil masks and made a watercolor of one of them. He decided to use it as the logo for his food truck. “Anyone who is offended by it probably won’t like our food anyway,” Navarro says.

Navarro’s Latin Creole Kitchen is open 5-9 pm Mondays at Oakshire Public House, 207 Madison Street. Check out its Facebook page for updates.

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DOLBADITAS WITH PICO DE GALLO
AND CHIPOTLE CREAM



SAVORY SEASONAL
SWEET POTATO SOUP



PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER