



Inti's 'now diet'

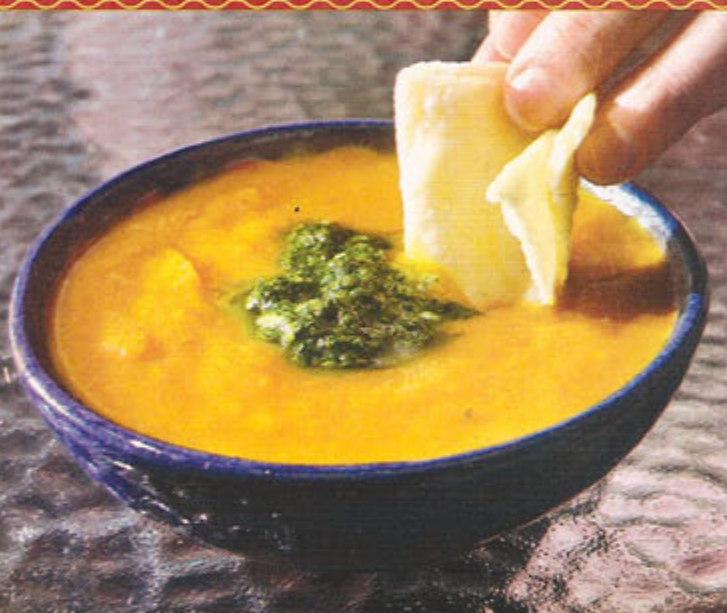
Cuisine at Talent eatery
starts from scratch

STORY BY SARAH LEMON
PHOTOS BY BOB PENNELL

DBringing her personal touch with Latin cuisine to Talent, Elise Passante ousted the Rogue Valley's "least-loved" Senor Sam's and ushered in Inti, the area's most unusual taqueria.

Inti's menu of tacos filled with vegetables, tofu and lamb, in addition to more predictable proteins, is a boon to customers craving not only a different sort of Mexican meal, but a more healthful one. Its from-scratch approach to cooking also allows Inti to accommodate a "now diet," says Passante.

"The first two years, people didn't get what we're doing," she says. "You really have to read your audience."



TOP: Inti restaurant can make dishes traditionally served on flour tortillas gluten-free on request. LEFT: Soups at Inti restaurant in Talent are made with seasonal vegetables, such as sweet potato and winter squash. RIGHT: Spiced tofu is one of the taco fillings at Inti.

Three years later, Inti has Latin dishes for vegetarians, vegans and, increasingly, gluten-free diners. Handmade corn tortillas already were gluten-free, and since this year's switch from wheat flour to rice flour for the batter, Inti's chiles rellenos are another option for patrons eschewing wheat and other gluten-containing grains.

It's a dramatic departure from Southern Oregon's average burrito, enchilada or fajita. A New York transplant with Puerto Rican and Spanish roots, Passante says she abhors plates swimming in red sauce and smothered in cheese. Those "homogenous" Mexican dishes, she says, look nothing like traditional cuisine south of the border.

"I think the misconception ... is it's fried ... it's

covered in cheese; it's covered in sauces."

True Latin cuisine, says Passante, is closer to the lighter dishes Inti prepares either by grilling or slow-cooking. While traditional Mexican cuisine does rely heavily on starch, she says, there is more emphasis on herbs and produce than seen in typical Mexican restaurants locally. Inti grows its own mint and cilantro on the sunny patio.

"They (Mexicans) eat a lot of squash ... cactus," says Passante. "It's a good blood thinner."

Inti furnishes proof of its authenticity on a daily basis when Lupe Juarez employs a wooden press to turn out between 80 and 150 corn tortillas before Inti opens. Despite the labor involved, Passante says she's never considered purchasing Inti's tortillas.



Inti co-owner Elise Passante puts her Puerto Rican spin on the restaurant's Latin cuisine.

"It supersedes anything," she says. "You can taste the difference; you can feel the difference."

Served mostly as tacos, the tortillas form the foundation of Inti's menu. Although braised lamb was the restaurant's substitute for goat — a traditional meat in Latin countries but obscure to Americans — the filling is just as popular as chicken, says Passante.

"It's something that isn't offered almost anywhere else."

Surprisingly, carnitas — the popular Mexican method of braising or roasting pork — failed to make the cut over Inti's first few years in business, says Passante. Taco fillings that compose the regular menu are shredded beef and pork, grilled shrimp, tilapia and vegetables and the marinated and pan-fried tofu.

"People really dig our tofu," says Passante.

In a nod to Passante's background, pinto and black beans are served whole, simply

simmered in vegetable stock and flavored with cilantro and onion, rather than mashed and refried. Flan also is more Puerto Rican than Mexican, she says. Passante has taken some hits on authenticity for refusing to serve menudo, the beloved Mexican tripe stew, but she makes no apologies for disliking organ meats.

Nor is her intent for every dish to be spicy. Passante makes several versions of mole, including one based on pumpkin seeds. Customers also can expect to see Bolivian meat pies and Brazilian fish stew among the daily specials.

Meats, depending on price and availability, may come from local ranches. Passante purchases organic salad greens from Fry Family Farm in Talent and favors seasonal ingredients, including asparagus harvested in orchards belonging to her partner, Brian Bayless, and fruit from his Talent property's trees.



The couple's efforts to harvest fruit are rewarded with rave reviews of Inti's pies — pear custard, in particular — that Passante's brother-in-law makes three days per week. "Tio Benito's handmade pies" have become such a restaurant byword that Passante says she has to limit customers to a certain number of slices per day.

Yet Passante's restraint doesn't keep certain customers from occasionally bestowing garden produce on the restaurant, thereby lending their names to a special dish. Passante says she believes making full use of what's readily at hand is at the core of Latin cooking.

"There's not a lot of waste because they can't afford it," she says.

Inti keeps most meals to \$10 or less. Fillings can be mixed and matched, and special dietary requests are welcome. †

IF YOU GO

Located at 109 Talent Ave., Talent, Inti Tacos e Mas is open 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Call 541-535-7336 or see www.intilatinsoul.com.

