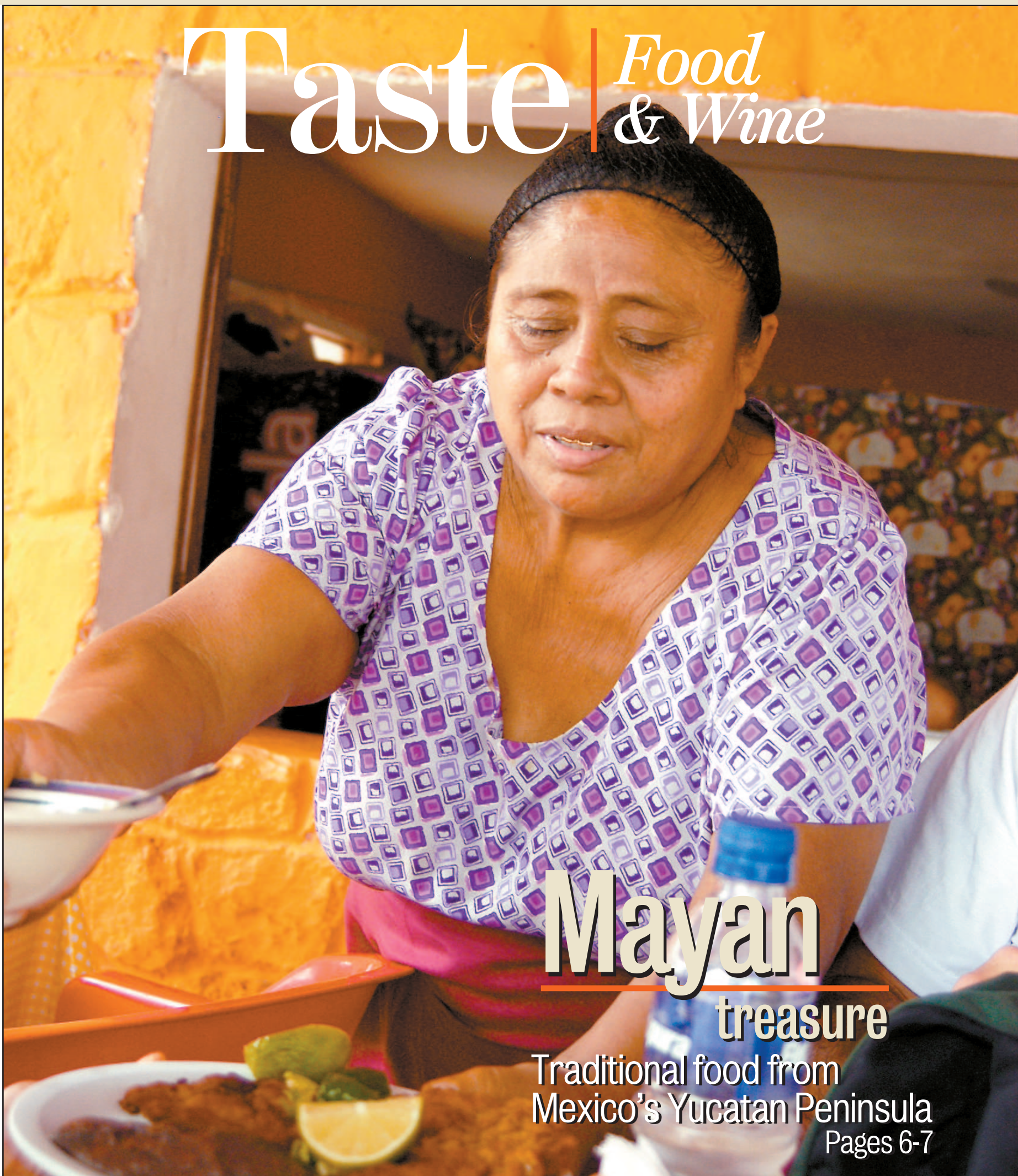


# Taste | *Food & Wine*



## Mayan treasure

Traditional food from  
Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula  
Pages 6-7

The simple, tasty comfort food of the Yucatan Peninsula finds a way to thrive in the modern world



Julio Ramirez, left, gets an order of empanadas from a young man who works for “the curtain lady” at a small stand in Playa del Carmen. Below: the finished product topped with salsa.

MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

# BEHIND THE CURTAIN

**T**he rivers in Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula run underground, coursing through limestone caverns; they’re accessible through cenotes, pools of quiet, open water reflecting the verdant rainforest around them.

These natural wells, portals to the sub-aquatic world, were considered sacred by the Maya; they were the water source for their ancient civilizations and also

recipients of their sacrificial offerings. Today, these subterranean waterways are being explored and mapped — creating a mainland destination for scuba divers. On our last trip to the Yucatan,

**Go behind the façade of the huge developments, the walls of high-rise hotels — out of the safety zone of the familiar and into the streets beyond, where the locals live — you’ll find a vibrant community.**

we came to dive the cenotes.

We’d been coming to the Yucatan for many years, lured by the Palancar Reef off of Cozumal — one of our planet’s premier diving spots — and the distinctive and addictive flavors of Mayan cooking. We were visitors before the pyramids had light shows and the ruins at Tulum were fenced off, when venison and peccaries were served in thatched-roofed restaurants along the



palm-lined coast.

We’d stay in San Miguel, the tiny town on the island of Cozumel where we’d amble the dusty back streets, eat homemade tamales on someone’s front porch, stroll the *malecón* at sunset, then enjoy tacos *al pastor*, or *cochinitas pibil* — marinated pork roasted in banana leaves — at one of the open-air restaurants lining the street. Some days we’d pick up fresh fruit at

## Food Wranglers

Back Roads, Good Food



### On the cover

The “curtain lady” is Doña Marina, a small, shy, matronly woman from Playa del Carmen who prepares fresh masa and salsas in her kitchen behind a curtain, then deep-fries her empanadas to order.

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## Yucatan

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the mercado municipal, then rent a motor scooter and ride to the center of the island, where local men still hunted with rifles, and 5-foot iguanas were abundant. We'd head out along the shoreline to the far end of the island where a lone reggae-playing café served cold beer and the best shrimp quesadillas. On days when we'd dive the spectacular reef, the dive boat would always anchor for lunch at a remada-shaded beachside restaurant, where we'd order up whole deep-fried fish fresh from the sea.

Over the years, San Miguel became crowded; more and larger cruise ships started calling; the oceanfront boulevard became a line of McDonald's, Carlos and Charlie's, T-shirt shops, discos and oriental rug emporiums patronized by daytrippers wearing name tags from cruise lines looking for a taste of Mexico. The small local merchants were pushed out of the main business area. More big hotels and time-shares were going up; that remada-shaded restaurant was gone.

We began staying on Playa del Carmen on the mainland, taking the early-morning ferry over to the island to dive. We'd still stop at the mercado for fresh tamales from our "tamale man" and buy mangos and mameys from the "fruit lady" before heading over to the dive shop. Once a town of dirt roads, small funky hotels, coconut stands and campers sleeping in hammocks on the beach, Playa del Carmen now had a few paved streets and stop signals — but it was still a town of small shops, taquerias and food vendors. The main thoroughfare was closed to traffic — a perfect street to stroll at night where travelers congregated, musicians from all over serenaded, and artists showed their wares; in the town park, children played on the swings while locals and travelers alike shared the park benches. But some of the old beachfront hotels were being razed and replaced by larger more expensive blocks of concrete; travelers were no longer welcome to camp on the beach. The once isolated coast was now being billed as "The Maya Riviera"; gated communities and a theme park were added.

It was about this time that we



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

**Local children play in a cenote, a freshwater pool that leads to underground rivers and caverns beneath the Yucatan Peninsula.**

met the "curtain lady." Our favorite beach hotel gone, we were staying in a small hotel in a working class neighborhood. One morning we noticed a line of people in front of a humble wood-frame house on the corner. Curious, we went over. An open window faced the street to the front; a flowered curtain hung behind it. Two small tables with plastic tablecloths and plastic stools were set up on the sidewalk. A young man stood at the window, taking orders and calling them back through the curtain. Minutes later, a hand would pass a paper plate of hot empanadas through the curtain to the young man to deliver to the customer. Crisp on the

outside, moist on the inside: chicken or cheese, served with creamy tomatillo-avocado sauce or snappy roasted tomato-serrano sauce; simple, done well, based on traditional Yucatecan ingredients: corn, potatoes, tomatoes, tomatillos, avocados and chiles.

The patrons sauced their empanadas from plastic containers on the tables, ate, and then headed off for work, leaving their seats for the next in line. Occasionally a taxi would pull up, the passenger — usually a business man in a hurry — would call an order to go and wait for that hand to appear through the curtain with his order; the man just had to have his empanadas.

We joined the line at the corner every morning and one day were rewarded with the face behind the curtain — Doña Marina, a small, shy, matronly woman wrapped in an apron. Up before dawn, she prepared fresh masa and salsas in her kitchen behind the curtain, then she deep-fried her empanadas to order — usually selling out before lunch. Just before we left La Playa, she gave Julio the recipe for her sauces — and the secret to her empanada dough.

This last trip to Playa, anticipating our first cenote dive, we went to see our curtain lady for empanadas — but she wasn't there. We were directed around the block to a



**A local butcher stands in his stall at the mercado municipal; he hand cuts his meats and knows all his customers by name.**

MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

### About the authors

Julio Ramirez and Marie Perucca-Ramirez, creators of the Fishwife Seafood Restaurants and Turtle Bay taquerias on the Peninsula, sold their restaurants to start The Food Wranglers Inc., a restaurant consultant group.

Julio is certified as an executive chef by the American Culinary Federation and in 1999 was inducted into the prestigious American Academy of Chefs. Marie is a writer with a degree in history and sociology and a master's in applied linguistics.

The couple have always enjoyed traveling the back roads of the world; they are interested in seeing what other ethnic groups grow, what they eat, how they prepare their food — what their various cultures "taste like."

During their travels they have met many remarkable individuals, had a number of unusual experiences, eaten a variety of unfamiliar foods — and collected some great recipes they have adapted for home use.

Once a month they will share their experiences — through words and photos — with Herald readers. Write to them at [marie@foodwranglers.com](mailto:marie@foodwranglers.com).

bright orange cinder-block house with an enclosed patio. The curtain lady had opened a "brick and mortar" restaurant, taking advantage of the growth in Playa and the locals' appetite for traditional foods: panuchos, salbutes, tamales and her incredible empanadas.

Fueled by those empanadas, our first descent into the cenotes was unforgettable: with flashlights and guide ropes — and care not to kick up silt — we swam through underground channels of stalactites and stalagmites, where fresh water mixed with salt, and the blackness was occasionally pierced by a rainbow shaft of light entering through an opening in the cavern ceiling above; a magical trip through an almost virgin realm, where blind cavefish swam among potshards discarded into the cenotes by the Maya centuries ago.

Playa del Carmen now had an Office Depot and a golf course; a Mall of the Americas was being built as well as a Price Club and Cinemax. We despaired for the loss of the traditional culture; when developers meet Third World

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## Yucatan

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communities, paradise is for sale — and the local community is changed forever.

But, then, the world no longer consists of isolated pockets of people. Developing urban areas catering to international tourism create jobs in construction and service that attract families looking for better lives for their children — and the local community grows. The locals adapt to this growth — but they also maintain what they truly value. Go behind the façade of the huge developments, the walls of high-rise hotels — out of the safety zone of the familiar and into the streets beyond, where the locals live — you'll find a vibrant community where fruit ladies, tamale men and street vendors ply their trade and family restaurants still serve the traditional cuisine.

On a back street in Playa del Carmen, the Curtain Lady's business is thriving, feeding her community. When we boarded our plane for the States, we carried an order of her fresh tamales carefully wrapped to eat on board — airlines no longer feed their passengers. We were the envy of Flight 259.

### Empanadas La Playa (Makes 12)

Empanadas are served all over Latin America and the Caribbean. Every region has its own version of the deep-fried, filled pastry; they can be filled with meat or cheese — or both. The best ones are crisp on the outside and moist and savory on the inside. This is our version of The Curtain Lady's cheese empanadas. Serve with tomatillo avocado sauce and/or fire-roasted tomato and serrano chile sauce (recipes follow).

6 oz. mozzarella grated  
6 oz. Jack cheese grated  
2 tsp. kosher salt (or 1 tsp. table salt)  
8 oz. prepared masa harina (see note)

16 oz. boiled potatoes, peeled drained and mashed; warm (the ratio is 2 oz. of potato to 1 oz. masa)  
Canola oil for frying

**Steps:** Mix the Jack and mozzarella cheeses together in a small bowl, add 1 tsp. kosher salt, toss well so the cheese absorbs the salt. Set aside

Put the masa and the mashed potatoes in a mixer; using the paddle on medium speed, mix until the ingredients become totally blended (about 2 minutes). This can be also done by hand using the folding technique for making puff pastry.



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

### A triggerfish is deep-fried and served at a beachfront restaurant in Cozumel.

Divide the dough into 2-oz. balls; place a ball between two sheets of plastic and press to make a flattened disk about 5-inches in diameter. Remove plastic, put 1 oz. of the cheese mixture in the center of the disk, then fold the disk in half over the cheese; seal the ends (it will look like a turnover). Repeat with the remaining dough balls.

To fry: Fill a sauce pot or frying pan with 1½ inches of oil (enough to cover the empanada; the amount of oil needed will depend on the size of

your pan). Heat the oil to 350 degrees over medium heat. You can fry the empanadas in small batches or fry as you make them. The secret to crispy empanadas is to keep the oil temperature steady at 350 degrees; don't overcrowd the pan. It takes 1½ minutes in 350-degree oil, turning once, to cook. The empanada will be a light golden brown when done; remove from heat with a slotted spoon; set on a paper towel to absorb any excess oil; while hot, sprinkle with kosher salt to taste.

Serve warm with tomatillo avocado sauce and fire-roasted fresh tomato and serrano chile sauce (recipes follow). Kids may prefer to eat them with ketchup.

**Note:** Masa harina is ground corn flour used for making tamales and tortillas. Either prepare the masa according to the package directions (it should have the consistency of the mashed potatoes) or buy it already made from Latin markets or a tortilla factory, such as La Morenita in Seaside.

### Quesadillas Cozumel (Makes 8)

Our favorite shrimp quesadillas in Cozumel had a real meaty flavor; they were cooked on the same grill as the meats. Serve these with tomatillo avocado sauce or fire-roasted fresh tomato and serrano chile sauce (recipe follows). Add a salad and you've got lunch or a light dinner.

12 oz. mozzarella cheese, shredded  
12 oz. Jack cheese, shredded  
1½ tsp. kosher salt (or ¾ tsp. table salt)

2 T. pan drippings from roast pork, beef, or chicken (or, if you'd rather, use 1 T. olive oil)

2 T. minced onion  
1 tsp. minced garlic.  
1 lb. 21/26-size shrimp, peeled  
8 eight-inch flour tortillas

**Steps:** Put the mozzarella and jack cheeses in a medium bowl, add the salt and toss together well to blend; set aside.

Heat a large frying pan over medium heat, add the drippings, heat, then add the onion and garlic and cook for 1 minute while stirring. Add the shrimp, stir to mix well with the drippings. Cook for 1½ minutes while stirring; remove from heat and set aside. When cooled, chop the shrimp into bite-size pieces

To make a quesadilla: Heat a griddle or a large frying pan to 350 degrees and place a tortilla on the

heated surface. When it is lightly toasted on one side (about 1 minute), turn it over and distribute 3 ounces of cheese mixture evenly over the tortilla, then evenly scatter a portion of the shrimp mixture over the cheese. When the cheese starts melting (about 2 minutes) fold the tortilla in half, cook 2 minutes, then turn over; when the cheese starts leaking (about 2 minutes), remove from heat. Cut into wedges; serve immediately.

### Tomatillo avocado sauce (Makes 2 cups)

This is a wonderful sauce for quesadillas, empanadas, egg dishes, roasted meats and grilled fish, as well as a myriad of other dishes.

10 oz. tomatillos (peel off husks)  
1 clove garlic  
1 T. minced onion  
½ tsp. minced serrano chiles  
½ cup chopped cilantro (about a half bunch)

1½ tsp. kosher salt (or ¾ tsp. table salt)  
1 large Haas avocado, ripe, but not mushy  
3 oz. cold water

**Steps:** In a medium sauce pan, bring a quart of water to boil, add the tomatillos and cook for 4 minutes; the tomatillos will change color from bright green to greenish yellow. Drain and put in a container of cool water. When cooled, put the tomatillos, garlic, onion and chile in a blender and purée; add the cilantro and continue to purée. Add the chopped avocado; purée a little more, adding the water, slowly, to create a sauce-like consistency. Add the salt, purée a bit more and adjust seasoning.

Store, covered and refrigerated, in a nonreactive container; it will keep for 4 to 5 days.

### Fire-roasted tomato and serrano chile sauce (Makes 2 cups)

This versatile, flavorful sauce gets extra dimension from roasting the tomatoes and chile. It goes well with grilled meats, egg dishes, seafood and Latin specialties such as tacos, quesadillas and empanadas. It makes a good flavor companion to the tomatillo avocado sauce.

4 tomatoes (about 18 oz.), roasted on a wire mesh grill over an open flame, until the skins crack and turn black. (Don't rinse or peel skins off!)

1 serrano chile, roasted similarly (don't rinse or peel skins off!); stem end removed

1 clove garlic  
1 T. lime juice  
2 tsp. kosher salt (1 tsp. table salt)

½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

**Steps:** Put the tomatoes in a food processor with half the serrano chile (or use the whole chile if you like your salsa to have a kick); blend well.

Store covered and refrigerated in a nonreactive container; it will keep for 4 to 5 days.



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

### The curtain lady in her new kitchen, serving up a bowl of chicken soup.