

A Latin look at what's cooking

■ Nueva Cocina strives to bring the most authentic and delicious Latin flavors to your local grocery store.

BY JIM WYSS

jwyss@herald.com

It doesn't take a connoisseur to recognize that if you mix one part food industry executive, one part investment banker and toss in a degree from the Southern California Culinary Institute, you're going to get a potent combination.

Celeste De Armas and Corina Mascaro are combining all those ingredients and then some in their new Latin food venture called Nueva Cocina.

They started selling their line of Latin-style packaged seasonings, soups and rice mixes in South Florida last month and hope to be expanding to Texas and Chicago some time soon.

UNIQUE RECIPES

Some of Nueva Cocina's recipes — like the *arroz con pollo* mix — are raided straight from *abuelita's* pantry, but others are inspired by Miami chefs such as Doug Rodriguez and Norman Van Aiken, who are combining Latin standards with Caribbean spices in a fusion called *Nuevo Latino*.

And it's with *Nuevo Latino* cuisine that the company hopes to make its mark.

"Latin food is where Italian food was 30 years ago — it's almost all burritos and tacos," says Armas, who is the company's president. "Thirty years ago, all we knew about Italian food was spaghetti and lasagna, but now tastes are a lot more sophisticated."

From the onset, the company aims for the sophisticated. Its packaging is stylish enough that it wouldn't look out of place on a good bottle of wine. And the company offers a full palette of spices, from pumpkin and ginger, to corn with green chile, that are not frequently found among its competitors' packaged offerings.

The Nueva Cocina story started its slow boil years ago



PHOTOS BY PATRICK FARRELL/HERALD STAFF

TASTE TEST: Celeste De Armas, president and Corina Mascaro, senior vice president of Nueva Cocina watch 5-year-old Sara Gevirman and her mother Debbie taste recipe-ready Latin soups developed by their company.

when Armas and Mascaro first met at Indiana University. Armas went on to cut her teeth as an executive at General Mills, Carnation and Nestlé USA. Mascaro pursued a career in investment banking but nurtured a love for Latin cuisine that eventually took her to culinary school in California.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

But they reunited about 19 months ago to start cooking up Nueva Cocina. Along with the desire to please discriminating palates, they also wanted to respond to the growing demand for healthier fare. By avoiding artificial colors and flavors, all of Nueva Cocina's recipes have earned space at

Whole Foods Market, the country's largest purveyor of natural and organic groceries, and the Greenwise aisle of Publix stores.

Last year, Nueva Cocina won the "Best New Ethnic Food" category at the Americas Food and Beverage Expo in Miami.

With new recipes and a line of frozen entrees in their scopes, Armas and Mascaro think they're well positioned to feed a growing demographic.

"If you look at the population increase in Hispanics in the U.S., their cultural impact will be tremendous in years to come," says Mascaro, the company's senior vice president. "The next 10 years are going to be big for Latin food."



WHAT'S COOKING? Celeste De Armas and Corina Mascaro of Nueva Cocina cooked up some good ideas for their new line of prepackaged gourmet Latin foods, above.