

Nicaraguan restaurant doubles as cooking school for poor teens

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

GRANADA, Nicaragua — Cafe Chavalos is just the thing for the indecisive diner. Each night it is open, Tuesday through Friday, patrons get whatever the staff has prepared. It is a four- or five-course meal that changes from night to night.

This cozy, colorful 4-month-old restaurant in the oldest of American cities is unusual for another reason. It is a school, a cuisine workshop that gives teenagers who have been wayward or lacking in opportunities a career leg up.

Chavalos, which is slang in Spanish for “kids,” sits like a colorful bird in a barrio of sluggish water, dirt-streaked children and tar-paper doorways. A couple from Colorado bought the property for \$3,000 two years ago during a stay at the inn that sits around the corner. The inn is run by the inimitable Donna Tabor, who spent years as a television producer in Pittsburgh, but who has made a more indelible second career as a humanitarian in her adopted Granada, Nicaragua, where she served in the Peace Corps in the mid-'90s and has remained.

Supported by the Pittsburgh-based nonprofit Building New Hope, Tabor has networked to get critically ill children to the States for pro bono surgeries and frequent-flier miles donated to their families. She has secured medical supplies, equipment for a women's center, books and computers for schools and, two years ago, even started a school to supplement the half-day education of the country's public system. More than a dozen children attend. Along Lake Nicaragua, it adjoins the home of a woman who donated the property and includes a dormitory for children whose families are too poor to care for them.

The Colorado couple, like many guests at Tabor's inn, got hooked by her zeal and the chance for bite-sized opportunities to do good. Most recently, a young couple from Italy who stayed at the inn volunteered to create Cafe Chavalos' Web site. Others have prolonged vacations to help with school construction or to volunteer as teachers.

Cafe Chavalos opened last September, with Sergio Canudas as the resident chef and instructor. A native of Mexico, he is also the breakfast chef at Tabor's inn, Another Night in Paradise.

“We first thought of having a library in the space,” said Tabor, “but decided on a job-training idea. It became a

cafe so that we could use Sergio's expertise and talent for teaching.”

The boys and young men in Chavalos' kitchen treat Canudas, who has two children of his own, with the adoration of sons. Already, three of the trainees have been hired as a team to work at a new guest house/restaurant.

Dinner is 95 cordobas, or roughly \$7. Tips, not long familiar to Nicaraguans, are becoming more common, and the waiters, cooks and servers share them.

Granada has flourished in recent years with guest houses and restaurants as tourists discover its colonial charms, but too many of its children languish in the

streets, filthy, uneducated and with little hope but to shine shoes and sell chewing gum for a living. Many families cannot afford to have their children in a classroom; they need them to bring in a few coins each day.

Tabor tapped Juan Carlos Mejia Valle to be one of the first three to leave the cafe's nest. As he anticipated the new job, he said, he had a pang, because the eight other chavalos “are my brothers, and Sergio is our father. Probably, I learned too quick.”

He had been a student at the lakeside school, learning to speak and read English, when Tabor recruited him for the cafe. “He's as smart as a whip,” she said.

Mejia, who says he's 20 (Tabor thinks he's a little younger), had 11 years of schooling but didn't graduate. “I was in a gang and I stopped going to school,”

he said. “When I was a kid, I wanted to learn English and be in international relations, but then I decided to be an architect. At the same time, I am interested in becoming a chef. In my own house, I used to cook.”

One night at Cafe Chavalos, the menu included gazpacho, ceviche and the burritos that Canudas had made popular at several local restaurants.

Because of the tang and that little something that is every chef's secret, the ceviche — raw fish salad “cooked” in a lime marinade and served cold with diced tomatoes, cilantro, jalapeno, garlic and onion — was obviously the work of a master chef.

“No no,” Canudas said, waving his index finger. He beamed at the boy with slicked-back hair. “Moises made the ceviche.”

Shy Moises Padilla, assistant-chef-in-training, pointed at another boy, but his face broke into a smile, and Tabor said, “He's probably the next one to go.”

