

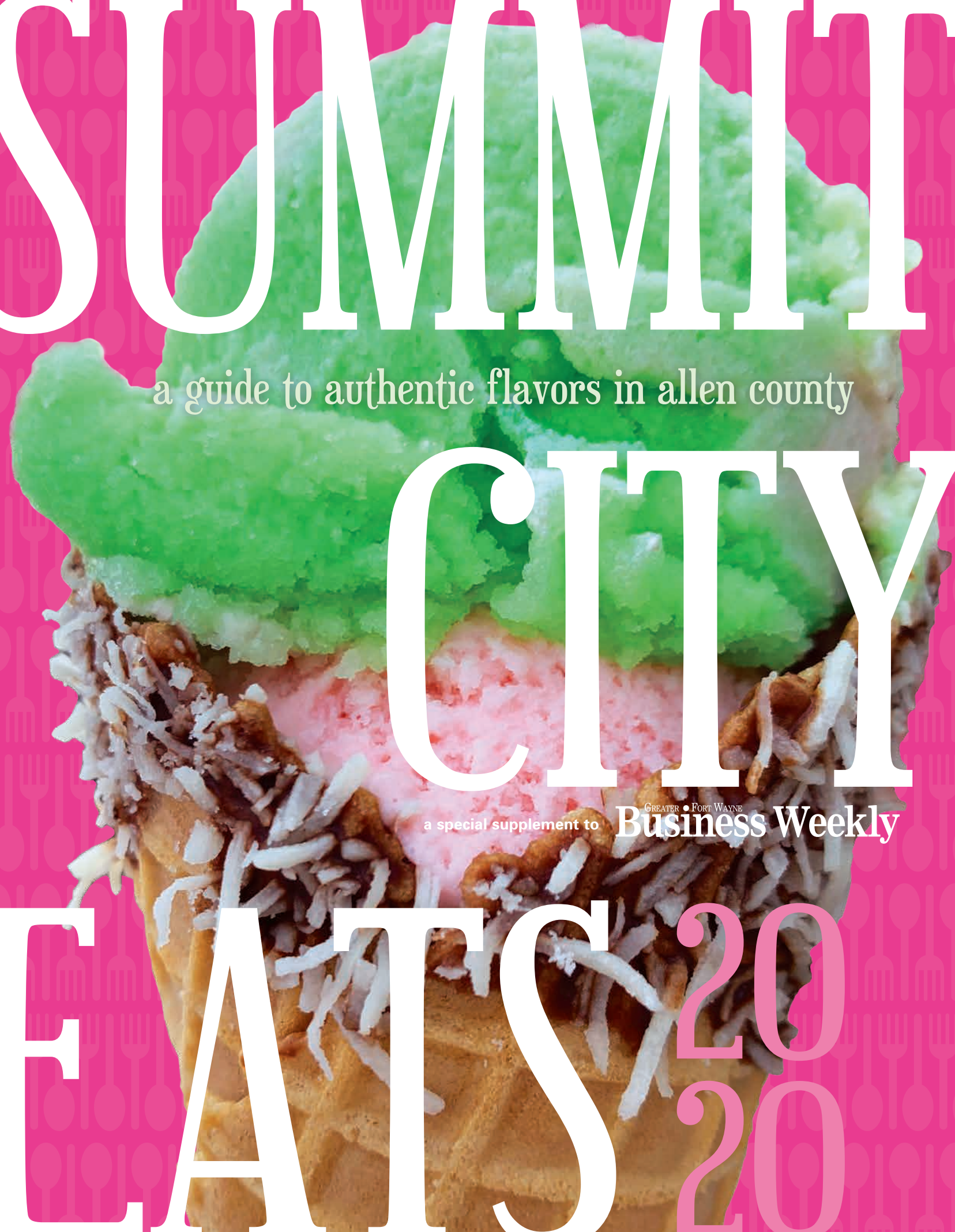
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Authentic Taquerias

PHOTOS BY BRIDGETT HERNANDEZ

If you're from the Midwest, the words "gas station food" likely conjure up images of hot dogs glistening on rollers, pizza and chicken under a heat lamp or nacho cheese by the pump – not exactly fresh fare.

However, taquerias at Fort Wayne gas stations are offering fresh options for filling up, including tacos filled with tender, slow-cooked meats, fresh salsas, traditional Mexican recipes and Tex-Mex favorites.

Tacos and gas stations have long gone hand-in-hand in other parts of the country like South Texas where gas station taquerias are ubiquitous. The trend seems to have finally arrived in Fort Wayne with several new taquerias opening shop at filling stations around the city.

Mo's Tacos opened in March in the Marathon Station located at 1130 Goshen Ave. Husband and wife Moises "Mo" and Gabriela "Gaby" Colin run the family-owned taqueria.

Mo's Tacos

1130 Goshen Ave.
260-484-1988
Monday-Saturday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Donde Sea Taco Truck

10226 Old Leo Road
260-705-7490
Monday-Friday 10:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Jalapeno Mexican Grill

437 E. Washington Blvd.
260-422-9916
Monday, Wednesday, Thursday,
Saturday 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.;
Tuesday, Friday 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Taco House

5405 S. Anthony Blvd.
260-739-3388

While Mo's Tacos is new to the neighborhood, chef Mo has served taco lovers in the Fort Wayne area for years. The couple previously operated

El Asadero, a full-service restaurant on North Clinton Street. Although it had a fan following, Gaby said keeping up with the demands of a sit-down restaurant was difficult. They closed their doors and continued catering with the goal of opening a restaurant once again.

"We knew that we didn't want to do the same, so that's why we started to look for a smaller location, something we could have full control of," she said.

There are already plenty of dine-in taquerias in Fort Wayne, Gaby said, so the idea of opening shop in the Marathon Station on Goshen appealed to the couple because they could provide fast carryout and target customers on their way to work.

"It's a good community here, very close to an industrial

park,” she said.

So far the reception has been overwhelmingly positive, she said. One thing that makes their food stand out is portion size. Tacos and tamales come “fully loaded,” Gaby said. Customer favorites include marinated pork “pastor” tacos and menudo, a brothy, spicy Mexican soup. Their menu includes many favorites from their former restaurant, including Tacos Del Sur, corn tortillas packed with steak, chorizo, beans, pork rinds, sour cream, lettuce, tomato and queso fresco.

Mo’s siblings have also found success with the gas station taqueria model. His brother Sidro Colin is the owner of Jalapeno Mexican Grill in the Marathon gas station located at 437 E. Washington Blvd. downtown. Mo’s sister Vicky and her husband, Pedro Cruz, own the Taco House on the city’s southeast side in the Marathon gas station located at 5405 S. Anthony Blvd. On the city’s north side, Donde Sea Taco Truck opened in April in the parking lot of the Shell Station located at 10226 Old Leo Road.

Owner Juan Carlos said he wanted to bring traditional Mexican food to the area. When his friend, the owner of the gas station, offered him the space for the taco truck, he jumped at the opportunity. The taqueria’s offerings are far from “fast food.” His tiny kitchen turns out homemade tortillas and barbacoa cooked low and slow for 6-8 hours. Fruit smoothies are made with mango, pineapple and papaya.

“We prepare everything in the moment. Everything is fresh. You feel the flavor. It’s very different than other places,” he said.

Carlos, who had a restaurant in Mexico before moving to the U.S., said making his customers happy is his first priority.

“Some customers request something different that I don’t have on my menu, but if I have the (ingredients), I make it,” he said.

Owning a restaurant is about more than the food, Carlos said. He enjoys building relationships with his customers, asking after their families and what they did last weekend.

“Other places are like ‘Next! Next! What do you want? What do you want? Next! Next!’” Carlos said, but creating a friendly space is important to him.

“My goal is not to make money; it’s to make friends,” he said.

– Bridgett Hernandez

Marinated pork tacos from Taco House



Sodas on ice at Mo’s Tacos



Rib tips

PHOTOS BY LAURA WESTON & LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

Authentic Barbecue

Lewis Street Grill

425 E. Lewis St. • 260-755-1093

Monday 7 a.m.-midnight; Tuesday-Saturday open 24 hours; Sunday midnight-7 p.m.

According to owner Demetrius Bostic, family, fresh ingredients and consistency are the keys to Lewis Street Grill's success. Its authentic and delicious food is a result of cooking with and learning from generations of his family. Food is made to order.

Barbecue is the star at this eatery. The ribs are cooked to perfection. The meat falls off the bone, and is basted in a lightly spiced, sweet vinegar-tasting barbecue sauce that lingers on the palate. The rib tips are especially tender and juicy and are a great option if you don't want to eat with your hands. The rib tips have a light sauce, and the texture is like a tender pork chop.

Coworker and family member Tyrone Freeman brings a pedigree of barbecue to the restaurant. His family owned the former Freeman Tea Room in the neighborhood.

The creamy, cheesy, macaroni and cheese is a good side dish to pair

with the meat. The collard greens are tender and full of ham.

Another tasty side dish is the baked beans. Ground beef and diced bell peppers make this dish meaty, thick, hearty and savory with just a hint of sweetness.

Nachos are a popular item on the menu. They are served with an abundance of toppings — jalapeños, lettuce, tomato and nacho cheese chips — and could be a good late-night snack or delicious lunch.

Everything is homemade, right down to the sweet potato pie that will satisfy anyone looking for a yummy bite of Thanksgiving goodness. The apple fritters — sweet dough encased in an ample filling of apples and cinnamon — are also a dessert option.

Bostic said that he has been blessed that his business hasn't been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Macaroni & cheese



Ribs combo

Employees are already behind a glass window and have minimal contact with customers.

One of the fun things about Lewis Street Grill is that on most days, it's open 24 hours. Area third-shift workers getting off work and those wanting food after the bars close make up the majority of clientele during the overnight hours.

Lewis Street Grill is a carry out-only restaurant. Catering is available. Bostic has plans to expand the business to a

nearby historic building and offer dine-in seating.

Giving back to the neighborhood is important to Bostic, and he makes regular food donations to St. Mary's Soup Kitchen.

Diners are always in for a treat when they pick up wonderful food at Lewis Street Grill. It's always fresh, always delicious and always made with family.

— *Laura Weston*



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Falafel combo

PHOTO BY LOUIS WYATT

Authentic Middle Eastern

Halal Eats

5755 St. Joe Road • Monday-Saturday 11 a.m.-9 p.m.

When Ayman Elswerky and his wife, Mayyadah Dour, decided to serve some of their homemade recipes out of a small downtown Fort Wayne gas station, they didn't expect to receive enough positive reception to warrant opening a full-fledged restaurant just three months later.

"We started it just to test out the market, because it's something new to Fort Wayne. I think it went pretty well. We had pretty good feedback, so we decided to go full force in February of 2019," said Elswerky who, along with Dour, owns Halal Eats at 5755 St. Joe Road, Fort Wayne.

Part of the allure of the restaurant, Elswerky said, is it's the only place in Fort Wayne you can get truly authentic Middle Eastern food. The restaurant prides itself on catering to the tastes of the local Middle Eastern population. Order a variety of dishes off the menu, and you'll be treated to flavors from Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and the Persian Gulf region. "Halal" refers to food that adheres to Islamic law, as defined in the Quran.

"It's got a lot of flavor. If you shy from it, you don't know what you're missing," Elswerky said.

Elswerky and Dour moved to Fort Wayne from Pakistan in 1989. Elswerky said he was previously in the restaurant business and recently decided to give it another shot. His wife holds a medical degree, but previously stayed home with their children. Now she's the primary chef at Halal Eats, serving up her own homemade family recipes that include shawarma, falafel, lamb shank and a variety of other Middle Eastern dishes.

According to Elswerky, the couple makes a great team

because "she likes to cook, and I like to meet and talk to new people.

"We're always having the repeat customer, and the good thing is we're seeing a lot of new faces. We have a lot of people walk in, and they just walked by and smelled the food and want to try it."


It's hard to recommend just one dish, but Elswerky said lots of people come for the garlic sauce, which goes well with the chicken shawarma. The menu also includes kababs, wraps, stuffed grape leaves, homemade hummus, baba ghanouj, fatoosh, lamb, rotisserie chicken — served with the aforementioned garlic sauce — and customizable plates with your choice of rice, meat, vegetables and sauce.

"The build-your-own bowl is becoming a very popular item, the chicken shawarma, the falafel, we sell everything in about the same quantities. And we cater a lot to the vegan and the vegetarian group. We have a lot of people come in to try the lamb — they've never had lamb before, and they keep coming back for it."

The restaurant is currently open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Food can be ordered for dine-in, carryout or delivery.

"I would recommend everybody to try it, because the worst thing that's going to happen is you don't like it," Elswerky said. "It's healthy, it's freshly made, it's all fresh ingredients — it's good."

— Louis Wyatt



Authentic Vegan Sunday Brunch

Junie burger & fries

PHOTOS BY MARY ANNE GATES

Savery Vegan Grill

1122 Taylor St. • 260-203-3959 for carry-out

Sunday brunch 10 a.m.-2 p.m.; Wednesday, Friday, Saturday 11 a.m.-7 p.m.; Thursday 11 a.m.-6 p.m.

Savery Vegan Grill is a family-owned business. Teresa George and her two adult children, Bradley and Brittany George, began their first foray into the restaurant business in November 2018. After going vegan they decided to open a vegan restaurant. Their purpose was two-fold. They wanted show people how easy it is to go vegan and they wanted to save animals.

"We wanted to show people they could still eat the same foods they loved before they went vegan," Brittany George said.

Then the family discovered there was more they could offer the Fort Wayne vegan community.

"We had been vegan for a couple of years and felt like there was a very specific type of vegan food that was missing. Vegan junk food was unavailable. The food we all ate before going vegan was missing," George said.

Being first-time restaurateurs was challenging. Successfully running the kitchen was one of their first hurdles.

"We had no idea what we were doing back there. We

taught ourselves," she said.

Naming the restaurant was easier. Their goals were creating good food and saving animals. Combining "savory" for food and "save" for animals created the unusual spelling "Savery."

"Savery is a play on words about savory food and saving animals," George said.

Like every other restaurant, COVID-19 affected the Savery Vegan Grill.

"We were really scared when COVID-19 hit. Thankfully, the vegan community is very supportive. People that came in once every two weeks started coming twice a week for carry-out because they were worried about us and our livelihood," she said.

COVID-19 also impacted the delivery of supplies to the restaurant.

"Some supplies from food to gloves were harder to get when COVID-19 hit. It has been a challenge to make sure we get what we need," said R J Biddle, who serves as the

general manager. It is an unofficial title, he said. Adding, he initially found the Savery Vegan Grill through a Facebook connection.

"I started working here shortly after they opened. I wanted to go into the vegan food industry soon after I became vegan," he said.

Overall, about 70% of our business is back despite COVID-19, George said in late summer.

One thing that was not back to normal yet was their once-very-popular Sunday brunch.

"We are the only place in Fort Wayne that offers a full vegan brunch. It used to be super busy, but less people are dining in now," George said.

"I used to fill every table on Sunday. Now with COVID-19, I fill less than half of the tables," Biddle said.

The Sunday brunch features include: Vegan chicken and waffles, biscuits and gravy, and specialty pancakes like strawberry banana and banana walnut. An assortment of breakfast sandwiches is also available.

Besides breakfast, the Savery Vegan Grill serves familiar lunch favorites.



Strawberry cupcake

"It's traditional American junk food. Whatever you can get at a typical American diner you can get here. We serve things like burgers and wings. We do things like country fried steak. It's traditional American food — just vegan," George said.

A vegan country fried steak is non-GMO dehydrated soy. We rehydrate it with flavorings based on the flavor we are trying to mimic, she said.

Similarly, our Philly cheese is soy based but we shred it and flavor it like a Philly cheese steak, she said.

"We meet people all the time that say, 'I didn't know this is what vegan food was like,'"

George said.

While serving good vegan food is important saving animals is just as important to the restaurant family.

"A lot of people hear the word vegan and think it has to be healthy. We are not actually here for health reasons. Whether people eat vegan daily or a couple of times a week we are doing our part to reduce animal exploitation suffering and slaughter," Biddle said.

— Mary Anne Gates



Chicken waffle, hashbrowns & tofu scramble



Authentic Mexican

Papas fritas

PHOTO BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

La Michoacana Restaurant

1421 N. Wells St. • 260-423-3515 • Daily noon-9 p.m.

Rosa Bravo owns La Michoacana Restaurant Paleteria LLC, 1421 N. Wells St. Before becoming the owner in 2015, she had plenty of experience working at the restaurant. Initially, Bravo did the cooking and served customers.

Opening a Mexican restaurant was a natural choice for Bravo, whose native language is Spanish. She also realized the popularity of Mexican food locally.

“A lot of people like Mexican food,” she said.

Specialties include a variety of sandwiches. La Michoacana offers a chorizo sandwich featuring the Mexican sausage and a Cubana sandwich made with breaded steak sausage, ham and cheese. Additionally, a Hawaiiana sandwich features ham, pineapple and cheese. Burritos, tacos, quesadillas and nachos are also available and round out the menu.

Specialty sandwiches made with a variety of ingredients can be tasty. However, some of the simplest dishes are the ones most frequently ordered.

“The most popular dish here is rice and beans. People also like steak fajitas served with rice and beans,” said Elizabeth Ruiz, a server. Ruiz has been at

La Michoacana for about a year.

La Michoacana offers a small variety of homemade ice cream.

There about 14 flavors of ice cream including three fruit flavors made with water: strawberry, lemon and mango, Ruiz said.

The remaining flavors are made with milk, she said.

One of the more unusual ice cream flavors made with milk is pine nut.

“It is really good ice cream,” Ruiz said.

Despite the popularity of Mexican cuisine and the variety of food served, not surprisingly, COVID-19 created a lot of turmoil for Bravo.

“I got depressed because customers stayed away. I closed the restaurant for a few days,” she said.

Soon she reopened for carry-out only. About two weeks later she reopened the restaurant for limited dine-in eating.

During the late summer, only about 35 to 40% of her customers had returned, she said.

— Mary Anne Gates



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Authentic Diner

Garbage

PHOTO BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

Cindy's Diner

230 W. Berry St. • 260-422-1957
Monday-Friday 6 a.m.-2 p.m.

COVID-19 continues to adversely affect many restaurants. However, Cindy's Diner, a 15-seat diner at 230 W. Berry St., has adjusted. During the early months of the pandemic, current owner Angie Rowedda and former co-owner John Scheele worked but did not take paychecks. Staff was also temporarily furloughed.

"Our sales now are only about a third of what they normally would be, but we are making enough to pay our bills. A lot of the downtown businesses helped support me when I was doing carry-out only," Rowedda said during the summer.

Cindy's Diner offers traditional American food, with breakfast served all day. One specialty menu item is the garbage breakfast combo that includes eggs, potatoes, cheese, onions and ham cooked together. Another breakfast menu favorite is sausage gravy and biscuits. Lunch options include burgers, chicken strips, fries, onion rings, soups, salads and chili. Desserts include pies and milkshakes.

The tiny, iconic diner follows CDC social distancing guidelines. While many other local restaurants were allowed to seat customers up to 75% of their capacity, Cindy's Diner was only allowed to seat customers up to

50% of its capacity. Due to its unique layout, only seven of the 15 seats were available.

"Even though we do not serve alcohol, because of our counter (design), we are considered to be like a bar. We can only use half of the seats at the counter," Rowedda said.

Recently, that restriction caused a problem when four women came in together and wanted to eat, said Cindy Scheele, former co-owner of the diner for whom the restaurant is named.

"(Rowedda) could not serve them. Fortunately, they went outside and sat at the picnic tables. Otherwise, they would have just walked away," Scheele said.

Besides the counter, there are two picnic tables on the outdoor patio in front of the diner. Social distancing guidelines mandate only four people per table, Rowedda said.

"Operating at less than full capacity is challenging. It's hard when you can only seat seven people at a time. Additionally, some people are still 'iffy' about coming out to eat at a restaurant during a pandemic. I understand their concern," Rowedda said.

Meanwhile, others drive for miles to eat at Cindy's

Diner. Recently, three men working in Hicksville, Ohio, drove about 30 miles to enjoy the food and see Rowedda.

“There is only one place I would like to go, and that is Cindy’s Diner,” said Matt Morrison who was installing a headstone in a Hicksville cemetery on a sunny July afternoon. Morrison was with two others when it was time to find a place to eat lunch. “We drove 40 minutes just to come to Cindy’s. There are a lot of memories here. She (Rowedda) has been serving us for 15 years,” he said.

Rowedda, formerly known as Angie Harter, began her tenure at Cindy’s Diner in 1996 as a dishwasher. But she soon took on additional responsibilities. Her penchant for helping wherever needed paid off in 2016 when Rowedda bought the diner.

“She was an excellent employee. If we got really busy, she would pitch in with anything. She did the prep work and took note of low inventory. Eventually, she just did all of it,” Cindy Scheele said.

John & Cindy Scheele co-owned Cindy’s Diner from

“

We drove 40 minutes just to come to Cindy’s. There are a lot of memories here.”

—Cindy’s Diner customer Matt Morrison

years. The popular diner has also moved around the downtown area many times. It has been in its current location for several years and currently has no plans to move again.

Eventually, when the pandemic is over, the new normal at Cindy’s Diner won’t look much different than it does today, with one notable exception.

“I’ll just be glad when we can have all 15 seats back. Pre-pandemic business was pretty good,” Rowedda said.

— Mary Anne Gates



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Authentic Historical Atmosphere

PHOTOS BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

Twenty at Charley Creek Inn

111 W. Market St. • 260-563-0111

Tuesday-Thursday 11 a.m.-2 p.m., 5-9 p.m.; Friday 11 a.m.-2 p.m., 5-10 p.m.;
Saturday 10 a.m.-2 p.m., 5-10 p.m.; Sunday 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

2020 will be a year most would rather forget. Perhaps traveling back to 1920 would be a welcomed respite.

A starting point should be the Twenty restaurant in Wabash. About 55 minutes southwest from downtown Fort Wayne, Twenty is located in the historic Charley Creek Inn, 111 W. Market St. Walk through the lobby of the hotel, celebrating its centennial this year, and you'll arrive at the restaurant and its homage to the flapper era. The tables are designed with lots of images from the 1920s, so you can have brunch, lunch or dinner with the likes of Greta Garbo.

Brunch is served 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; lunch is 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and dinner 5-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and 5-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday.

A brunch special included french toast covered with

plump blackberries, strawberries and blueberries under a thick cream. As if that's not filling, the salads can be a meal themselves. The Indiana Cobb salad comes with crispy chicken on a bed of romaine lettuce with cheddar cheese, charred corn, cucumber and tomato with honey mustard dressing. Or try the Charley Creek Bibb Salad with dried cranberries, white cheddar cheese, strawberries and candied pecans with a Fuji apple dressing.

The french onion soup is made with a veal broth and caramelized onions under a warm blanket of Gruyere cheese. What's brunch without a cinnamon roll? These are housemade and come with a cream cheese frosting so don't expect the claggy sugar frosting that most eateries provide.

While waiting for your order, take a spin around the

restaurant and the adjoining Green Hat Lounge, with its mural that honors two musical legends with Hoosier roots: Hoagy Carmichael and Cole Porter. The images recall days of Hollywood glamour.

Walk off any heavy meal by shopping downtown. Many nods to Wabash history run through the town, including small elephant statues along the street.

Modoc's Market, 205 S. Miami St., is a coffee house and espresso bar. Its name comes from a circus elephant that got loose, ran through town and ended up at the site where the shop now sits. Modoc also appears in a mural and copies of the book, "Modoc: The True Story of the Greatest Elephant That Ever Lived" can be found in shops around town.

The Wabash River runs through town, and canoe and kayak rentals are available during the summer from White Rock Recreation, 800 S. Wabash St.

The Family Farm Trip for a canoe paddler costs \$22; it's \$10 for a canoe child rider. Kayak rental is \$35. Life jackets are provided and required. Board the White Rock Recreation light-blue bus and get dropped off at a point where you'll be asked to carry your paddles to the river. There, an employee will help pull your craft into the water and send you on your journey. Head back to the business with a mostly uneventful trip, except for a small rapids and the occasional rock jutting just above the water's surface. Then spend 2-4 hours paddling or floating at your own pace. The LaGro trip takes 3-6 hours and costs \$25 per canoe paddler and \$10 for a child rider and \$40 for kayak rental.

Treat yourself from a variety of ice cream flavors or pizza at White Rock when your return.

– Lisa Esquivel Long



French toast



Pineapple cake, chocolate cake, carrot cake

PHOTOS BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

Loving Cafe

7605 Coldwater Road, Suite A • 260-489-8686 • Monday-Saturday 11 a.m.–7 p.m.

In 2009, the Loving Café began life as a local, family-run business. Eventually, as the restaurant got busier, George Le, the family patriarch, took over ownership in 2014.

A variety of vegan appetizers, sandwiches, soups, desserts and side dishes are served up six days a week at the small café at 7605 Coldwater Road, Suite A.

“Our menu has many vegan dishes. We use no animal products, like eggs or dairy,” Le said.

Paying attention to what customers like is one of the keys to success.

“When we have a new dish coming out, we let customers try it and if they really like it, we will put it on the menu,” he said.

For example, popular sandwiches include: an organic “cheesy” quinoa or black burger served on an organic bun. The burger, featuring black rice, is served with avocado, onions, tomato and kale or lettuce. Another popular sandwich is the deluxe Impossible Burger. Made by Impossible Foods, the grilled burger is served with organic sprouts, tomatoes and other sandwich condiments.

“People like tasty stuff, so they usually order a sandwich that comes with a side of fries,” he said.

Tasty fries at the Loving Café include raw french fries. These healthy delights are sliced avocado fingers coated with crushed almonds, walnuts, and sun-dried tomatoes served with ginger dressing and kale chips.

Besides sandwiches, a favorite organic soup features potato and kale as the star ingredients.

“Most of the people like our potato kale soup,” Le said.

Other gourmet soups include a pistachio and mushroom combination or almond and mushroom combination. Both contain pureed carrots, onions, celery, almond milk and spices.

Tasty and healthy share top billing on their vegan dessert menu.

“Most people like carrot cake. If they are eating healthy,

they get organic raw cheesecake,” Le said.

According to the menu, raw cheesecake begins with cashews, dates, vanilla and coconut oil. Additionally, strawberries, blueberries, agave, lemon and sea salt make it a delicious, guilt-free treat.

Le attributes the growth of his restaurant business through the referrals given by friends and satisfied customers.

“We don’t do any advertising. ‘Mouth to mouth’ has built the business,” he said.

The Loving Café has not forgotten children who are growing up vegan. The kid’s menu includes grilled “cheesy” bread and quesadillas. Additionally, nuggets, wings and a vegan fish entrée are available.

As with other restaurants, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact. However, Le is optimistic about the future.

“In March and April, it was tough for a few weeks, but we have a vegan community that really supports us,” he said.

Because dine in service is limited, restaurants are finding creative ways to serve patrons. Normally, 10 tables are set up for dine-in guests. Currently, only three tables are available indoors. Four tables are set up outside for diners who prefer eating al fresco.

Many diners hungry for vegan fare prefer a take-out option.

“Right now, our main business is carryout. Currently, 70% of our business is carry-out and 30% is from customers who eat at the restaurant,” he said while speaking in late summer.

A growing vegan trend usually cites both environmental and health benefits for its popularity.

A desire for a cleaner environment, good health and compassion for animals sums up our decision for opening a vegan restaurant in Fort Wayne, Le said.

“About 90% of our customers are not vegan. They come in to try vegan dishes and find out they are tasty and healthy,” Le said.

— Mary Anne Gates



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