## Baja Fresh dishes up healthy Mexican specialties

BY ELEANOR HEALD SPECIAL WRITER

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With about 170 locations across the
U.S., Baja Fresh Moxican Grill evolved
from a regional favorite, establishing its
first roots in California, to a national phenomenon. This chain restaurant has
proven that Americans like Mexican food
even more when its healthy and fresh.
You can't miss the Baja Fresh philosophy. Signs above the counter announce it
oud and clear. No lard. No MSG. No
freezers. No microwaves. No can openers.

Only the white meat of Grade A chicken

cris.

Only the white ment of Grude A chicken is used and for beef items, all fat is trimmed from lean USDA Choice.

Baja Fresh owner-partners Mike Lucci (yes, of Lion's fame) and Tony Versaci are also partners in 20 Burger King outlets. These two very fit-locking guys read restaurant marketing surveys. People want low-fat fresh foods that taste great. When Versaci's son wanted to join his father and Lucci in the food business, the hunt was on for a healthy eatery concept.

Baja Fresh fit the bill and the three partners opened in Troy in early April.

The location broke national sales records for the Baja Fresh concept was still on the drawing board," said Michael Versaci, "I was working at one of the Burger Kings. A man of Hispanic origin with restaurant management experience came in to inquire about a job for his wife. In the back of my mind was the still

Baja Fresh Mexican Grill Where: 1358 Coolidge Highway (in idtown Square), Troy (248)822-9000. Open: 11 a.m.10 p.m. daily. Menu: Fresh, prepared to order tradi-

Open: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. usuy.
Menu: Fresh, prepared-loorder traditional Mexican items to eat in or take e
out. Described on a separate menu,
party packs are also available.
Cost: \$1.85 to \$7.25.
Beverages: Soft drinks only.

unsolved puzzle of how we were going to create an authentic Mexican atmosphere for a Baja Fresh in Michigan. Because I speak Spanish, the man and I got talk-ing."

ing."
Enter serendipity. That man is Armando Heredin. Ho is now solely responsible for bringing area Hispanies to work at Baja Fresh and heads up the friendly, always smilling, efficient kitchen crew in the Troy location.

## On the menu

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In today's restaurant lingo, Baja Fresh service is called "fast casual." Meaning, you place an order, then receive a number. When it's called, you pick up the made-to-order items to eat in at one of the 110 seats or take out. The call-in atmosphere is bright and contemporary with an exhibition kitchen, some high-top tables and others that are standard size. All elements stand out against black and white tiled floors.

In an easy-going style, food is served on sectioned black plastic plates with sturdy

plastic flatware. It's the same for take-out items with the exception that they are covered with a plastic dome. If your preference is take out, you can call ahead, then pay, grap it and go.

A serve yourself Salan Bar has additionated the contract of the serve yourself Salan Bar has additionated the servery and four the server and four these servers and four them.

then pay, grab it and go.

A serve yourself Salsa Bar has additional toppings at no extra charge and four different made-fresh-doily salsas. Salsa Baja is reasted tomatees. Roja is red and apicy. Verde is green and mild. Pico de Gallo, translated as "rooster's beak," is made from finely chopped fresh ingredients and represents a traditional Mexican salsa. A generous portion of any salsa contains no fat and just 10-15 calories.

The best nspect of Baja Fresh is choice. Adults can eat light or if they're hungry, order the huge Burrito "Dos Manos," so named because you need two hands to get it to your mouth. It can be ordered as charbroiled chicken or steak with black or pinto beans, rice, grilled peppers, chilis, onions, chees, sour cream with both Pico de Gallo and Salsa Baja. Any Burrito can eo ordered "Enchilado" style, that is topped with melted jack and cheddarcheeses and Enchilado (that's not spelled incorrectly; it's a trademarked name) Salsa. Lettuce, tomato and sour cream are on the side.

There's a vegetarian Burrito and vege-

Salsa. Lettuce, tomato and sour cream are on the side.

There's a vegetarian Burrito and vegetarian Quesadilla. Also appealing if you don't want meat or poultry, is the Baja Fish Taco with tangy dressing and a squeeze of lime.

A good choice for kids is the Mini Quesa-Dita with melted jack cheese in a small grilled flour tortilla with rice and a choice of black or pinto beans.



Fare at Bala Fresh: Chicken quesadillas and chips.

If you enjoy chips and Guacamole, Baja Fresh chips are tops. The guacamole is made fresh several times each day from whole, ripe avocades. Chips are cut from fresh tortillas and cooked several times each day in pure Canalo (ii). A one-ounce portion of chips (about 15) contains only 7 grams of fat and weighs in at only 140 calories. That's not only fresh, but low-cal for Mexican food!

Over the next year, Mike Lucci and the Versacis will open four more Baja Fresh locations:

Rochester Hills: In mid-Sentember

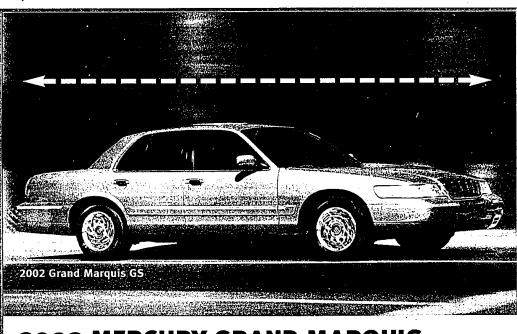
Rochester Hills: In mid-September

■ Farmington Hills: In late fall 2002 or early winter 2003 at 12 Mile Road and Halstead. In Spring 2003 another Baja Freah will launch at Northwestern Highway and Orchard Lake Road in Farmington Hills.

■ Southfield: Also fall 2002 or early winter 2003 in the expansion/renovation of Tel-12 Mall.

Eleanor Heald is a Troy resident who writes about dining, food, wine and sprint for the Observer & Eccatric Newspapers. To leave her a voice mail message, dial (734) 953-2047 on a tauch-tone phone,

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