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Latino diet campaign shifts back to basics

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In their village in Mexico, Esther Marshman's family -- she was one of 11 brothers and sisters -- lived frugally but ate healthy foods.

"We didn't have much money," says Marshman, who owns Ole Taqueria and Grill in Salinas, Calif. "We couldn't afford much meat."

Yet when watermelon, beans and other fruits and vegetables arrived on the kitchen table, they came fresh cut from the vine and with the sun's warmth rising from their core.

Only when Marshman moved to the United States, only when she drifted from that traditional village diet, did she develop diabetes.

That is why today her taqueria menu carries such healthy options as "Grandma's beans" -- whole Peruvian beans, bean broth, cabbage, cactus, pico de gallo and avocado.

Marshman's menu, which is mostly traditional Mexican fare made from fresh ingredients, is but one indicator of an aggressive local and national campaign to get many Latinos to include healthier foods from their native diets.

The effort also includes nonprofits such as the Boston-based Oldways Preservation Trust and the Latino Nutrition Coalition, which posted online in May an updated version of its 1996 Latin American Diet Pyramid. (Oldways is the umbrella group for the coalition.)

The aim is to help Latinos, and all Americans, protect their bodies from the ravages of serious, diet-related illnesses.

The effort to shift diet choices stems from alarming statistics about weight gain, especially in the Latino population.