

The Changing Face of Arlandria

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Dozens of Hispanic business owners have moved into the closed stores along Alexandria's Mount Vernon Avenue in the past decade, earning the neighborhood the nickname Little Chirilagua after the coastal village many Salvadorans fled during the country's civil war.

There are nearly 20 Hispanic-owned restaurants, bakeries, salons and sellers of books and inexpensive knickknacks that employ dozens and lure Latinos who are nostalgic for home to the six-block area.

The city's economic development planners say they want to build on this, creating a Latino version of the bustling Chinatowns in Los Angeles and New York. The hope is that non-Hispanics looking for authentic Latin food and products will come to Little Chirilagua, which is also known as Arlandria because it borders Arlington County.

"Hispanic folks from everywhere come. It's known in the Hispanic community," said Marc Brambrut, an economic development specialist with Alexandria Economic Development Partnership Inc. "We don't want to change the identity of the neighborhood." The city just wants to spruce it up a bit to make it a destination spot, he said.

Toward that end, a five-year, \$2 million economic development package passed by the Alexandria City Council a year ago includes plans to line the streets with trees, place festive banners on light posts and put sidewalk furniture in front of restaurants and bicycle racks on corners.

A community policing program has drastically decreased the neighborhood's crime rate in the past few years, which should make it more attractive to outsiders, city planners say. The city plans to market Little Chirilagua by holding such community events as street festivals. A local business group plans to hold a pupusa cook-off this summer, inviting people from outside the neighborhood to come to Arlandria to try the traditional Central American dish of cornmeal dough filled with pork or beef and cheese.

Brambrut said the city's plan will draw diners and shoppers from more affluent areas to the Hispanic establishments.

"They want to create beautiful, beautiful Arlandria. Okay, we are with you," said Paula M. Coletto, the owner of Huascaran Restaurant, a local Peruvian eatery. But Coletto said she was concerned the effort might cause rents to increase.

Hector Rodríguez Jr., a Guatemalan who manages the Chirilagua Unisex Salon for his father, also said he was nervous about rising rents. "Rent is already so high," he said.

Salvadorans started several businesses in Arlandria in the late 1980s, and Uruguayans, Guatemalans and Peruvians followed suit.

Walking down Mount Vernon Avenue, signs advertising pupusas for \$1.50 and telephone calling cards are written in Spanish. English is rarely spoken. The window of a travel agency advertises trips to El Salvador and Guatemala. A half-dozen Latinos in dusty jeans and sturdy workingman's pants walk into the local *cambio de cheques* establishment to cash their paychecks and send money to their families in Central America.

A little farther down the street, a woman fries plantains in La Feria Bakery's narrow kitchen. The bakery sells the fried fruit and sweet breads and employs about a dozen people. This year, the Uruguayan owner of La Feria opened another kitchen to bake and package fresh Salvadoran bread and sweets for *mercados*, or markets, throughout the area.

At the Chirilagua salon, a woman angles a pair of scissors to clip a man's short, brown hair, while a Latina waits her turn in the sparse waiting room. The salon employs seven stylists and says it takes in \$2,000 a week. At Huascaran, the ceviche—a cold dish of flounder, shrimp and scallops prepared with salt, pepper and lemon—draws Peruvians hungry for home. A plate costs \$12.95.

"We have to do what the neighborhood can afford," Coletto said.

A few non-Hispanic establishments predate the influx of Hispanic businesses. City planners point to RT's Seafood Kitchen, a Cajun restaurant that opened in 1986, as one of the businesses that draws most of its customers from outside the neighborhood. Former president Bill Clinton ate there. Christopher J. Wells, the restaurant's manager, said RT's hasn't really benefited from the Latino influx because most of its customers are non-Hispanic.

Wells said he likes the way the neighborhood is evolving but thinks it "could use more improvement." He said he supports the city's plans to improve the neighborhood but knows that some Latino business owners are wary.

In recent years, with Hispanic businesses reviving commerce in the area, other non-Hispanic businesses have moved in. A Subway sandwich shop and an H&R Block have opened. My Organic Market, a locally owned grocery store that is similar to Whole Foods Market, opened in Arlandria in October 2002.

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Economic development experts say that as Latino businesses lose some customers to non-Hispanic competitors, they must learn to appeal to other customers.

“It’s great that Latinos sell to the Latinos, but there is more than that,” said Alvaro de Moya, a professor at Montgomery College’s Hispanic Business Institute and an economic development planner who works with Hispanic business districts in Montgomery County.

It’s about marketing, de Moya said, citing a few small businesses he has worked with that have changed their decor and marketed themselves in English to attract non-Hispanic customers.

City officials say that the first test of its efforts to bring non-Hispanics to the area will be a large, city-sponsored street

festival Sunday. For years, this annual community celebration has been held in a soccer field nearby, but this year, the streets will be closed for a real fiesta. City officials say they hope non-Hispanics will come to Little Chirilagua to dance to salsa and merengue music and buy the pupusas, Central American snow cones and yuca con chicharron, a starchy potato served with fried pork.

Coletto, of Huascaran, said she had her own plan to woo non-Hispanics. She has applied for a permit to open a second restaurant in Arlandria called Spectrum.

“It will be international, not only Latino, with Mexican and Italian food, mostly seafood,” she said. “It will bring in outsiders and more business. Absolutely. We need multiculturalism.”

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