

Let the seasons shape what's on your plate

BA.5 omicron subvariant is highly contagious. If you are eligible for a second COVID-19 booster shot, get one! Double down on eating healthy (eat more fruits, vegetables, grains, fish, and smaller amounts of lean meats) to reduce your risk of severe illness. Get some physical activity and be well rested.

Q I try to buy all vegetables at a farmers' market, thinking vegetables will be "in season" and fresh, but I have seen produce that couldn't be grown locally. What is meant by "seasonal vegetables?" JT, Greenville

A I often stop at a farmstand on my way to the beach. Buying and consuming local, seasonal produce has benefits for your health, the local economy and the environment. To know what produce is seasonal in North Carolina visit www.seasonal-foodguide.org/veg/lettuce/north-carolina. At my favorite farmstand, a poster hangs at the entryway "Fresh Harvest Dates for Vegetables in Carteret County." The poster credits N.C. Cooperative Extension, Farm Bureau-Carteret and The Crystal Coast. Right now, you will find several types of squash, cukes, snap beans, sweet corn, okra, tomatoes, peppers and eggplant, field peas, herbs and flowers and watermelon. But of course, there are other items there as well. Kylie Nowicki, a fourth-year Brody medical



KATHY KOLASA

student, investigated this further. As Kylie says, "here is what I 'dug up' on buying produce at farmer's markets." "Seasonal" produce refers to the fruits and vegetables harvested and sold within the same season and varies depending on location. At the farm stand Dr. K visits regularly, she found corn and peaches from South Carolina long before the North Carolina crop "came in." Farmers often are in a cooperative or have agreements with other farmers to both provide increased variety and enhance their income. You can find a list of certified farmstands and farmers' markets at ncfarmfresh.com. Farmers strive to provide consumers with



The Leroy James Farmers' Market is among the sites featured on the N.C. Farms app.

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the highest quality, fresh, locally grown fruits, vegetables, ornamental plants and related farm products. They might have frozen and canned produce, as well. There are farmer's markets throughout North Carolina, and vendors at those markets must follow each market's rules and responsibilities. Some allow farmers to sell only their own produce, while others allow vendors to sell items, such as lemons or avocados, purchased from distant farms or farm cooperatives. LaRita Johnson tells us the Leroy James Farmers Market in Pitt County (<https://www.pittcountync.gov/599/Farmers-Market>) has growers who are in co-ops. Those vendors grow

some of their produce and get other produce from local farmers. While not always cheaper than store-bought, freshly harvested produce usually contains more flavor and nutrients, is more ecologically friendly, and experts say may even be better physiologically suited to our needs. Dr. K says that as a child she accompanied her mom to the farmer's market once a week because the produce was less expensive than in the store, whereas this year during our strawberry season, many local grocery stores had berries on "sale" for less money than the "pick your own" farms. We can guarantee you that the local berries were superior in taste, smell

and nutrition than those traveling from California, and worth the extra money — even more reason to support local farmers! The seasonality of "seasonal" produce also may support your body's natural nutritional needs. Think about it this way, in the winter season when the weather turns colder, more dense foods, such as root vegetables, potatoes and butternut squash are in season. Whereas in summer, with warmer temperatures requiring more hydration and less caloric density, berries, melons, and tomatoes are ripe for eating. In contrast, out-of-season produce, while available year-round, comes from distant areas and may lose some

of its nutritional value while in storage or transit. So if you enjoy green beans in the winter, you may get more nutrients for your buck by purchasing frozen vegetables that were processed at the peak of their ripeness. You asked about seasonal produce, but the same can be said for seasonal seafood. The peak of freshness and abundance for all seafood comes at certain times of the year. The North Carolina Sea Grant has created the "North Carolina Availability Chart" that shows the peak season for the most popular fish and shellfish. Visit ncseagrant.ncsu.edu. Right now, you would do well to select local shrimp, blue crab-hard, tilefish, tuna and look forward to spotted sea trout and flounder coming into season soon. The experts suggest eating fish at least twice per week. Helpful nutritional information about fish and shellfish can be found at seafood-healthfacts.org. And if you are concerned about mercury in fish, check out the chart at fda.gov/food/consumers/advice-about-eating-fish, which lists "best," "good," and "to avoid" choices. Note that the tilefish from our Atlantic Ocean is a "good" choice while it is to be avoided from the Gulf of Mexico. So whether it's produce or seafood, consider letting the seasons help shape your plate.

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La Ribera Mexican Restaurant updates menu

BY CHRISTINA RUOTOLO
Hot Dish Writer

If you love Mexican food and have lived in Greenville long enough, you probably have already eaten at La Ribera Mexican Restaurant at 658 E. Arlington Blvd. in Arlington Village. They have been serving up authentic Mexican food since 2011.

The expansive lunch and dinner menu features traditional Mexican dishes, vegetarian options, soups and a big kids menu, too. For the health conscious, you can ask them to make your meal with olive oil. La Ribera is famous for its variety of weekly lunch and dinner specials including the popular "Taco Tuesday," when shredded chicken or beef tacos (hard or soft) sell for \$1.50 each. They serve thousands of tacos per week and not just on Tuesdays.

Manager Hugo Ayala has been heading up the crew at La Ribera since 2014. He and the friendly staff will help you navigate the menu and find a fiesta meal the whole family will enjoy. And speaking of families, La Ribera is one of the only Mexican restaurants in Greenville that does not serve alcohol. They do, however serve a variety of Mexican bottled sodas with those awesome little ice cubes so many of us love.

They also added a variety of flavored waters to the menu



CHRISTINA RUOTOLO FOR HOT DISH

Among the new menu items at La Ribera is the Mojarra Frita, or fried tilapia.

recently including jicama, a Mexican fruit that's like a mellow apple, mango and pineapple. They mix water with fresh pureed fruit and the end result is a delicious fruity drink. I sampled the pineapple, which was tart, refreshing and perfect to cool you off on hot summer days.

I also was lucky enough to sample the horchata, a cold milk-based drink made with vanilla and cinnamon. La Ribera uses sweetened condensed, evaporated and whole milk for the base and serves it in the biggest mug you can imagine — enough for two people or one really happy kid! It was smooth

and creamy and tasted like a cross between rice pudding and a vanilla milkshake. It has happy written all over it.

Now that you are hydrated, it's time to enjoy some new menu items, including shrimp and fish tacos al la brava, chicken verde, tilapia and shrimp, a full fried tilapia and Hawaiian chicken.

The fish tacos filled with boneless tilapia topped with shredded lettuce, pico de gallo, shredded white cheese and sliced avocados, then drizzled with a chipotle cream sauce. I love these tasty tacos. The tilapia pairs beautifully with the cool

avocado and toppings, which help cool down the slightly spicy chipotle-style cream sauce. The same tacos also come with shrimp. Two tacos are \$12.89 with two sides like Mexican rice, refried beans, black beans, Charro beans, fries or a salad made with lettuce and tomato.

Another new menu item is the Mojarra Frita, which is a whole seasoned and fried tilapia, or mojarra, served with lettuce, tomatoes, onions, avocado slices and your choice of fries or rice. I had never ordered an entire fish before because I am scared of bones and because I could never eat it all by myself, so I needed some education before I tried it. The fish was beautiful with the fins still in place and the skin delicately scored and crispy to the touch. You can choose to eat it with your hands or take a fork and flake away the delicate white meat under the skin. I opted for my fingers to ensure I could feel for bones. It was easier than I thought as the meat was so tender it pulled away from the central bones with little effort. And for me eating fish with my fingers felt natural. I enjoyed the yummy bounty for only \$19.89.

To end my tasting I tried the new Hawaiian chicken. Yes, I just said Hawaiian when taking about a Mexican restaurant. That is the beauty of La Ribera; they add a delicious spin on menu



items to provide you with multiple options and flavor profiles to consider. Start with a grilled chicken breast sautéed with onions and green peppers and smothered in a rich sauce made with sweet pineapples and chili sauce, then top that with grilled pineapple rings. Pair this dish with two sides for only \$15.89. The sauce has a smoky yet sweet flavor similar to a sticky sweet barbecue sauce, and I love the combination of sweet and smoky on the same plate. I paired mine with grilled mushrooms and onions and seasoned rice. I enjoyed the detour to the islands.

Make sure you check out the new menu items for yourself at La Ribera in Greenville. It is open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Saturday. You can order take-out, through Grub Hub, Door Dash or Takeout Pros, enjoy curbside service, or come inside and dine-in. For more information, visit their www.lariberamexicanrestaurant.com or call 565-8945. If you would like to visit the Washington location, it's at 702 W. 15th St., 944-7734.

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