

Profile of Lester Cabezas: Focus on Food



Mercy Food Services Director Lester Cabezas is ebullient even on an ordinary Monday. Dressed in a chef's jacket, sporting rimless glasses, he gestures with both hands from behind his office desk. Open cook books—*Easy Organic Cooking*, *Vegetarian Menus*, *Nuevo Latino-New Latin American Cuisine*—all have pages tabbed and notes in the margins.

"I'm a happy guy," he says. "I have a great kitchen staff. They're happy and friendly. Food is one of the main things people think of when they come here."

He has reasons to be happy. He came from Nicaragua as a teenager, and his family was wise enough to insist he attend school rather than immediately go to work. He graduated from Capuchino High School in San Bruno, worked at MacDonald's, and most luckily 26 years ago, found a job with the Sisters of Mercy. He started as a dishwasher and educated himself into his present position. He learned by watching others, especially former Food Service Director Nora Gleason, who was at Mercy for nine years and was his mentor and friend.

Nora taught the whole staff about being organic, fresh and local. As a result, the kitchen buys from small farmers and growers, and their menus minimize meats. "We go light, use less butter and salt and no grease or cream," says Lester. Those delicious soups are thick with vegetables, not fillers or fat. "We adapt these recipes," he waves toward the cookbooks, "for the numbers of people and the tastes of the guests and Sisters. And using seasonal ingredients is very important."

In response to requests for health conscious menus, he prepares a big salad bar and vegetarian soup daily. Lester is proud of his staff, who work hard to serve those eggplant terrines or rosemary chicken on time and with respectful attention to guests.

"There is no turnover in the staff," he beams. "They are loyal. I work every day to empower them. This is not a job. It's a mission. Every day we think about what Sisters and guests like, and we make everything with a whole lot of love."