

## **Hispanic Businesses Flourish in Downtown Peekskill**

*Stores, restaurant cross cultural lines to fill a need*

Story by Henry Naccari

Two weeks ago, on a surprisingly mild Saturday night about 7:30 p.m., Wilson Narvaez was found helping a long line of customers bag groceries and load up their shopping carts at his grocery store, Peekskill Marketplace.

A few blocks away, Piedad Quituisaca, proprietor of 99¢ Power, was standing behind her cash register ringing out customers and speaking Spanish with those who were looking for particular items.

At Azuay's Fabric Store, Ohger Quituisaca stood behind his counter while Spanish music played in the background and employees bustled about.

Around the corner at Ruben's Café, Ruben Alvarez was busy helping patrons who packed his restaurant to try the Mexican cuisine he has been offering for several years.

While all four own separate, distinct, flourishing downtown Peekskill businesses, they all have one thing in common: they are Hispanic entrepreneurs catering to the burgeoning northern Westchester County Hispanic community.

"I opened my restaurant because I did not see this (Hispanic) food offered around here," said Alvarez, 39. "I thought it would be a good idea."

According to the 2000 census, there are 25,745 Hispanics, out of a total of 194,808 residents, living in northern Westchester communities, a figure that will undoubtedly grow when the next census occurs in four years.

Comprising 13.2 percent of the population, Hispanics have been, at least in prior years, a largely ignored, untapped consumer market.

But, as the Hispanic population has grown throughout the years, downtown business districts are witnessing a growth in Hispanic themed and owned shops, which stay open later than traditional mom and pop stores and eventually wind up catering to residents of all ethnicities.

No place is this becoming more evident than in Peekskill, where 4,920 Hispanics, in a city with a population of 24,010, reside.

While the exact number of businesses that cater to Hispanics is difficult to pin down, a quick walking tour of the city revealed that from North Division Street to the heart of downtown, numerous stores have opened.

Ranging from hair salons to restaurants to grocery stores to a bakery, Hispanics have opened shops that offer foods at relatively low prices.

At 99¢ Power, which is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., seven days a week, and is located on Bank Street, one can find items ranging from candy to household goods to wrapping paper.

"We have a little bit of everything," Quituisaca, who owns the store with her brother, said through a translator.

When asked about her customers, she stated that although she initially opened because she wanted to work for herself and cater to those of her ethnicity, she soon discovered her customer base crossed all ethnic and cultural lines.

"This community, this place, is very friendly," said Quituisaca, who hopes to expand her business.

A few blocks away, at the cross streets of Main and Broad, sits Peekskill Marketplace/Ctown, the city's first downtown grocery store in decades.

Opened a year ago, and owned and operated by Narvaez, the market has become a popular destination for shoppers who once had to travel by bus or car to Stop & Shop, A&P or ShopRite.

Narvaez, who used to work in grocery stores prior to opening his location, said he wanted to open the store because he grew weary of having to travel to New York City, specifically the Bronx and Queens, to find Hispanic food and groceries.

And in talking with others, he discovered they felt the same way.

So, the 35-year-old became an entrepreneur, offering Hispanic coffees, soy products, flavored foods, whole pigs, fresh fish, goats, and other items, such as spicy flour, to make tortillas.

Peekskill Marketplace/Ctown also sells American food found in most major supermarkets at lower prices.

Thanks to the combinations of ethnic food, Narvaez has discovered that Hispanics are not the only people flocking to his location.

"People are shopping here because they like it," said Narvaez of his store, which is open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day. "We are offering them good, personal service and affordable goods."

Customers agree with Narvaez.

Pushing a small shopping cart, Irene Butler, who is African-American, said she shops at the store because of its downtown location, friendly atmosphere, and good prices.

"I can walk here," said Butler, who lives downtown. "I don't have to take the bus and they have good prices."

A Hispanic customer, who did not wish to be identified, said he was happy the store, and other businesses, are opening because he was having a difficult time shopping at other places.

"It's hard to walk into a store and no one speaks your language," he said through a translator. "You don't have to worry about that here."

Across town, Alvarez, whose restaurant is located on Division Street and is open from 8:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., is one of the rare restaurants in the area that offer something other than Italian food.

He opened because home cooked Mexican food was difficult to find in northern Westchester.

Since opening, Alvarez has had many packed nights at his place, where he can sometimes be found cooking the meals, working the bar, or chatting with customers.

The more businesses that open, whether Hispanic or not, said Alvarez, is good for his business.

"More business means an increase in foot traffic," said Alvarez. "It's good for everybody."

Community business leaders, activists, and city officials agree with Alvarez and are also aware of the rise in Hispanic businesses.

Recently elected Business Improvement District (BID) President Joe Lippolis, who owns River Towns Realty, a downtown real estate agency, said, like the chamber, his group intends to start outreach programs.

Lippolis went on to say as the Hispanic population continues increasing, the need for businesses will continue.

"As you look around, more Hispanics are buying homes in the area," Lippolis stated. "As the community increases, it makes sense to have businesses open that cater to that community."

Community activist Alfredo Duenas, a Peekskill resident since 1999, said since one-third of the city's population is Hispanic, potential proprietors have a tremendous opportunity to cater to a growing market.

Like others of Hispanic descent, Duenas often traveled to other cities and municipalities, such as New York City and White Plains, to purchase Hispanic food or other items.

Now, he can stay at home in Peekskill and do the same thing.

And, Duenas added, the businesses are successful because they accessible to everyone.

"It's pretty impressive to go into one of these places and see non-Hispanics happy to go into the store and buy something," said Duenas. "These stores are helping the economic growth of the city."