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Small business close-up

## Corporate cuisine

**Azar's brings well-known restaurant experience to company cafeterias**

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Staff writer

August 13, 2004

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### Azar's Food Services

Owners: Viola and Victor Azar

Address: 1514 Flint Road, Spokane

Estimated 2004 revenue: \$400,000-\$500,000

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Both Viola and Victor left the business several years ago to pursue separate business plans. Their sister, Katy, took over Azar's Restaurant and runs it now at 2501 N. Monroe. Meanwhile, Karim and his daughter, Shanez, run Azar's Express at 3624 E. Sprague. Both restaurants are run separately from Azar's Food Service, which incorporated a year ago.

Even before the Triumph job, Victor and Viola Azar had decided that their hearts belonged to food service. They had asked Ben Cabildo, director of Spokane's business-development agency, AHANA, to help them craft a business plan.

Then Cabildo heard that Triumph wanted to replace Sodexo USA. He contacted the Azars and had them meet with Triumph's screening committee. The Azars beat out four other local competitors for the contract.

Cabildo also alerted the Azars, and another AHANA member, that Avista wanted to switch to a different food-service provider.

Steve Nelson, facilities manager for Avista, went out to Triumph and tasted the Azars' food and looked at how the workers there responded to the menu. What he saw, and what he tasted at Triumph, cemented the deal, Nelson said.

In both the Triumph and Avista cases, the service is provided on a profit-loss basis. That means the companies don't subsidize the provider; every cost for food is borne by the Azars, though both companies provide free utilities in their kitchen and cafeteria.

The Azars spend most of their time at Avista, having hired other workers to manage the Triumph operation.

"We make 30 days of unique and different menus," Victor said. Azar's could offer 60 straight days of varied food choices, "but our customers say they don't want to wait two months for the dishes they like to come back," he said.

Nelson said the Azars have turned around a food service that had been losing money under Sodexo. They're serving about 75 breakfasts and 125 lunches daily, both increases from before they took over on July 1, he said.

The Azars cook great food, plus they bring a family atmosphere to the service, Nelson added.

"Victor is always asking people, 'Try this dish' or 'Tell me if there's anything else we can get for you.' He's very personable," said Nelson, whose favorite dish is the Azars' Salisbury steak.

At both the Avista and Triumph cafeterias, Azar's provides three groups of offerings. First, there are basic comfort foods like meatloaf, mashed potatoes and lasagna. Next come their own favorites, which are items with spicier mixes and flavorful meat toppings, meant to cover rice or noodles. Thursday, for instance, Viola made a warm dish of northern beans cooked with garlic, onions and tomatoes.

"Those are the foods my mom served us at home," said Victor.

Third are fruit and salad bar offerings that take care of anyone looking for healthy, basic fare.

"We pride ourselves on cooking everything from scratch," he added.

Said Viola: "Preparing food for me is fun. I consider what we do carrying on our mother's (Lebanese) legacy. She was an excellent cook and showed her love through her food."

The Azars say they're committed to gradual, careful growth. They hope to add a full catering service later this year or early next year.

Avista worker Doug Kelley said he's delighted with the upgrade in food service at the cafeteria.

"I personally like the spicier dishes. But it's also great that I can get something healthy and simple when I just need a quick hit," he said.

Both Avista's Nelson and Thomas at Triumph regard in-house food as a key part of a well-run company.

In companies their size, the variety of food preferences and different lifestyles present a challenge for whoever provides cafeteria service. When the quality drops, as Thomas admits it did under Sodexo, workers get testy.

"As the company president, I used to hear about food-

service problems (here at Triumph)," Thomas said. Since the Azars took over, the work force has been happier, she said.

"The Azars have done a wonderful job for us," she said. "If our food service had gone the other direction after we switched, it would have been very detrimental to our business."

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