



### NEW JERSEY DINING | ATLANTIC HIGHLANDS

## Southwestern Fare, Inspired and Varied



Aaron Houston for The New York Times

SHORE STAPLE The Copper Canyon, decorated with an earth-toned motif.

By SCOTT VEALE  
Published: May 28, 2011

CLOSE by the beaches of Sandy Hook, Atlantic Highlands has a fairly lively eating scene, with fancy and family-style restaurants alike along the lower end of First Avenue, steps away from the town marina and Raritan Bay. If you're not paying attention, though, you might walk right past one of the best: There is no sign outside the [Copper Canyon Restaurant](#), just a rust-colored horseshoe logo above the door.

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Aaron Houston for The New York Times  
A serving of the tinga tostada.

"I couldn't afford a sign when I first opened," Michael Krikorian, 45, the owner and head chef, said. That was 15 years ago, when he started the place in a humbler building directly across the street; he moved it eight years later to its larger current home adjoining the [Blue Bay Inn](#), which Mr. Krikorian also owns and operates.

"It's been word of mouth ever since," he added.

Based on a couple of recent visits, it's easy to see why people keep hunting down Copper Canyon, for Mr. Krikorian and his team are cranking out seriously worthy Southwestern-style fare. And the word of mouth must have reached the [James Beard Foundation](#), which nominated Mr. Krikorian this year for best chef in the mid-Atlantic region.

The place has a welcoming atmosphere. The décor includes children's artwork, courtesy of Mr. Krikorian's three children. There is a casual bar area that can become boisterous, and a separate dining room has large windows and walls done up in a vaguely abstract, earth-tone motif. The tables and booths are amply spaced, though the high-backed black leather chairs overwhelm the otherwise gentle furnishings and block the lovely evening light.

You might start with the homemade chips and salsa, and one of the half-dozen Mexican beers or eight house margaritas on hand, though you can also choose from more than 150 tequilas. It's a big and varied menu — Mr. Krikorian has no formal culinary training but was drawn to Southwestern cooking after a trip to New Mexico in the late '90s — and it's well worth traveling beyond the guacamole.

The wild greens [salad](#) with pecans is spiced with cayenne, ancho chili, black pepper and soy sauce; it was a fiery pleasure. The seared tuna taquitos with avocado, corn tortillas and serrano chili sauce were another winner, as were the panko-coated crab cakes, thick and wonderfully complemented by a tangy chipotle chili salsa.

The only disappointment was an order of the bland Southwestern spring rolls with chorizo, black beans and jack cheese, which sounded better on paper.

Among the entrees, the fajitas — pork, chicken, shrimp or vegetable — were well turned out as specials one evening but easily surpassed by the mahi-mahi, which was pan-fried and crusted in a wok before being roasted in the oven; paired with freshly sautéed vegetables and pickled onion rings, it was a meal in itself. So were the scallops served with a bracingly al dente [risotto](#) flavored with chorizo, and the strip steak, expertly seared with a pepper-hickory crust and accompanied by thin and crunchy chili fries.

Most striking was the tinga tostada, a mesa-size heap of shredded chicken, baby spinach and black bean purée atop two sauces — one red chili, the other sriracha — laid out in colorful patterns across the plate. It's a robust concoction, with its sweet and spicy elements balanced by the slight bitterness of the spinach.

For dessert, a tasty, if oddly pistachio-colored, key lime [ice cream](#) tart is recommended; Southwestern-accented cheesecake and flan are also on the menu.

If some of the prices seem a bit steep — and they do, honestly — the portions are usually generous, and unless you have the appetite of Thor, you'll find yourself carting home leftovers. But what's wrong with treating your household to a midnight snack of cold steak and risotto? Now that's word of mouth.

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## Copper Canyon Restaurant

51 First Avenue

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(732) 291-8444

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### WORTH IT

**THE SPACE** Main dining area seating about 90, in addition to 15 seats in the bar area and another 30 seats in the summer in the courtyard of the adjoining Blue Bay Inn. Wheelchair accessible.

**THE CROWD** Varied, with a number of families earlier in the evening, becoming younger and thirstier as the night goes on. **THE STAFF** Casual, friendly and helpful.

**THE BAR** Full bar, featuring a dozen beers, a wine list of 30 bottles, \$22 to \$46, and more than 150 tequilas.

**THE BILL** Dinner appetizers, \$8 to \$16; entrees, \$16 to \$31. American Express, Visa, Mastercard and Discover are accepted.

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**WHAT WE LIKED** Tuna taquitos; wild greens [salad](#); panko-coated crab cakes; pan-seared mahi-mahi; chicken and baby spinach tinga tostada; caramelized sea scallops and chorizo [risotto](#); pasilla pepper New York strip steak.

**IF YOU GO** Lunch: Monday to Friday, noon to 4 p.m. Dinner: Monday to Thursday, 4:30 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 4:30 to 11 p.m.; Sunday, 5 to 9 p.m.

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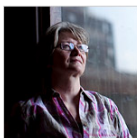
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