

A Cuban Kitchen in Greenwich Village

by Dina Alvarez

At eighty-two, my Cuban mother complains her taste buds are off and that she doesn't know what to eat anymore. She has a host of health issues including a thyroid condition and high blood pressure that she manages, but the one she speaks most about is her lack of appetite and frustration over enjoying food. "One of the true delights of life," she says.

Most phone conversations are a blow-by-blow description of everything she managed to eat that day and any hints of flavor that came through that reminded her of a dish she used to make when cooking didn't feel like such a chore. Although she goes out less after a recent fall, she never misses visiting the farmers market at Abingdon Square on Saturday searching for the freshest ingredients. She may not be able to fully savor those market finds, but her Greenwich Village kitchen, the same one since 1966, still manages to serve up some of the best Cuban fare when she's feeling up to it. Just as if she was back in Cuba. Muscle memory.

My mother legally immigrated to this country in 1966 with my six-year-old sister in tow. She didn't know the language, a single person other than my father, or what a cold front felt like until she stepped off that plane on a bitter March day. But the warmth of our kitchen never lacked a hot Cuban meal. While she could have landed in much worse neighborhoods than Greenwich Village, she was still blindsided by the music, a downtown hippie vibe along with a dirty subway, hotdog stands and the smell of pretzels outside Radio City Music Hall. One of the few remnants of home lived in the Cuban Chinese restaurant called "La Rampa " on West 14th Street, the only place we would eat out on the rare occasion.

Around the holidays, my mother never veered from her personal menu of "Lechon Asado" for Christmas. It took all day to cook in our tiny oven. Roast pork bathed in a garlic and olive oil rub baked until the skin, scored with a ¼ inch deep



crosshatch pattern crackled and crunched against your teeth like hard candy. We would pull pieces and pop it into our mouth before it even made its way to the table. On New Year's Eve there was seafood paella and if we were lucky, a few extra lobster claws thrown in for good measure. It was the only time of year lobster made an appearance in our small apartment.

Since we never had a real tree, the smell of Christmas always centered around these two meals, spiked with the scent of Lestoil, her favorite disinfectant used exclusively during December. It was the only way to get the house ready to ring in a spotless New Year along with twelve red grapes that were to be eaten at the stroke of midnight to ensure good luck for every month of the incoming year.

Dinners on regular days included: steaks pounded so thin you could almost see through them, sauteed with onions and tucked into a soft white hero bread; pork chops served with black beans, white rice, and sweet plantains or "tostones;" green plantains twice fried to perfection and lightly salted; ropa vieja, the traditional shredded beef dish of Cuba; or picadillo, a ground beef meal made with onions and pepper and white rice, somehow appeared magically within the hour of her arriving home. Even though she had a full-time job at a factory sewing bedwear for Gloria Vanderbilt (located in the building that is now Chelsea Market), my mother always managed to have a meal on the table. TV dinners, so coveted by my sister and I, never had a chance, but to my mother's credit, she did eventually graduate to making meatloaf and spaghetti although they were never her strong suit. She always made a great turkey for the holiday, replete with flan for dessert.

My mother no longer cooks for the holidays, but our weekly Sunday afternoon meals entail lunch at either Anton's or Bus Stop or Mémé's. All are located on Hudson Street near her home of fifty-six years, where our conversations revolve around how much the neighborhood has changed and about her early years in Cuba. In these restaurants, I watch my mother clean off her plate, sip a glass of wine like a pro, and

happily take in the restaurant ambiance as part of our Sunday together. Taste buds or not, I know that the social setting, having someone else do the cooking, and our weekly outings filled with conversation drive her desire to eat. I tell her that her appetite seems fine and joke that she eats like a horse. She always replies, “In good company, everything has flavor.”

On cold wintery days mom will invite me upstairs for a meal, the chore of cooking suddenly forgotten. This year, just a few days before Thanksgiving, she asked if I could come over so she could show me something. A surprise, she said. She’d made Cuban ajiaco, my personal all-time favorite meal, an elaborate dish that is half soup, half stew made with root vegetables, corn on the cob, and dried cured beef. As I was fawning over how truly delicious (and unexpected) it was she told me, “If I would have told you I was making it, I bet it wouldn’t have come out as good.” It felt like an old Cuban proverb when she said it.

As we sat together eating our Cuban meal, I asked her if she ever regretted leaving her entire family for a new country, waiting fourteen years before she saw any of them again and seeing them only a handful of times since. Did she imagine a country so different from her own, one with customs about which she knew nothing? “I never thought of going back and living there again. Not even for a minute,” she said. “This is home.”

Sitting in the apartment where I grew up, I realized that there’s nothing a Cuban mother won’t do for her daughter, especially in the kitchen. Muscle memory or not, even if she can’t taste a thing. I asked her to make arroz con pollo next time she was inspired to cook. “Of course,” she said.





Dina Alvarez was born and raised in New York City. She holds a BA in Film and Media Communications from Hunter College and has spent most of her working life in Corporate America. In 2004, she launched SomosPadres, the first bilingual parenting publication for Latino families in NYC. She is currently working on an anthology focusing on mid-life reinventions which will be released in October of 2023. Dina resides in NYC with her husband and son.