



## Chef Ariel Fox is Expanding Our Understanding of 'Authentic' Cuisine

The VP for Dos Caminos and Del Friscos pulls back the curtain on what it takes to launch a restaurant, talks about the difference between competing on Hell's Kitchen as a newbie versus an established chef, and shares the personal change that inspired her new cookbook: [Spice Kitchen: Healthy Latin and Caribbean Cuisine](#).

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- Alicia Menendez: Chef Ariel Fox has worked in and led some of the most renowned kitchens in the country, STK, Harding's, ACME, Dos Caminos. That success is not surprising. Ariel knew very young that she wanted to be a chef, and her performance in culinary school proved that she was exactly where she was meant to be.
- Menendez: We talk about her approach to being a contestant on Hell's Kitchen with celebrity Chef Gordon Ramsey, her unique perspective on food's authenticity, and the inspiration for her new cookbook, *Spice Kitchen: Healthy Latin and Caribbean Cuisine*.
- Menendez: Ariel, thank you so much for doing this.
- Ariel Fox: Thank you for having me.
- Menendez: Where am I talking to you today?
- Fox: I am actually in an office at one of my restaurants in New York City. And we are launching a new menu today, so it is a busy day for me.
- Menendez: Okay. That explains so much, both about why you are in your gear, why you were 10 minutes early for this interview, which nobody ever is, so thank you so much.
- Menendez: I want to go back though and start at the beginning because your family is not Mexican, but you grow up in a Mexican community and surrounded by Mexican cuisine. Take me back to growing up. What your family was like, what your parents were like. And the influence of growing up somewhere where you're not actually in the majority culture.
- Fox: Yeah. I mean, it's pretty wild. So I grew up in Santa Cruz, but I went to school in Watsonville, which is where my mom taught, and she's a bilingual teacher. She's been studying Spanish for many, many years. And Watsonville is a farm working town. I mean, it's right in the heart of where a lot of the produce that this country eats comes from that part of California. And there's a lot of migrant workers. I mean, the school I went to in Watsonville was probably 90% Mexican community.
- Fox: In a way I never felt like I was out of place or didn't belong, even though I come from a super mixed background, just none of it happens to be actually Mexican. It just felt like the norm to me in every way, shape or form. I mean, when I would go to my friend's houses and spend the night, I mean, I was just completely surrounded by the most amazing, authentic Mexican cuisine. I actually felt more out of place when I left that town because I felt like that community that I had been so, so immersed in, I missed it. And I don't think it ever left me, obviously.

Menendez: When you say super mixed background, what did that look like?

Fox: My father is Afro-Colombian and from an island that is off the coast of Columbia in the Caribbean, so it's very much Caribbean influenced. His family lineage was brought over during spice trading. And so that's my father's side, and then my bio father's side.

Fox: And then my mother is Irish and German. And then I have a stepfather who's Black from Jersey. So I just kind of have a very strong connection to many different routes.

Menendez: So much of your mythology really is grounded in that time in Watsonville, not just those years growing up in a rich Mexican community, but also the time you spent at a small farm there as a teen. What was the work that you were doing, and how did it begin to shape how you thought about food?

Fox: It was called Mariquita Farms, and it was really one of the first organic farms in the slow food organic movement in the Bay Area. And I mean, I wasn't like heavily farming, but I was definitely packing vegetables to bring up to the San Francisco Farmer's Market.

Fox: I would work the farmer's market on the weekends, so we would load the trucks and we would drive up to San Francisco. That was really interesting because this was before everyone was talking about farm to table.

Menendez: But that also then gives you exposure as a very young person to some titans of the industry.

Fox: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, one of our biggest clients was Alice Waters and a bunch of San Francisco names. You had chefs coming all over from Berkeley, Sacramento, San Francisco, coming over and supplying their restaurants.

Fox: And we actually had the opportunity to go and eat in these restaurants too. And I didn't even realize that was such a privilege at the time because the chefs all loved their farmers, so they would invite them in. And anyone working on the farms got to do stages or internships at those restaurants. So it was very, very cool to be in that world.

Menendez: I mean stages, does it mean staging? What does it mean?

Fox: Yeah, I mean, that's the French where ... It's basically you're doing a stage, you're pulling a shift. So you basically get to come in and work for a day.

Menendez: Do you remember what the biggest surprise of that experience was, of being invited into someone else's world?

Fox: Seeing the machine, it was such a beautiful process, from the first person who arrives that day, to when it's time for service. And it's almost like we're opening our doors, the pre-shift. I mean, it was very magical to see the prep happening and the line being set up and the fire being stoked and everything, all the equipment being turned on. And then the server's all gathering, and it was like an orchestra of people.

Fox: And it's like that moment when it's like, "Okay, we're open for service." I can't really describe it. I mean, I just feel like it was just magic happening. And it was a different time I think in the business, for sure.

Menendez: You decide to go to culinary school, and you're going to forgive me because my French is so bad that I'm going to ask you to say the name of your culinary program.

Fox: I went to the Cordon Bleu, which is the California School of Culinary Arts.

Menendez: And what was the biggest learning curve?

Fox: I just remember, that was where I really learned that I was competing against the people next to me. You would have a chef instructor who would do a demonstration. It was very intense. You'd only get to see it once and he would talk really fast and you'd be taking notes, and it's like the sauce and the this and that. And then it was like, you would go and

everyone would have their tray of their ingredients, and it was like you had to duplicate this masterpiece that you just saw one time.

Fox: And it was about the ... I would challenge myself to get it as close as possible to what that chef produced, every step of the way. From the knife cut, to the brunoise on the vegetable, to the gloss on the sauce, to the julienne on the garnish and all of that. And then it was that moment where we would all put our plates up and I would try and not look at the person next to me and compare. But I mean, that was really what it was all about. Who really got it as close to the chef instructor.

Fox: And then I did very well. I was always one of the top one or two students in the class, so I realized I was where I was supposed to be.

Menendez: As I understand it, you spend the early part of your career in Los Angeles. And in addition to all of the staging, as we've talked about, it is also a different time in that it's pre Me Too. And the reckoning that has happened in every industry has not yet happened in full in your industry.

Menendez: And I've heard you say, "I put up with more than I should have." And I wonder what that looked like, and if you think it's different today.

Fox: I think that there is more awareness today. I think that then, I just remember that the norm was to joke about sex. It was a common thing in the kitchen, dirty jokes. I mean, every chef had a reputation and it was like, this is what we do. We make dirty jokes in the kitchen. And as a female, you're maybe the only one, maybe there's two, there are a lot more savory women chefs now, but back then I think a lot more women were in the pastry path.

Fox: And it was just inappropriate comments all the time. In the walk-in, vegetables that are shaped like body parts and joking about the size of it. And just a lot of totally ... At the time I didn't realize that I don't have to listen to that while I'm working. I'm trying to focus on my job. I don't know if it's 100% different now, but I just know where I work now we don't really allow that kind of talk. And if we see it, we stop it. And I think that's the thing, is that now, if you see it, you do have to say something. That's the difference now.

Menendez: Take me back to your decision to move to New York. What was the thinking and the thought process behind that decision?

Fox: I had reached the ceiling with the company or in that location, and I really wanted to move up to oversee more than one unit. That was my moment when I realized I liked the corporate world as well, I've been able to oversee multiple. And the company I worked for that opened STK in LA, their main office was in New York. So they basically said, "You have what it takes, but you have to move out to where we operate."

Fox: And so I was getting out of a relationship. I had just filmed the first time that I was on Hell's Kitchen and it was about to air, and I was like, "You know what? I'm just going to get out of Dodge." So yeah, I mean, it was time. It was like, did my time in LA and I was ready for I guess the big leagues.

Menendez: In the course of those years there is a lot of launching, launching of restaurants, launching of new menus. Can you choose one of those launches, and what it is that you've learned over the course of time about what a successful launch looks like?

Fox: I mean, the first one that comes to mind absolutely has to be when I launched ACME. I left corporate for a little while to do a passion project with one of the chefs from Noma. And at the time they had been best restaurant in the world for nine years in a row. Of all the people in New York he chose me to be his chef de cuisine.

Fox: The pressure of that opening was probably the most pressure I've ever had in my life to perform. And the level of food that we were executing, I had never done foraging type of food, to just all the things I'd learned from working in busy, high volume restaurants, I just had never done that level of execution. I mean, we had a full brigade, it was all eyes on us. We were going after the stars in the New York Times. We wanted the two and we got the two. And when we got those two stars it was such a moment. I can't even explain it, it was such a moment of accomplishment.

Fox: But I think what that opening taught me was just I got to work at a level of excellence that not all places will afford or give you the budget for. I'm very good at running at any level of budget, but that was the one time in my life where I got to perform at a level of excellence that kind of like there wasn't really a dollar cap on it. And I don't think I'll ever have that opportunity again. But I got to learn how to be excellent, and I now apply that in every opening that I do, regardless of the opening budget that we have or what we're trying to hit.

Menendez: As you said, you do one season of Hell's Kitchen and then you return and compete again. I wonder, especially for someone who's pretty established, what you see as the value of those reality show, competition shows, when it comes to people in the food industry.

Fox: I mean, the first time I didn't question it because I was still coming up and it was like, "Okay, this is appropriate." And I came in third, I was disappointed. I didn't think I pushed myself hard enough and I told myself, "If they ever asked me to come back, I will because I want to come back and win," because I realized now what it takes.

Fox: And I definitely had to think about it a lot when they did call 10 years later, because there's the thought going through your head, "I'm already doing really well." What if I perform poorly and now it's on live television, and I have all these people that report to me and respect me. I've earned my respect, not because of television. I've worked my way up and I don't want to undermine what I've done in my life by now maybe looking like a total clown on TV, because you have no control over how they edit you and-

Menendez: Yes, you were not a Kardashian, you did not have final edit.

Fox: I think though that because I had so much to think about going into it, I think that I was so careful all the time when I came back. And a lot of people said that about me, they were like, "You never said anything too crazy or ..."

Fox: I just, I left like there was a lot on the line and it wasn't that. There was a lot on the line in my real life that was so much more important, not to undermine the show, but there was just so much more important things to me outside that I wanted to make sure that I represented myself well. And I actually embraced it as an opportunity to do that, to come back and represent myself well for the women in the field, and certainly came in and was going to win and that's what I did.

Menendez: I love that energy. "I came in to win."

Fox: I did, that was not going ... That was not a question.

Menendez: You're out with a brand new cookbook, Spice Kitchen: Healthy Latin and Caribbean Cuisine. Part of the impetus for Spice Kitchen, your own decision to change your lifestyle, learn about nutrition. What was it that inspired that change?

Fox: Honestly it was not so much ... I mean, people assume it's about being skinny and fit. It was actually more about being tired all the time. And I worked my way up the ladder. You work a little less physically, but the mental strain is much more intense. There's certainly very blurred lines on schedule, when you're on and when you're off because it's really all the

time. And that's a choice, that's nobody's forcing that. It's however serious you take your job, that's the amount of effort you put in. And mine just happens to be very much all the time. If I'm available, I'm available.

Fox: And I needed to really figure out how to overcome just being tired or just mood. There's a lot of things that you can do to hack your own body and figure out how to have more mental clarity, and to have more energy, and to have a better mood just by what you eat. But a lot of the books out there and stuff out there for this type of shift in lifestyle is a little, I don't want to say one dimensional, but I felt like I wanted to represent these flavors and these types of food, and be able to merge that space of flavor and health.

Menendez: You also have a really interesting take on something that I've just been thinking about since I read you, speaking about this, which is this bristling at the idea of authenticity. What is authentic Mexican cuisine? What is authentic Cuban or Colombian cuisine.

Menendez: In your world there are folks who put a lot of emphasis on that. And I'm really into how you reject that. And I wonder if that's something you came to over time or if there was a moment where it became clear to you?

Fox: There was a moment of a few years back where that word was just everywhere. I don't remember exactly when, but it was just everything was authentic, authentic. And it was like, there's a lot of things that I relate to that are important to me that I'm not Mexican, I'm not Puerto Rican, I'm not Dominican, I'm not Jamaican, but I'm also not French, I'm not Italian. All these things that I feel very passionate about in my cooking. And there was a time or a question where it was like, "Well, you can't really cook authentically if you're not from there."

Fox: And I kind of got a little bit shy and intimidated by some of the foods for a while. And I really was not okay with that and needed to say, "Okay, no. I'm not any of those things, but I use things from all of these ..." I mean, I'm French trained, I learned ... It's not fair. It was like a, this is a not fair moment. And I'm really good at working with these things and using these techniques. And I think the authenticity comes from you have to love it and you have to cherish it. And if you are trying to incorporate something from a place of love and positivity, then that's all you need.

Fox: And so that's the moment when I rejected it and said, "You know what? I'm not those things. I mean, I don't come from those places, but I'm absolutely using authentic ingredients, authentic techniques, and that's okay." It was kind of like, "I'm allowed to be in this space and you guys are going to let me be there."

Menendez: Reclaiming it for yourself. My final question for you, Ariel, is, you are now a mom. And I wonder, are you making eight course meals or is your kid getting the same frozen pizza that my kid's getting?

Fox: Yeah, well, when my daughter ... I have a stepdaughter who's going to be nine, and she went through this phase. When I met her, she was three and she was very picky. And I said, "Oh, I'm not going to let ... When I have my baby that's not going to happen." And my daughter, Charlotte, she ate everything when she was a baby and then she turned two and a half and we went into the zone, the toddler zone. And you know what? Her favorite foods are mac and cheese, chicken nuggets, pizza, rice.

Fox: So I'm battling it. I'm trying, I'm trying to introduce things. When I can I make healthier versions of it when I can sneak it in, she doesn't realize. I told myself too that I would never make two different meals because that's just not cool. But you know what? I'm not eating chicken nuggets and pizza. So guess what? Right now in my house, I've got two different

meals and I'm going to get out of that as soon as I can. But for now, that's what works for us. I feed the kids and then I feed my husband and myself.

Menendez: Ariel, thank you so much for doing this.

Fox: Thank you for having me. It was a joy. Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer, Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead, Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode.

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