



## Why Bricia Lopez Wants You to Embrace the Art of Asada

As she was researching her new cookbook, *Asada: The Art of Mexican Style Grilling*, the LA restaurateur began to realize how men dominate the grill scene. Now, she's trying to change that by giving others the tools and inspiration to master asada. Bricia explains the financial margins necessary to sustain a successful restaurant, and the pride and responsibility of being Oaxacan.

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**Alicia Menendez:** I want you to imagine someone grilling carne asada, the scent of the marinade, the smoke swirling in the air. Chances are you are imagining a man, and if so, Bricia Lopez wants you to expand your vision of who's behind that grill. The co-owner of LA's Guelaguetza has made a name for herself not only as a restaurateur, but as a fierce proponent of Oaxacan culture and cuisine. Bricia talks us through why some restaurants succeed when so many fail, the inspiration behind her new cookbook, *Asada: The Art of Mexican Style Grilling*, and what she's teaching her son about the privilege of being Oaxacan.

Bricia, thank you so much for doing this.

**Bricia Lopez Maytorena:**

Oh my gosh, girl, please. Anything for you.

**Menendez:** Bricia, born and raised in Oaxaca, what was on the dinner table when you were growing up?

**Lopez Maytorena:** I grew up in a very beautiful household where my mom would make a homemade meal every single night and a different flavor agua fresca every single night. From something as simple as just like, a vegetable soup, to an estofado de pollo. My three favorite things she would make would be pollo enchipotlado, which is a chicken braced in this chipotle tomato sauce. And then the second one was her salsa de carne frita, which is fried pork ribs, also in this beautiful tomato with morita sauce, which is also a type of chipotle. And then the third one, she came up with this--I, it's so funny--I tell her you need to, I think she sent it to me once. She had this recipe called pollo místico that she made up, which was basically just like guisado of chicken and plantains and oranges. And I think that day she probably didn't have much and she just made whatever she could with what she had. And she just called it mystic chicken.

**Menendez:** Well, of course she can't give you the recipe for mystic chicken.

**Lopez Maytorena:** It was like rice, beans, rice and beans always. I think base rice, beans, tortillas, cheese, those three things are base, and then soup or chicken or anything, an agua fresca always.

**Menendez:** Was she pulling you into the kitchen or was she pushing you away from the kitchen?

**Lopez Maytorena:** I just had this conversation yesterday with a chef that came over to my restaurant and we were learn--I was teaching him how to make mole. I was like, I'm going to be like my mom right now because my mom has this way of not telling you you're doing it wrong, but there's an actual push. There's an art to this push where she'll tell you to do something

and if you don't do it well, that's your one chance, and if you don't do it well, she'll grab the pan from your hand and just do a little shimmy, a little pivot to just an actual push you from it and be like, yeah, you're not going to make it here. Do you know what I mean?

Menendez: I do, I do.

Lopez Maytorena: She's just an out, a very kind low-key shimmy and just push you off and then you just have to watch. So I learned how to cook by watching her not, she never was the woman that sat there and was like, "okay, mija, like this is the way it's done and this is the way you hold the knife." I'm like that with my son today. His knife skills are pretty impressive for an eight-year-old. And I sit there with him and I teach him and I show him and he knows how to make tortillas and he flips them and he uses his hands. He's learning these things, but I'm teaching him. My mom never taught me.

Menendez: Your mom is the chef at home, but it's your dad who ultimately opens the restaurant in LA. Was the restaurant itself the reason that your family moved to the United States?

Lopez Maytorena: Yeah. So my mom was always hooking at home. My dad was a mezcal maker. He made mezcal and sold mezcal. He was always a merchant. He was always just like a traveling sales man, traveling through Mexico, selling mezcal, slanging mezcal, making it just hard work. I feel like my family's history is more of if you are not out in the field, if you're not sweating, if you're not physically tired, at the end of the day you're not really working. But in the early nineties, Mexico had a huge money devaluation, which hasn't happened. And I think Americans aren't really familiar with the devalue of a currency. So imagine if tomorrow the Fed said, okay, everyone who has a \$10 bill, that \$10 bill's not going to be worth \$10, not it's going to be worth a dollar. And it was from one day to the next. So since my dad was in commerce, people owed him money. And then how do you even wake up to those news the next day with four kids in school with no money in the bank? Basically your money has been slashed by 10. Thankfully at this time, my dad had a visa and a passport. I don't know how, but he did. So he was able to come to the US. His sister lived here. He really wanted to become a gardener. That was what he wanted to do because he realized "if I do this laborer, they pay me this much. I could make a great living out of this." But then he started selling Oaxacan food to people from Oaxaca, and then shortly thereafter he did a pop-up. What you would call right now like a popup, back then was just like he posted up in the corner and slang tortillas and tlayudas. He was a street food vendor and then saw a place that was for lease, just went for it, opened a restaurant, started doing very well from the beginning and then told my mom, "I think we need to move the entire family here because there's no future in Mexico. Our future is here." So we all moved. I was 10 years old, crossed the border with a backpack full of cheese and have been making food ever since.

Menendez: What kind of cheese?

Lopez Maytorena: Well, Oaxaca cheese, the only cheese worth smuggling through a border.

Menendez: Once you were in the United States, Bricia, what were the lessons you were being taught at home about what it meant to be Oaxacan and then what were the messages you were getting outside of your home about what it meant to be Oaxacan?

Lopez Maytorena: I think there was no clear messaging at home saying like, "okay, Bricia, this is what it means to Oaxacan," right? Because I am from Oaxaca and I went to school there. I danced all the folclórico, my parents were in a Oaxacan restaurant. I was surrounded by Oaxacan community. I always loved our food. My mom made an altar every single year, just like my grandma. We never lost any of our costumbres. It was always the same. It was

almost as if we never left other than now we couldn't go outside and play. There was other things that we couldn't do. Believe it or not, the world in America was more kind as to what it meant to be from Oaxaca than the world in Mexico. I think when I was in Mexico, the world was telling me I wasn't enough because I was from Oaxaca, but I also went to I think an 80% non-Latino school.

My parents sent me as far as they could, so they sent me to a school in Palisades, and if anyone's familiar with Los Angeles--Palisades, I'd say it's 95% white. So even though everyone was very kind, my teachers were very kind, my teachers really took to me, they really wanted to help me with my English and just everyone was kind as a 13-year-old girl in middle school, not really knowing the language, looking around. Everyone looked like an episode of *Saved By The Bell*. I didn't. I think that was very hard on my self-esteem and on my personal value because there wasn't any women that looked like me on TV or writing books or doing anything that I was aware of. I mean, the people who were on TV really showcasing our food. I mean, we were. My family was in a very tiny sense. So when I turn on TV, I would only see Diana Kennedy and Rick Baylis showcasing Mexican food. So I grew up thinking that was the goal. If a white person cooked your food, like, oh my God. And it wasn't until really my early thirties, twenties that I was just sort of took that back and said, "no, I don't have to be a white woman in order to promote my food." And I think this new generation of girls who, I didn't grow up in privilege, my kids are growing up in privilege, so I think they're going to grow up with that audacity of not being apologetic. I didn't grow up like that, so I always had to keep your head down and say thank you, and just be grateful for what you have. And I didn't grow up in privilege, and it wasn't until recently that I really tapped into that white woman audacity that I want to have. And I think everyone should tap into that and we all have it. And that's sort of like what I want my children to grow up with.

Menendez: Watching your dad run a restaurant, what were the biggest lessons and what were the biggest mistakes you watched him make?

Lopez Maytorena: Biggest lessons, I would say anything is possible. You don't really need anything but sheer will to make things happen, work and will get you wherever you want. Mistakes, I think I'll learn a lot more mistakes. And my dad, I think he became a millionaire and went bankrupt in the span of 15 years. So I saw the rise, but I saw also the major fall, and I think that the fall taught me a lot more than the rise. It's like not having people around you that know more than you, not being afraid of asking questions and having financial literacy is one of the most important things that we can do for our families, and taking responsibility for ourselves for doing that and not putting the burdening on anyone else, especially your 13-year-old daughter.

Menendez: Draw a picture for me. What was the burden that was being placed on you?

Lopez Maytorena: Not just me. I think my siblings, I mean, my dad to this day can't speak English. So I also understand my father grew up and my mom grew up in a traumatic household. Like most of our immigrant parents did and always saw children as older than they really were. Our parents were just like, you know how to speak English, can you just talk to my accountant? You know how to speak English, talk to my lawyer, you know how to speak English, go. So my siblings and I were just bombarded with this information and asked to make decisions, business decisions, even at 21, 22, what are you supposed to know out of college?

I was trying to hook up, I was trying to talk to boys and my dad's like, can you figure out how this cookbook things work? And so I think not having a team around you that knows more, not that knows more than you, but being okay with surrounding yourself with great people without feeling like you need to be the one in charge of everything is really important.

Menendez: Talk to me about the economics of a restaurant. Why so many fail...

Lopez Maytorena: Run!

Menendez: I think we all have those neighborhoods in a restaurant where like, how has this restaurant been here forever? And then you have those restaurants, you're like, the restaurant was so great, what happened?

Lopez Maytorena: Yeah. Well, I will say that restaurant economics vary throughout the country. Restaurant economics, just like any business has to do with margins, has to do with your profit. If you put in \$10, how many dollars is that \$10 going to make you? If you work in let's say tech or service as a business situation, if you are selling a t-shirt that you buy something for \$2 and then you resell it for 20, you have yourself a great business. And that is why those pieces of sell for a lot. In a restaurant there is so, it's pretty much like an event production slash movie making slash everything that you can think of all wrapped up to serve people food. And at the end of the day, you're probably making maybe one to \$2 per \$10. I'm talking about California economics. So pretty much out of those \$10, \$6 are going to go to your food and to your staff.

So you have \$4 left to play with rent, utilities, tables, plumbers, electricians, anything else. You have to fight for that. As time goes on, those \$6 are now quickly turning into maybe seven or eight that are going to your food and your staff. So now you're only left with \$2 to play with. So the margins in restaurants are very, very small. So it's a volume game. Even when you talk to McDonald's restaurant owners, you can survive off of owning one McDonald's. The play is to own 10 McDonald's because the margins are so small. But then when you have 10 of them, then that makes sense.

Menendez: One of the things that you said, I think this was on Instagram that you said this and caught my attention as part of the reason I want to talk today, which is that there are so few women in grilling specifically, and I wonder how that shows up for you that there are so few women in grilling.

Lopez Maytorena: So I didn't know, I didn't think of this book and say, "I'm going to go because there's no one that looks like me and I'm just going to be the first." I had this book inside of me and I knew this is the book I wanted to make. And it took me a while to write a second book because there was nothing that really spoke to me and I felt very passionate about until this. And I was like, this needs to be a book a hundred percent. And no one's written something like this. And I love doing carne asadas and I love hosting people, and this is me. I'm putting my best work out there. So it wasn't until we were doing the, I wouldn't call it proposal, we needed to send this sort of five pager to my publisher so they knew what I was doing and we needed to do a little bit of research, a little background research. And then we all kind of came to the realization there's zero books on carne asada, like the actual art of having an asada at home. And there's a only a handful of women who are talking about grilling, let alone Mexican grilling. And also in Mexico, when you think about grilling, you just think about those northern, tall, brown handsome men out there with their hats and their boots grilling their carne asada. There isn't like this skinny, tall chick with bleached hair from LA. That's not what you think about when you think of someone grilling

your meat. So I just wanted to tell people, you don't have to look at certain way to get down on the grill. And it's cool. It's okay that your hair smells like grease and fire and charcoal on the weekends. It's not a big deal, just wash it.

Menendez: One of the original ways that we connected was actually at this pivotal moment when there was a recording released of several LA council members and they were making racist remarks, including about Oaxacans. And you wrote this beautiful piece. You wrote, "our community has always been left behind. They drink our mezcal, they eat our corn and love to use us as a photo prop when convenient. Yet deep down, they still think less of us." And the title of that piece was "The Privilege of Being from Oaxaca" or "The Privilege of Being Oaxacan." What are you teaching your own kids about the privilege of being Oaxacan?

Lopez Maytorena: For me in this household, really it's all around food, but also I've had a very not serious conversation with my son. He's only eight years old, so I have to be careful of what his brain can handle as far as seriousness. But he needs to understand, number one, I want him to feel extremely proud of his food. And I tell him, "God gave us a gift, and that's to give the world the best food in the world. And it is our responsibility to make sure to maintain that because we represent our culture, that is what we do." So we have to make sure that we're in the kitchen, we respect it, respect the ingredients, respect where we come from, and he takes that very serious, maybe a little too much that he thinks he's like a world class chef. There's a separate conversation where he means to be a brown boy in America, and certain things that non-brown boys can do in school that they can get away with because of the way they look and certain things that we cannot get away with because of the way we look.

So that I think conversation is starting to happen slowly for him because that's just the reality. And I don't want to put a blind eye to that, but for him is knowing that we have a responsibility to maintain our food for so many people that are going to come after us. And also him understanding that his grandpa, my dad was eating the same recipes that he's making today. And that to me is beautiful. I love the evolution of food. I love going to restaurants and when chefs get creative, and I love going to fancy fine dining restaurants, don't get me wrong, and I will continue to do it, but there's something so special to me about maintaining that same essence.

I mean, it blows my mind. My great-grandma was making these dishes for my dad, and I'm making the same ones for my son. And that's why I love Oaxaca so much, my first cookbook, because that I know I can hand this off to my children and my nieces and my nephews, and they will continue to preserve. It's like almost like an encyclopedia, a preservation of a culture in that book, asada is a preservation of her life in LA. The idea that my son is going to be hosting people at his house, being the guy who knows how to make the best rice and beans and asada, that's beautiful to me, and that's really why I do this.

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

Lopez Maytorena: You're welcome.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer, Tren Lightburn mixed, this episode we love hearing from you. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our [merchandise@latinatolatina.com](mailto:merchandise@latinatolatina.com) slash shop. And remember to subscribe or

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