



Chef Claudia Sandoval Wants You to Ask "Why Not Me?"

This solo mom won the sixth season of MasterChef and parlayed that success into a catering business, a culinary consultancy, and multiple TV gigs, including her new Discovery+ show, Taste of the Border. Then, when the pandemic sidelined her plans for a brick and mortar, Chef Claudia found a way to rebuild. Now she wants her success to inspire others to ask, "Why not me?"

Alicia Menendez: Chef Claudia Sandoval was making ends meet as a solo mom when a friend suggested she audition for a new reality show, MasterChef. Claudia went for it, even in the face of criticism from those she loves most, and she won. But that is not even the most interesting part of her story. What is really fascinating is what happened after. She started a catering business and culinary consultancy. She worked as a judge on Telemundo's MasterChef Latino, and started to make plans to open a brick-and-mortar eatery. Then the pandemic hit, and Claudia's big dream went from just within reach to impossible. Claudia opens up about the toll that took on her mental health, the opportunity to prove her proof of concept, and the meaning behind her new Discovery+ show, Taste of the Border. Chef Claudia, thank you so much for doing this.

Claudia Sandoval...: Of course. Thanks so much for having me.

Menendez: Growing up in San Diego, it was your mom and your grandmother who were the cooks in your home. What was it that they were cooking?

Sandoval: Oh my gosh. Just super traditional Mexican food, everything from beans and rice and all of that stuff, to really, really more complex stuff that you don't even really see in San Diego, like asado Mazateco. My family's originally from Mazatlán, Sinaloa, so there was a lot of fresh seafood, a lot of soups, especially when it was hot, because that's so the Latina thing to do. But lots of very authentic, traditional Mexican food, lots of tortilla making, all of that.

Menendez: I want you to take me back to ... I don't know if it's 2014 or 2015. Do you pursue reality TV, or does reality TV pursue you?

Sandoval: Way back when, 2014, even before that, I ran an Instagram community called Instagrammers San Diego. And one of my kind of co-curators, moderators for IGers San Diego, Lauren Gallaway, was managing a community online for these debriefs after the show, like, "Oh my God. And then Claudia told Eric ... " Because she was very ingrained in the MasterChef community, she got first dibs on knowing when the auditions were going to be. She reached out to me and she was like, "Claudia, I know you're carving your way and doing all these things. However, I also know that the majority of the stuff that you post on Instagram is food." She's like, "I feel like you should totally do this." Now, at that point, I had already been a single mom for many, many years, but I remembered when MasterChef originally started, and I want to say that it was Jennifer Behm had just won. And I

remember my ex-husband back then going, "Oh, you could totally cook all of that." Even he was like, "You should go on this show."

So when she brought it up, I laughed and I was like, "Oh my gosh. That's so funny that you say that. You're not the first person to tell me that I should go on this show." So it really wasn't like they looked for me, or I was looking to be on a reality show. I think it was just like, "I love to cook. Maybe I should try and do this, and see if it's an opportunity to change my life."

Menendez: And it was.

Sandoval: Needless to say. Yeah. No, it's been completely ... I can't believe sometimes that this is my life. It's very exciting, even this many years after.

Menendez: Well, the way that you put it in one of your bios is you decided that your life at that moment wasn't enough. Which I get the sense of playing it safe, playing it small. Can you take me back to that moment? Because making that decision, that's the actual life-changing moment, not the reality show itself.

Sandoval: Oh yeah. Listen, I think especially as a single mom, not to mention that I left my marriage with nothing, literally nothing. Everything that was in my apartment up to that point had been donated to us. I had moved from a county government job to establishing my own space in this advertising agency, and created a position even. I created an experiential event marketing manager position so that I could transition from where I started to where I was.

But even then, with the cost of living in San Diego, I was living paycheck to paycheck, and sometimes not even paycheck to paycheck. I was still negative \$34 because something was just over. I remember back then I had a blog called The Adventures of a Single Latina Mama, which is for sure still up, and I remember writing a blog about how, one day, my daughter asked me for pizza, and I literally only had \$4 in my pocket. And I stopped in my tracks, and it was as if the world stopped.

When you're responsible for another life, it puts some added pressure on you. You think to yourself, "There's no way that I can be irresponsible and go out on a limb and try to do this thing that has the potential of making me lose my job." There's a lot of risk when you go on a show like this. I went through it. My mom and me got into a huge fight before I left. I've never even talked about that, but she had had that whole, "How are you going to be so irresponsible, to leave your daughter for this many weeks, and this many months, for a chance?" And I'm like, "Mom, it's a chance. It's a chance at changing our lives. Why wouldn't I take that chance?" I think it was also one of those moments where it's fight or flight. What else do you do?

Menendez: And you fought. You fought and you won.

Sandoval: So hard. So hard. Yeah.

Menendez: I got to go back to the fight with your mom. Once you won, did she understand it?

Sandoval: Oh no. It didn't even take that long. No, because I would call ... You get a 10-minute phone call once a week, so I ended up calling my mom at some point, and being like, "Hey, I've gotten further." And she's like, "Oh my gosh. This is crazy." It's funny because close to the end, actually, when we were in the top three, I called my mom ... Or she called me, excuse me. And I was like, "Listen, I'm going to sabotage. I'm going to get myself out of this competition." And she was like, "Whoa, what the hell?" She was like, "Whoa, wait a minute. I didn't raise a quitter." And I'm like, "You didn't even want me to come out here."

But I think it also taught my mom something really important, even about herself, because now we've even had the conversation. She's like, "You know what this all taught me?" she said the other day, was something along the lines of, "Why didn't I ever go on that show? I'm the one that taught you how to cook." And I'm like, "Agreed."

Menendez: I think there's a tendency to think that you have success, and then everything is just up from there, just ascendancy, nonstop. And I think one of the things you learn, if you're lucky, in your 30s and your 40s, is that it is much bumpier than all that.

Sandoval: Oh, yeah.

Menendez: And I think for you in particular, the fact that you have this big slash, you win. You parlay it into your catering and consulting business. You're doing all of these major brand partnerships, and then you make the decision that you want to open a brick-and-mortar bakery, and you Kickstart, you raise money, and boom, the pandemic-

Sandoval: The pandemic.

Menendez: ... comes in. Take me back to that time.

Sandoval: Yeah. I think for many years ... A lot of people don't know this, but your contract with the production company for a show like MasterChef ties you with them for a minimum of three years. So my thought process was like, "I don't want to do anything if it continues to be tied to somebody else. I want it to be my own. I don't care if it's small, I just want it to be mine. I don't want to have investors. I don't want to have other people who are going to try to make me serve guacamole and chips and salsa. I want to be able to serve food the way my family would serve it, in Mazatlán, Sinaloa."

The original plan was to open up a restaurant, and there's a great organization called the Women's Business Center in National City, California. I grew up in National City, so I spoke to my friend, the mayor, whose sister I was in the ASB with. Just so you know, it wasn't like, "Now I'm schmoozing with mayors." No. We literally all grew up together. Anyway, she was like, "You've got to go work with them." Worked with them, they helped me create the business plan, create projections and financials. I went through what any small business owner would do. And then I thought I was going to have more work. Or I thought, better yet, that MasterChef Latinos was going to be renewed. And then it wasn't. And that was a huge heartbreak for me, because we were doing so well and ratings were great, so I just didn't understand it. It was that blow.

I didn't tell anybody that, because I wasn't allowed to. Then I was like, "Well, what do I do?" And I sat with my best friends, Mikey and Michelle, sat down with them and was like, "What am I going to do with my life?" And they were like, "You've got to keep going forward with this plan. Why don't we just start a Kickstarter?" Then the next meeting I had with the Women's Business Center, I told them that I wanted to do this. And they were like, "That's a good idea, but it would be a better idea if you got a loan, a loan from a friend or a mom." And I was like, "My parents aren't ... They don't have money to let me borrow \$100,000. That's not the kind of family I grew up with." So they were like, "Okay, well, fine. That's fine if you go forward with this Kickstarter, but we want to talk to you about your business." Then they were like, "We've noticed that there's been, I don't know, something like 30% increase in the amount of restaurants that had just opened in San Diego." I was like, "Shoot." So they were like, "Let's talk about that backup idea you had." And I was like, "Okay, let's talk about it." Cochi Dorado. There is no upscale ... If you look around all of the United States, we have all these upscale French pâtisseries, right? And I'm like, "Why can't Mexican bread have that moment?" And we moved forward with Cochi Dorado, and I had

filled out all of the paperwork, done all of the work. We raised \$59,000, something like that. I want to say it was March 11th, roughly. March 11th. I had reached out to my SBA person, and I was like, "Hey, when are we going to sign docs so that we can start this? Because I got word that they can start April 1." And then I reached back out and I was like, "Hey." March 12th. "Actually, they just told me that they can start on March 20th. Can we do this? Let's go."

No response. And I was like, "What is going on?" Of course, as you and I both know, already in those times, we were already starting to hear that cases were going up, and cases were going up, and cases were going up. So we were all a little weary. And I felt it. I felt it in my gut, and I knew that something bad was going to happen. I knew it. I just knew it. And that's why I think I kept pressing and pressing and pressing. So then, when the world shut down on the 17th, I want to say, I emailed her immediately, and I was like, "I haven't heard anything back from you. What's going on?"

She waited until, I want to say, two or three days later, reached back out and was like, "The SBA has decided not to issue any more loans to any new businesses because of the pandemic and because of the shutdown. There's no way that anybody's going to be able to work. There's no way that you're going to be able to sell. So why would we invest in new business?" And I was like, "What?" Because, mind you, at this point, I was just waiting for the go. On my end, I had already paid for architects. I had already paid the construction workers to come out and scope everything out. I had already ... Just so many things. I had already paid for first, last, deposit on a location. I'm not joking. I want to say maybe 75% of the money that I had raised in the Kickstarter was gone.

I was just broken. I was completely broken. I didn't know what to do. I felt like I had invested seven months of my life at that point, more than that probably, all for it to just be right through my fingers, just was such a gut punch, on top of knowing that I didn't have MasterChef Latinos to fall back on. I went through a really, really tough depression, and then I was being attacked by local media saying, "Well, where's the money? Where's the money for all of her Kickstarters?" Not knowing, of course, that I had already emailed all of my Kickstarters and said, "If you want to refund, I will gladly refund you." Only three people requested a refund, because they were all like, "No, this isn't your fault. This is crazy. All of us are affected right now."

Menendez: The world is crazy right now. How did you pull yourself out of that period of depression?

Sandoval: I didn't. Somebody else did. Being honest, I didn't. I was in a really, really rough place, and I was just ... I don't know. I was nonfunctional, which is obviously a sign of depression. I was sleeping all the time, sleeping way too much, not calling people, not responding to texts. Because obviously everybody was like, "Are you okay?" And I understand that. I understand the wanting to make sure that I'm okay. But I was so distraught and so heartbroken, and it was just not a good time. And Chef Maeve from Sugar and Scribe reached out, and she was like, "You are so much better than this. Get it together." And I was just like, "I just don't ... " A lot of people don't know this, but I had invested in logos, and printed stickers, and purchased bags, because that's all the stuff that you have to buy in advance because it takes months to make. I was like, "What am I going to do with all these boxes? What am I going to do with all these bags? What am I going to do, Maeve?" And she was like, "Just come have breakfast with me." And I was like, "Okay." We sat down, and she's like, "I have an idea." And I was like, "Okay." She's like, "How about you come and do a popup here?" And I was like, "What do you mean?" And she's like, "You

already have everything in place. You knew where you were going to be baking. Why don't you find a commercial baking space and just do a popup out of here?" And I was like, "Like a day popup?" And she's like, "No, like a month-long popup." And I was like, "What?" And she's like, "Listen, if Cochi Dorado can't live for the rest of its life, then that's fine. But at least all of the people who invested, all of those people who believed in you, all of the people who wanted to see this all come to fruition, who have been looking at all of your pictures, will get to taste what they were craving and wanting."

And I went home and was just like ... And I'm not joking, within three days, I was like, "Okay, I got it. I got the place. I got the thing. Let's do this." And she's like, "Are you serious?" And I was like, "Yep." We sold out every single day. We would open at 8:00 and by noon, we were already sold out of everything. And when I say everything, I mean over 2,500 pastries. It was insane. And it also made me believe I wasn't crazy. This is something that could have lived.

And I think, even now, it still bums me out, because it was a good idea. It is a good idea. And I don't know whether I have ... I know I do. I know I have it in me, but I just don't know whether I have the resiliency right now to do it again. It's almost like when you get cheated on, and you're like, "I don't know whether I want to jump into another relationship again." I don't know whether I want to jump into another business again. It sucks. It sucks. I guess the whole Dory thing, just keep swimming, kind of applies. You just can't give up. For so many of us, the bounce back hasn't been as wonderful as everybody claims it is. It's been a slow bounce back. It's been more of a crawl back. But we're crawling still, so it's still movement.

Menendez: Speaking of movement, talk to me about where Taste of the Border fits in to this next Claudia 3.0.

Sandoval: Taste of the Border, man. I developed Taste of the Border with Authentic Entertainment, something like four or five years ago. And everybody said no to that project because it was too ... With that current administration talking so much about the border and how politically charged that topic was, nobody wanted to touch it. And it's incredibly frustrating, because the show was never meant to be political. It was, "Guys, I don't care what your politics are. We can all gather around a table and agree on delicious food." And really, it was more about the commingling of cultures across both sides of the border. I had the best crew that I have ever worked with. The first day I met my director, he goes, "Let's win an Emmy." And I was like, "You get me. You get me. You understand what I'm trying to do, which is to tell people stories." I know it because I grew up as a border town kid. My mom was a border town kid. All of my friends and family, my kids' godparents work on the other side of the border.

And we'd come back and forth all the time. I knew the richness of culture living on the border, and I knew how foreign it was, because when I started traveling and explaining that to people, they were like, "What do you mean, you cross the border to go have tacos?" And I was like, "Yeah, I cross the border, and then I go have tacos, and then I'm back in the United States in 15 minutes." And they were just like, "What?" "There are like 75,000 people that cross every single day. Do you understand that?" And they're like, "Wait, what?" A lot of it really is ignorance. And my thought process was, let's just gather around a table and have conversations about how you were inspired by your region, by migration, by whatever it is, and let's share that story.

Menendez: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this, Claudia.

Sandoval: Of course. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Florence Barrau-Adams mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, or wherever you're listening right now.

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