



## How Chef Grace Ramirez Found Her Place Outside of the Kitchen

Culinary school helped hone her skills, but she still needed to figure out who she was as a chef. That journey led her to hunting, diving deep into the world of sustainability, and supporting communities in the aftermath of natural disasters. Grace opens up about the grief she experienced in the wake of divorce, and the life changing joy of nourishing others.

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**Alicia Menendez:** Grace Ramirez lives her life in quantum years. She spent the early part of her career in production before trying her hand in front of the camera as a cooking show contestant. She got her butt kicked, and instead of slinking away, doubled down by earning a scholarship to go to culinary school. From there, her career took off and with it, her marriage unraveled. Grace moved through her own pain by helping others parachuting into Puerto Rico to provide meals for those impacted by Hurricane Maria, the type of service that would come to define the next chapter of Grace's life. We talk about how chefs do not wait to be invited. They take their knives and go, the identity crisis that led grace to learn to hunt, and her effort to bring nourishing Latin cuisine to students across this country. Grace, thank you so much for doing this.

**Grace Ramirez:** No, thank you. I've been looking forward for this for so long.

**Menendez:** Grace, you are born in Miami, raised in Venezuela, and so often I hear that story in reverse. Why was it that you were born in Miami, and then raised in Venezuela?

**Ramirez:** It was the 80s, and my grandparents had an apartment in Miami, and it was very typical for Venezuelans back then to have a second home in Miami. My mother is very smart, and she had a scholarship to go to London. She didn't like it. She said it was too cold, so then my grandparents said, why don't you go to Miami and study in Miami instead? It's closer to us. It's a warmer climate, and I was born there. My grandparents basically raised me, because when I was a year old, my father passed away and my mom was a working mom. My grandfather is a very interesting character in my life. He was a general in the Venezuelan Air Force, so he would fly from Caracas to Miami literally every week on a Hercules. And I remember literally growing up in that cabin of that airplane.

**Menendez:** When you lose a parent that young before you ever really know them, and then you're raised by a mom who's trying to figure things out in real time, what were the expectations of you? What was communicated to you as a child?

**Ramirez:** I now look back, and it all comes from that. My drive, my overachieving. It comes from a space that I wanted my mom to see me. I wanted my mom to acknowledge my existence. I had to work on the relationship with my mom a lot, because the relationship with my mom was complicated. But I now look back and say, of course, my mom had a high school sweetheart that she had a child with, and it was in her 20s, who passed on Christmas Eve. Very tragic car accident, and I was a year old. So imagine I look back, and who can blame her? She was trying to figure herself out, and then she had this hypersensitive child. I was

like the sunshine of my family, but my mom was very tough on me, and she was constantly wanting to give me a father. She was in search of a partner and a father for me, but not necessarily she was seeing me.

So I was always like, look at me and being overachieving everything. Now that I look back, that says a lot of who I am today, and thank God I healed the relationship with Mother, now we get along great, but it was very difficult for a very long time.

Menendez: That desire to succeed, to be seen, it does take you to a lot of interesting places in your life. Again, the same way I say people are born in Venezuela, and then usually move to Miami. Normally I hear about people who start their career in culinary and end up in television. Again for you the reverse, and you started your career in television in Latin America. You're doing PA work, right?

Ramirez: I was PA since I was 16 with Miguel Angel Alonso, he's an amazing photographer. He ran a very famous agency at the time that he would do photography, and he would do promos. I was a child model, but I was also helping out in that studio. So then I went from Miguel Angel Alonso studio to working at Nickelodeon Latin, to then working at MTV, to then leaving Miami, and then coming to New York to launch MTV Tres for Hispanics in the US. So by the time I was 24, I was supervising artist related specials. So I got to interview from Jennifer Lopez to Beyonce, to Ricky Martin, and to Shakira, to everyone that was someone at the time, and that is still relevant. So I felt very lucky to have had that kind of media experience. I've had many lives, as you know, but I think going from a director producer role to then going to culinary school has been one of the biggest transitions for me to starting over.

Menendez: Well, especially because it doesn't happen in a totally linear way, right?

Ramirez: Yeah. I had to start kind of over again in that transition of being kind of a supervising producer role for MTV to then literally quitting. I had done almost a decade at MTV, so I had enough, and then there was this channel that started becoming really cool called the Food Network, and I didn't know anyone at the Food Network. I ran out of my savings, because I was asking around who knew someone at the Food Network until at a party, my ex-partner said to me, oh, I found a lead. I found a person who knows someone that works for Bobby Flay's production company, Rock Shrimp. I was like, hook me up. And I was very persistent. I normally am, very intense and intentional, and I finally got a meeting and I became an associate producer, which is obviously four levels down from what I was doing at MTV Tres, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get my foot in the door and work at this network. And so I started as an associate producer, and then I became the director of the show, throw it down with Bobby Flay.

Until then, I left to do Master Chef, the first master chef ever, and I went and casted out of 60,000 people. They picked me. I sucked at it. I got kicked out on the second episode, cried a lot, ate a lot of ice cream, thought my life was over. But Gordon Ramsay when I was leaving, he said to me, he goes, you know what? You should come back after you do culinary school, because you definitely have the passion for it. And I said, well, I'm never doing this show again, but you're right. And David Chang cookbook said he did culinary school at the French Culinary Institute in New York City, and that it took him nine months. And I was like, oh, okay. Women have children in nine months. I can give birth to culinary school in nine months. I'll go and check it out. But it was \$50,000. And I was like, how am I going to pay for this? This is insane.

I'm still paying for my first career, and I cannot afford \$50,000. But they said, well, we give two scholarships a year. So I said, oh, okay, well, I'll go win that scholarship then. And I did. That's how I went to culinary school.

Menendez: Hindsight being 2020, of course, it makes sense so that a person who has the type of grounding you have in media, and then you add the culinary degree that your television career in this space explodes.

Ramirez: It was very intentional. Honestly, in Venezuela, you could only work in front of the camera if you were Miss Venezuela. So now, it all makes sense. I was a child model until I was 16, and at 16 I got taken to that guy who tells the Miss Venezuelas, you could be Miss Venezuela, you cannot be Miss Venezuela. And he said, I wasn't tall enough. I wasn't pretty enough. I wasn't skinny enough, I wasn't enough, enough, enough to be a Miss Venezuela. That really traumatized me. And I was like, well, if I cannot be Miss Venezuela then I can't be in front of the camera, but I could be an amazing producer director. But inside I always wanted to be in front of the camera, because that's what I was doing. I was this child model. But then when I found the kitchen, I was like, wait a minute, now it all makes sense. It's showing off my culture. It's showing off something that I love doing. And I remember having this conversation with Bobby Flay. Bobby said to me, go be the J Lo of cooking, which I thought was really funny, but I took that. Just go do it. Coming from him, and coming from Jennifer, when the last time I interviewed her. Jennifer Lopez, she said to me, we are the new American girl. The only thing that I'm going to tell you is, don't let anyone put you in a box. Don't let the stereotypes get you. And to have come from that. I can't be in front of the camera to have these two very successful individuals, Bobby Flay, and Jennifer Lopez said to me, go do you. You are the new American girl. Had a huge impact in my career.

Menendez: As your television career explodes, what happens to your marriage?

Ramirez: It was hard, because Antonio's an amazing human being who have taught me so much. And now we're in a great space of this very deep friendship and mutual respect for each other. But there was something about our marriage. First of all, Antonio's older than me and our dynamic now that we look back, it was kind of me just admiring him and him admiring me, but not in an equal way. And he was very supportive of me, but I think that it's hard. I was exploding. I became New Zealand's sweetheart. I was in all the newspapers. I was in all the covers. I launched my first cookbook. I was a judge for My Kitchen Rules. And looking back, I think that would've made me insecure as well, and it was hard. I think we both failed at prioritizing the marriage. Thank God we went to couples therapy to get divorced, because it was the best thing that we could have done, the most mature thing that we could have done for ourselves and each other.

I think we both learned from the many mistakes we did, and we're applying it into our new relationships, which we're very grateful for.

Menendez: I ask you about that, because it is an inflection point, again, in your own life where while you have this activist and activists and advocate spirit. It's sort of in the depths of your own pain, that you really find purpose and clarity about the way in which you want to use the skills that you have built in the service of others. If you are comfortable, can you sort of take me back to that period of time as your marriage is falling apart, as you are in the depths of that divorce and the decision you make at that point?

Ramirez: I appreciate talking about this, because I think that people see me, and they see my life, and all they see is glam and glow and the TV shows, and Grace speaking at Congress.

And yes, I went through a depression, something that I never thought could ever happen. When my marriage fell apart, when I was divorcing Antonio, my grandmother passed exactly the same months when we decided to get divorced, and I have had many passings, death is a constant in my life. And it's a constant reminder of the appreciation that I have of life, and how I live my life. My boyfriend now, says that I live in quantum years, so it's true. I don't live a linear life. I live a full life every day, and I live a very present life. But in that moment, I was lost, and I didn't know that level of grief could get me into a depression.

And then Maria happened hurricane in Puerto Rico, and we saw that image of President Trump just throwing the bounty paper, toilet paper to the crowd, and I knew the work that Jose was doing. I went and tried to see Jose speak at The Food and Wine New York, and he was getting interviewed by Sam Cass, who's the former chef of the Obama administration. I went up to Sam, Jose was virtually in Puerto Rico, and I said, Sam, connect me to Jose. I need to go to Puerto Rico. He goes, no, just go show up. We chefs, we just show up. Take your knives and go. I took the advice that Sam gave me, and I took my knives and went to Puerto Rico, and then, of course, I met everyone who was working with Jose and just started cooking. I didn't shower for two weeks. It was hard.

But what Puerto Rico gave me was hope. It gave me life, and it gave me purpose. And I realized that the only way to come out of this depression was two ways, giving back to the community and really taking seriously that if I didn't stop and did this meditation center for six months, just literally lock myself in a meditation center, so I can grieve for six months, because I have not stopped working as long as I can remember. I said, I need to take the time to heal, and I need to take the time to mourn, and I need to take the time to heal this relationship with my mother, because it's preventing me from taking that leap of boom, of everything exploding. And I think that that was a very specific turning point, where I completely turned my life around. I decided I cannot keep living like this anymore. I felt like dying of grief at that point, so I needed to take it seriously, and I did.

Menendez: To your point about your life being non-linear and living in quantum years, where in all of this do you face this question of who you are as a chef, your sort of identity crisis around being a chef?

Ramirez: The identity crisis about being a chef came in right after culinary school, because culinary school here in New York back then gave you a very strong set of skills. But where does food come from? Wait a minute, what part of the animal is this? You had a very superficial understanding of this, where food came from, and I didn't think it was fair. I was facing an identity crisis as chef, like what is my philosophy around food? Because I love meat, but I understand what it does for the planet. Where do I stand in this debate around sustainability and eating meat? My ex-husband said to me, look, I have a big job offering in New Zealand. I said, well, let's go. I mean, if there's a country that is all about sustainability, garden to table philosophy, and is so ahead of its time when it comes to food is New Zealand.

In New Zealand, I decided to say, if I'm going to eat it, I'm going to own it. So if I'm going to eat meat, I want to see the whole process of how an animal gets slaughtered, and I'm going to work at a butcher shop. I'm going to go hunting with the boys for deer, and I'm going to go fishing, and I worked at a garden to table program with kids, where we taught kids how to grow, harvest, and cook their own food. So there it was, where my passion around sustainability and traceability came from. Now, I think everything in moderation. I

eat a very balanced diet. I eat meat only sometimes, grass-fed, and if I go to a restaurant, I eat meat. Most of the time I know the chef and I know where it's coming from, and I know they're making a very ethical decision of where that meat is coming from. But that's when my strong food philosophy came from. It came 100% from living in New Zealand for four years.

Menendez: It strikes me, Grace, that you have so much going on and so many cool things happening that we could do separate episodes on each thing, because I love that when you and I work together that we all grow. The thing you were most excited about, it seemed to me, was Cocina Latina, tell me what it is, and tell me why it means so much to you.

Ramirez: La Latina Cocina is a concept that is in conjunction with Aramark. Aramark runs like 250 higher education food halls around the country, and inside those food halls lives, La Latina Cocina. So think of like, a Chipotle meets La Carreta, but really cool and trendy and specifically designed for kids in universities and colleges around the country. Very Latin food, right? But you have your rice, your beans, your shredded beef, your chicken tinga, your chipotle mushrooms, your tostada, your tacos, your choripán, your wasakaka. So, I think, that seeing La Latina Cocina come to life, which is literally bringing my cookbook La Latina to life in 80 universities around the country, have been a dream come true. But most importantly, the messages that I get from kids is like, I haven't had plantain since I left home from Puerto Rico. This tastes like my grandmother's food. I feel home when I eat your food.

I feel nourished. I feel comforted. That to me is everything for Latino kids to feel home and nurtured and for non-Latino kids to discover Latin flavors. And it's the first time we have proper representation in these spaces. And the concept has my name and my face on it, because I wanted to make sure that Latina girls see me, and they could dream big, because I've just had to work really, really hard. And having that bite of my grandmother's beans in 80 colleges around the country, that's a dream come true. I mean, I always said that I didn't want to own a restaurant, because I'm all about impact and scale. Well, La Latina Cocina, it's about impact and scale. I mean, I'm feeding thousands of kids a day. I'm very proud of that. And at the end of the day, it's about representation, and how excited I am to break down a wall and make space for us.

Menendez: Grace, thank you so much.

Ramirez: Thank you, dear. I love 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. 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 at [latinatolatina.com/shop](http://latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember to subscribe or follow us on radio public, Apple Podcast, Google podcast, Good pods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

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