



How Karla Vasquez Reclaimed Salvadoran Food

When she learned that there were virtually no Salvadoran cookbooks in print in the United States, this food writer and cooking instructor made it her mission to capture the food and the spirits of the women of El Salvador.

Alicia Menendez:

We have all been there. You want a taste of home and so you call your mom, or your tía, and ask them to share a beloved family recipe. Often there is resistance. The recipe is almost never written down and measurements are inexact because the secret ingredient is almost always experience and intuition. But what happens when in lieu of that knowledge you look for a cookbook, only to learn that there are virtually no books in print in United States that celebrate your food and your culture? This is what happened to Karla Vasquez as she looked for Salvadoran cookbooks and it set her off on an epic and unexpected quest to capture the SalviSoul.

Karla, I'm having that thing that I have, a thing that's happening to me that happens periodically, which is that I have followed you for so long that I have to remind myself that we're not actually friends. I've never met you in person.

Karla Vasquez: That's right.

Menendez: This is our first time talking in a formal capacity.

Vasquez: Yes. Absolutely. I mean, isn't that what's so wonderful about social? That is still the golden nugget in all of this chaotic energy that is social media, is the wonderful folks that you find each other, and you're on the same frequency it feels, so a part of you feels at home with these strangers.

Menendez: When is it that you decide you want to pursue a formal culinary education?

Vasquez: So, that happened because I was diagnosed with a chronic health illness. I am a type-1 diabetic, so I think I have my little insulin pen here. If you know anything about diabetes, you know that your success of being healthy with it is really dependent on what you eat. So, when I was diagnosed, I was 23 and I was so confused, I had just finished a few half-marathons, was on that smoothie life and everything, and then I'm told I have this. And the doctor explains, "Well, it's just one of those things. It's genetics. There's nothing in your diet. It's not that you were eating bad or anything. This is just something that happened to you." And I thought, "Okay. Well, how do I manage this?" And he said, "Well, I would advise you to not eat tortillas, don't eat this, greasy food, a lot of that Latin food is not going to be very favorable for your health." And that was just heartbreak, because I felt at that time that without realizing, he was really saying, "You have to make a choice between your health or your culture, and it sucks that your culture is really unhealthy for you," was

really the subtext of all of what he is trained to say to me. And I was really bothered by this, and I felt like, “This guy is just wrong. There’s no way that this is true. My food is healthy for me. I’m going to figure out a way.”

And so, I really start getting involved in the food justice scene here in LA, start managing farmers markets, and the farmers market where I’m working at at the time says, “We need to get sales up for peaches,” I think, and the farmers market manager said like, “Do you think you could do a cooking demo?” And I thought... It was cantaloupe. It was cantaloupe. I thought, “I can’t do a cooking demo. I don’t know what that is.” Eventually, I talked to, you know, my parents, I was like, maybe I’ll do it. Let’s just try. I did a cantaloupe salsa, I remember, and it was fine. I had a good time. We kept doing it and finally she says, “These are so great. We’re getting people to come in to try food and the farmers are happy because there’s more traffic, so we’re gonna put you on the schedule every single week.”

Eventually, people would stay after class, or after my demo, and say, “Hey, I have this ingredient, how do I use this or what’s another way that I can prepare this?” And then they started to call me chef. Chef Karla, I’m looking at the asparagus today and I would like to know how you recommend me using it. And I thought, “Oh. Who’s gonna tell them?” I was really trying to help this farmers market in East Hollywood, who... You know, the only reason I got involved is because of everything I was learning about the access to food, and how integral when we talk about social justice and when we look at the scope of problems and challenges in our communities, food is there. Food is political. Who is picking your food, who gets to eat certain food, and I was not there to make cantaloupe salsa, but of course that’s what you found me doing.

And I, when I started to get people to come up after class and ask me these questions, I felt like I really need to be about it, and I would need to go get more training. Of course, I wasn’t gonna go into more debt and go to a school that I’d have to pay \$60,000 a year for training, and so I found a program here in Culver City, shout out to the New School of Cooking, and I did their program. It was like a six-month program, something like that, and I just loved it. I got a lot of training, of course, like there’s a lot of questions, right? Why are all these concepts French? Why is there no mention of plantain on this curriculum? Plantain is eaten all over the globe.

Menendez: For real.

Vasquez: It is a true hero in the food world. It can be baked. It can be fried. It can be made into all kinds of things. It can do no wrong. It blesses any space that it enters, pretty much. And I felt like, “Why?” And finally, it was in the egg class, or it was an egg week, so I was in class and in this egg class, someone raised their hand, my classmate, and she asked the instructor like, “Why is it that we say words like sauté? Why do we say words like omelet? These are French words.” And she I believe was Middle Eastern. Our instructor is Korean American. Here I am, Salvadoreña, and the whole class is just like, “Holy shit, that is a great question.” We all kind of leaned in a little more.

And the instructor kind of looks up and is... She was chopping some shallots. And she thinks for like two seconds and then snaps her fingers and says, “I know why.” We all kind of just like, “Okay, tell us why.” “It must be because the French were the first to document that process.” And even though now I know there’s much more to it, there’s imperialism, there’s colonialism, there’s a lot more to the process now, but it is true. Omelets are

ubiquitous. And what really made sense and the light bulb that turned on was, “Holy shit, documentation.”

It has power. Hey, is that all it takes? Don't I have a journalism degree? Isn't all the lament I've had because I haven't been able to find it? Maybe I can document it. Right? All these things that had been happening on the peripheral were just kind of coming together in this moment.

Menendez: Karla, what is your favorite Salvadoran dish?

Vasquez: My goodness. I will say that one dish I go back to a lot is a classic, sopa de frijoles Salvadoreños, because it is there for you even when you wish you could go out and forget that you have frijoles en la casa. But it is the thing that I absolutely love. It's nutritious. It's something that connects me to my great grandmother and I just... I love that this is a food that my ancestors enjoyed and literally sustained them, so that I could be here now. Because it's a food that when times have been hard, when access to proteins has been a political thing, when resources have been scarce, you have una libra de frijoles. And that feeds you. And that's there for you.

Menendez: What a perfect, brilliant answer that's at the intersection of everything that you care about, right? Food, social justice, community, culture. I love it.

Vasquez: Yeah. I did kind of come into this project wanting to connect with my grandmother, remember her, because her cooking was like little bookmarks all throughout my life, right? Like what she made for birthdays, what she made for Sundays after church, what she made for regular, lazy Saturdays that we'd just kind of mosey on over there, right? And yeah, as an adult, now having gone to cooking school and having done a lot of cooking projects, longer cooking projects over the weekend, you realize how much of what I kind of thought I could have, or maybe expected to have from my grandmother or my mom as a kid was really an unfair ask. You're really wanting that part of culture, because it's the one you can touch at least three times a day, but when you have that kind of ask to a grandparent or a mom and you say, “I want you to show me this recipe for, you know, pernil or tamales, you're really asking for decades worth of knowledge to be given to you in a way that's user friendly for you, when really this was a process that took them burns, scars, experiences that cost something.

Menendez: And where there are gaps in that knowledge for all of us is where you go to your tía and you say, “Can you give me a recipe for this?” And she's like, “I don't have a recipe for that. I've never quantified it. I've never written it down.” And in those gaps is when we begin to Google and look for recipes that fill those knowledge gaps, right? So that at least we have scaffolding structure for some of these things. Your Googling leads you to a very big truth about Salvadoran food in this country, which is there are only two cookbooks about Salvadoran food in print currently in the U.S. What does that tell you about the place of Central American culture and El Salvador more specifically in the United States?

Vasquez: When I first Googled that, because you ask el señor Google everything, or as my mom likes to say, Google-ealo, which I love that about my mom. She's adorable. So, I went, and I was really heartbroken. I thought, “This is absurdo. Why are there only two cookbooks?” And when I did this initial search, I actually got five book results. The other three were children's books and they were just bilingual food books. Immediately I thought, “Okay, well, it sucks that there's only these two, but let me get these two.” The first one I get was

printed in El Salvador by Maria Rosario, and this is like the OG book. It's black and white. The pictures are also black and white. The recipes are not super thorough. They're more like loose maps, right? They'll get you there, but it won't be perfect.

And then the second one is this book by Alicia Maher. She's the first one who wrote the Salvadoran cookbook in English called *Delicious El Salvador*. And I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is beautiful." And I click to buy it and it's sold out everywhere. So, I'm looking through all of these other secondary sellers, right? And they're being sold for \$85, \$150, \$300. I have a screenshot of one that they priced it at \$1,200. And I thought, "Why is this so expensive?" I paid around \$150 to get my copy and I thought like, "Man, this really sucks." I had to save up for that book. She researched 70 recipes and I was so grateful to have a piece of it, to hold it, and then of course it begs the question. Why is it this way? And why can't I find anything out there that gives me that information? I went to the library here in LA. I joined the Culinary Historians of Southern California around that same time, because I thought if I can't find the answers on Google, well, we're gonna have to find them the old fashioned way, which is with these culinary gastronomy associations.

The librarian who specializes in finding resources for this particular subject looks and finally says to me, "It looks like if you want to find this book, you're gonna have to write it yourself." And that's not what you want to hear when you are craving knowledge, when you're craving understanding of something that you see everyone else kind of have. And I felt like, "Why doesn't it matter? Why is no one else upset that there's a whole region of Latin America that we have no documented information about from our people in El Salvador?" I can't tell you the feelings. I can't even really express them exactly how I felt them at that moment, because I felt so vulnerable.

When you want to understand home and when you want to understand the land that my grandmother farmed in, I have so many stories of my great grandmother looking for work and picking coffee, because that's how she was able to make a living. You can't find anything. You don't have a map. You feel a little lost.

And that's when I called my grandmother. And so I asked her, Ma Lucy, I really want to make salpicón, help me make salpicón. She was like, Karla, I got you, we're going to do this. Yeah and it was from there and her talking about her experiences while she was teaching me this recipe, her experiences as a woman surviving in El Salvador. I realized that she was no longer *la mujer que sufrió*. She suffered, but she was Lucía, the hero of the story. And it was through this cooking time that as the food nourished my body, the stories were nourishing that part of my soul that went into that library looking for answers and couldn't find them. And realizing they're here with my grandmother.

After talking to my grandmother, I interviewed a few more people in my family. And then I happened to reunite with my one Salvi high school friend and my one college Salvi friend, and said, hey, you know they asked, "What are you up to?" "Well this is what I'm up to." And they immediately say, "Are you interested in interviewing more people? Because if you are, you should talk to my mom, because I've always wanted to record her story."

Eventually I found myself in their living room saying okay, tell me what you want to tell me, And eventually I did that six or seven times, and I had seven women. I had seven women who I had sat with. I pitched to them, what if I collect stories and recipes, maybe we put something together. And when I first pitched it to my grandmother, before I had a name, before I had a full concept, she immediately got it. She said, "Karla, esto se trata del

legado de la mujer Salvadoreña.” “This is about the legacy of Salvadoran women.” Immediately, she really set the tone for me.

Menendez: So, this is all pushing us in the direction of asking, “Karla, where’s the cookbook?”

Vasquez: Yes. That question. The cookbook is being made. It is in the process. It’s been a long process. So, I have been... Once I realized like hey, this is something that I can really go ahead and do, I have a real concept here, I have 25 women, I have a community who’s behind me, I know people care, we all care about this and we are carrying this together. I started pitching my cookbook to agents. I started telling people in the industry, “Hey, this is what I’m doing.” And some agents, one of the first few agents I spoke to, who I only approached them because they had been the agent for a very similar cookbook, and I sent them what I had and they said, “I don’t think that the American public will know what this, or that they’ll know what to do with it.” In retrospect, I wish I would have said to them like, “I am the American public.” And I started sending a ton of pitches and some folks would say to me, “Hey, we found that compilation books don’t do so well.” Several other people were like, “Ah, well, maybe if you get more followers you might be able to. You might have a case.”

Menendez: As in Instagram followers.

Vasquez: Yes. Instagram followers. I had one agent who said, “If you can get to 10,000, then we can talk.” Fortunately, through amazing community support, we got to the 10,000. I told them, “Hey, I finally have the 10,000.” And then I never heard from them. Got completely ghosted and okay, fine. And a lot of that just really wore on me. By this point, I’ve been working on this project for like four and a half years of doing it on the side, of trying to stitch or Frankenstein a career, an income, so that I could do this, so that I could be available to the project, and yeah, it was really, really hard.

And now, in October of last year, I think it was October or November, I finally found an agent. It took several years, and this was the only agent who ever said to me, “Karla, I don’t know what was wrong with everyone else who heard your pitch. This is wonderful. I cannot wait to work on this.” And to be so exhausted and hear someone say, “I cannot wait. I’m so anxious to work on this,” feels... I don’t even know if the word is great. Oh, man. I can’t tell you how wonderful it felt, like, “Oh, I have help now from the inside.”

Menendez: One of the reasons I was so excited to talk with you, Karla, is that very often we talk with people after the big accomplishment, once the play is written, or the album is out, or the book is published, and so there’s something just really exciting to me about talking with you while this project is in process. In part because it allows me to ask you my final question, which is what can we all do to support you in this journey?

Vasquez: Oh, thank you. That is always a great question.

Menendez: So, we’re following you on Instagram.

Vasquez: Following on Instagram. Yes. I am also... I host online cooking classes and that was something very much... We had to pivot because in-person classes were a no go in March of last year, so tons of online classes. I offer one at least every week and they’ll be back up in February. But I also honestly, I really want folks to really send out those prayers, to really bless communities that they’d like to see more projects from. You know, and we can say those things. We can say those things, because we know that when we talk good about a

friend that we know and their project, whoever hears it gets picked up, or they get that phone call. And I think words, written words are powerful, spoken words are powerful. They are absorbed. They are energy, and food energizes, all of it is energy.

So, I mean it in a very real, scientific way. When you say something, it matters. And when you bless communities and you say, “I bless the Central American community. I bless Salvadoran creators who are having a hard time producing their heart’s desire or the genius that they’re here to share with the world. I bless them.” You know, it’s with my whole body that I feel it, because there’s been suffering, and I think that so many of these communities, we get talked about in a way that doesn’t bless us. So, if we can send those words out, it means something.

Menendez: Karla, I cannot wait to hold this book in my hands.

Vasquez: Oh, man. I can’t either.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you’re listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

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