



## How Dalina Soto Became an Anti-Diet Dietician

She always thought she'd be a doctor, then a college class refocused her on the power of preventative health care. Now, as a registered and licensed dietician with more than 100K social media followers, Dalina is encouraging us to eat without guilt, embrace our culture, and question dietary absolutism. In this episode, Dalina walks us through the CHULA method, her trademarked approach to freeing ourselves from diet culture.

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**Alicia Menendez:** Dalina Soto calls herself an anti-diet dietician. Her approach—eating without guilt and embracing our culture—which she shares online as Your Latina Nutritionist, has earned her a massive social following. Here's the thing I love about Dalina, rather than just talk about diet and wellness culture, she's actually built a framework for reckoning with it. So in this episode, I'm going to have her walk us through her CHULA method—her guide to food freedom.

Dalina, thank you for doing this.

**Dalina Soto:** Oh, thank you for having me.

**Menendez:** So you go to Penn State thinking that you're going to be pre-med. You take a nutrition 101 class and it really turns you around, What is it that happened in that class?

**Soto:** In my mind, I always was just like, I'm going to be a doctor. Nobody's going to stop me. But I think when I went into that nutrition class, it was very eye-opening to me just seeing a different side of health I never thought about. I didn't come from a family that dieted a lot. I didn't come from a family that viewed food more than just what it was. I wasn't raised in that way, and then I just learned how food plays such a major part in our health, and it just kind of clicked all of the things of like, okay, so not only do I want to help people because I've always been a helper. But more importantly, I want to make sure people don't get sick. That was my train of thought then, very wellness culture, very diet culturally in a sense, because I didn't know better.

**Menendez:** You use terms we hear thrown around a lot, diet culture, wellness culture, and you do such a great job on your Instagram of talking about how both of those cultures are built around ideas of control, of moral superiority. As you said, you sort of went into this practice indoctrinated in that baseline culture. Is there then a moment where you say, wait a minute, something's not right here?

**Soto:** I mean, yeah, I think that throughout education, you sit there and you're like, okay, I'm this first gen, pretty much the only Latina in all of my classes, and you're alone and you're thinking to yourself, I'm paying all of this money. These people have to be right. There's no way what I'm learning is wrong. Hello. I think for a very long time I was like, yeah, this has to be right.

But there were definitely certain times where I had this dissonance of hearing the statistics of, okay, Black and brown Americans have higher rates of diabetes, they have higher rates of heart disease, they have all of this, and it's the food. In the back of my mind, even though I was believing it, I was like, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. In the back of my mind I was still like, but wait, my family eats these foods and we don't have diabetes in my family. Nobody in my family has diabetes. Nobody in my family has heart disease. Everybody is really, really healthy and we all eat all of these foods. My mom is one of eight. I had a lot of people to choose from. I was like, this is not a thing.

Menendez: One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you, Dalina, is because you have really found language that is accessible, has helped me understand the extent to which I have internalized all of these ideas. So if it's okay with you, I want to walk through the CHULA Method as a skill that our listeners can return to or that might help refrain for them some of the ways that they think about food. So let's start with C, challenging the negative thought.

Soto: Everybody has negative thoughts around food. I mean, I can't introduce myself as a dietician anywhere because the first thing is like, "Oh my God, is this bad? Am I eating this wrong? Should I not be eating this?" But I think we all have those thoughts around food and that's normal because we hear it in the media, we hear it everywhere. I mean, I just did a TikTok because me and my kids were watching a Christmas movie. The wicked stepmom says to one of her daughters like, "We're going to the ball and you can't eat carbs because they're going to make you fat." And I just paused the TV and I looked over to my kids and I was like, "That is not true." And they're like, "We know. We know." Because I do it so much because it's everywhere. It's everywhere. They're so tired of me. But I'm like, "No, I got to reiterate this. You need to remember this. Carbs are not bad. Carbs will make you fat. Fat is not a bad word." And they're like, "We know." But it's everywhere. So imagine growing up without someone that's going to help you challenge those thoughts. I'm helping my kids challenge that immediately as soon as we hear it, as opposed to a lot of kids internalize that. A lot of kids hear it from their own parents, a lot of kids hear it from their teachers, from their peers, and I'm just constantly having to battle these ideas. We have a lot of them inside of our brains. So the first step is letting them out and challenging them.

Menendez: Then you have H, honor your body and your health. What you have really helped me disentangle here is that we often use weight as the default measurement of a person's health, when really there are a ton of other measurements that tell you how healthy a person is or isn't.

Soto: Yes, and I think health is also something that people use as a morality measure as well. On Threads currently as we speak, there is this viral post of this person I have never seen before saying that health is an option and saying that you could work on it and you could do all of these things. And it's like, actually no. You can wake up tomorrow and be disabled and not have health anymore. You could wake up tomorrow and be diagnosed with something. When you think about the definition of health, it's the absence of disease and nobody is really absent of disease. We all have something that as humans, as cells die, as we grow, as genetics, socioeconomic status, environmental things, I mean, I'm blind, okay, I have to work contacts. Technically, I'm not healthy. In the sense of the definition of healthy, technically, I wouldn't be considered healthy because I can't see without my glasses.

I have genetic high cholesterol. That doesn't make me a bad dietician. That doesn't make me a bad person. It just means I have to work a little harder to get my LDLs down. And if I'm going to be quite frank, the research has only been done on white men. A lot of the research that we have on LDL, most of it comes from one study that was done in the 1940s or 50s, I can't remember the exact date, and that is what we have based all of our recommendations on. And I'm not a white man, so how do I know that that recommendation is actually right? I don't.

But do I think that we have to keep those ranges and we have to normalize understanding those numbers and normalize adding nutrition and making sure that we're not getting to a point where that number is really high and scary and I'm like, Ooh, we got to reel it in? Yes. Also, normalizing averages and normalizing stability. So if your blood work is the same year after year after year, I'm like, cool, those numbers aren't moving. That's a good thing. It's telling me that what you're doing is great. Now, if I see fluctuations where they're constantly going up and then you drop them because you go on a crazy diet, but then they come back up when you're off that crazy diet. That's not healthy. We like to have stability. So when we're talking about honoring your health, we're talking about you as an individual taking all of the factors into consideration and saying, this is what your baseline is. What does health mean to you? And how are we going to achieve that without getting crazy?

Menendez: You talk about understanding your body cues, understanding your needs, which brings me to one of your saltiest takes, which is maybe you are not addicted to sugar, maybe you're just not eating enough.

Soto: Yes, I have a personal anecdote for that one. So my kids brought home the stomach bug this week, and so your girl couldn't eat for a few days. I mean, I was nauseous. So I got over the bug, but I was still looking at food. If it looked at me, I was like, ugh. For a minute I was like, am I pregnant? But I wasn't. But I say this to say that I barely ate, okay, because I was trying. Obviously I was like, you've got to eat something, but it wasn't full Dalina nourishment.

And yesterday I finally felt better and I ate cookies. We went to the supermarket and we got black and white cookies and they were so delicious, and you know what my body was doing? It was getting back all the carbohydrates I didn't have for the last five days that I was sick. Was I binging? No, I didn't have the whole thing of cookies at once. Throughout the day I had eight cookies. Am I worried about it? No. But I did think to myself, holy shit, you literally have barely ate since last Wednesday because you've been queasy and puking, and it is completely normal that your body is now like, I need quick energy, I need carbohydrates, and those cookies were freaking good and I'm not mad at myself, and that's literally normal.

Menendez: Well, and it dovetails nicely with the next one, A, acknowledge your emotions because there are times where we're like we're happy and have cookies, there are times when we're sad and we have cookies, and what you are challenging us to do is have an awareness around it, right? It's okay to be in celebration mode, it's okay to choose to have a cookie because you were celebrating. What you want us to do is to watch when we are disconnecting the emotion and the food.

Soto: Yes. And that is something that we need to remember. I know we skipped L, so we're going to go to A really quick.

Menendez: Dalina, I've never been the best speller.

Soto: It's okay. It's okay. We'll go back to L, but I think that a lot of people numb with food. I think we all know that. We have never been taught to actually use food as a coping mechanism. We have been taught to numb with food. Again, you watch movies or somebody brought up once, Olivia Pope, and whenever she had a bad day, she would have that huge glass, she would pour the whole entire bottle of wine and she would just drink it.

Menendez: Don't forget the popcorn.

Soto: And the popcorn on the couch. She never dealt with the emotions. She just drank them away. And as a society, we either drink it away, eat it away, or use drugs to numb. Those are the three things that we go to instead of actually sitting with our emotions, working through them. That's why therapy is so important. And so for a lot of people, food becomes this mechanism. Again, there's nothing wrong. We celebrate with food. We love with food. Food is a normal, natural part of life and coping. But if you're going to come home and you've had a bad day and you're going to eat a whole tub of ice cream because one, you deserve it and two, you're stressed and then you're going to feel like crap afterwards, what are you learning? Nothing. You're not. So why not just grab the ice cream, have a bowl, think about what's happening, why are you feeling this way?

Do whatever it is that you need to do, journal it, talk it out, whatever it is. But you shouldn't eat the whole thing because one, you are probably going to poop your pants later. That is a lot of ice cream. And two, you're just going to feel more guilty and crappy afterwards instead of utilizing the ice cream to actually help work through the emotions. You're just numbing it. So that's why I'm like, you have to understand and learn, and that's really hard for a lot of people. A lot of people aren't there yet. And I'm not a therapist, and that's where you go to your therapist and you learn and you figure that out. But we have to learn to sit with our emotions, and it doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. It's not something that you just are going to read my five sentences and be like, okay, I got it. Thanks, bye.

Menendez: Okay, let's go back to L, listen to your hunger, because this is something I was not able to do until recently, listening to your hunger cues, listening to your fullness cues. A lot of us just lose that in childhood.

Soto: We unlearn them super quick. My kids, again, going back to the black and white cookies, last night for dinner, they're like, "We're done because we're saving space for the cookies." And I'm like, "Okay, just let it go." I have to honor the fact that they know, "Hey, I finished eating this food because I have to leave space for them cookies that you just bought us." And I can't take that away from them because that's something that we should be able to do naturally and normally. We had dinner and they should be able to enjoy those cookies and they don't want to be over full. So it's important to be able to honor that for them. But again, as adults, we also have to understand that a lot of us don't know what fullness is.

Menendez: Dalina I will admit to you that this brought up a shame memory for me. Which was about a decade ago I was on The Chew—it was this ensemble food show where they would make food and chit chat. And I was asked about my favorite recipe. And I said, oh, my favorite recipe is my grandmother's picadillo. And then in passing I said something really stupid like, well you know a lot of ethnic food just

isn't really that healthy. And there as a woman on Twitter who called me out for that comment, and I am so grateful that she called me out for that comment, because it made me realize the extent to which I had internalized this idea that the food we grew up eating, the food we grew up loving, was somehow less than, was somehow unhealthy. And you use the example often of white rice. And how it has been unhealthy in favor of something like brown rice when really, there's not that much difference.

Soto: It's not. And you probably cannot name one dish that's actually culturally made with brown rice. I have this discourse a lot. All my viral posts that have gone mega viral about white rice, and I ask this question, not one person can give me a dish that is actually made with brown rice. Now, I did do a post because I was like, I've got to deep dive into this because somebody's going to call me out one day. And I did research the history of it. All rice starts off as brown. It's a grain. So all grains have a bran, and then they have the germ and the endosperm. And the germ is what's the white rice. In order for you to get that white rice, you have to take that bran off, that brown shell. Hundreds of years ago, that's when people were eating brown rice because they didn't have the ability to polish it, take that off. Only the wealthy was eating white rice.

And then you flip-flop that into the 1900s where then the health halos started coming out, and the US was all about whole grains and whole grains have more fiber and whole grains are better for you. And then brown rice switched over to the – now once the whole world was eating white rice, because they refined it and it became a staple. I mean, the majority of the world eats white rice, and we have, I think it's like, I want to say 120,000 different types of rice. There's red rice and there's black rice, and there's wild rice. I'm not talking about those rices. I'm literally only talking about brown rice because brown rice is the health halo that the United States loves to throw into people's faces, and it's like it's not even worth it. Because it's just one gram of fiber.

Menendez: You bring up a good point, and it is one that I want us to land on, which is thinking about nutrition as being additive. If eating white rice inspires you to use a nutrient rich bean, a nutrient rich vegetable that you can taste and enjoy—that is as important as the carrying agent underneath it, right? We spend so much time thinking about what we can't have, that we don't spend enough time thinking about what can we add that is going to nourish my body and my soul?

Soto: I often say not many of us are eating white rice on its own every day. Do we do it? Yes. I love taking that first spoon of rice and putting it in my hand and eating it as a snack or as you're cooking, it is just the most delicious bite in the world. But for the most part, we're creating meals, so that's why I always say white rice is a great vehicle to add nutrition. When you add beans, when you add peas, when you add lentils, when you add eggs, when you add whatever it is that you want to add to it to make a dish, you are adding more nutrition than you could have possibly taken away when you took the bran. The bran doesn't hold that much nutrition in it. It's very minuscule. And now we're adding it probably tenfold, so you're getting even more nutrition in a dish that you're actually going to enjoy it.

And in case anybody needs to hear it because I talk about satisfaction all the time. When you eat food that tastes good, you actually digest it better because you create more saliva, you create more gastric juices, and I know that a lot of people didn't take an organic chemistry class or a macronutrient class, so I'm going to break it down for y'all. We need those enzymes in those juices, the saliva, the

gastric juices, the stomach, the small intestine, all of those that we're producing when we look at a food that smells good, tastes good to digest the nutrition in it. So when you're eating food that's bland that you don't want to eat it, guess what? You're not even getting all the benefits. You're not even digesting all the nutrition, so you're just forcing yourself to eat this food because you think you have to, not because you have to.

Menendez: Dalina, I just think you are so awesome and so clear, and I am so grateful for your time. Thank you for doing this.

Soto: Thanks for having me.

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](https://latinatolatina.com/shop), and remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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