

Family Recipe

Olimar Rivera Noa

Dishes, forks, knives, spoons, and glasses clicking against each other. People talking, the cash register opening and closing, the phone ringing, the blender screaming around the place, the beef and the eggs on the griddle demanding silence – ttssshhhhhhhhh. Silence please! A gust of odors fills the places the sounds do not cover. The smell of ham, pepper, onion, garlic, roasted chicken, *sofrito*, toasted bread, coffee, mango, papaya, banana, salt, green peppers, *recao*, plantains, parsley, pasta, tomato sauce, and *sazón* combine in the air, producing a delicious chemical reaction that results with, “Mmmmm, I am hungry.” The tables are in the middle of the room – eighteen tables and seventy two chairs, to be exact. On the left side, a counter with ten more chairs faces two blenders, one milkshake maker, two griddles, three fridges, a coffeemaker and the cash register. At the far end of the room, the kitchen – a temple where perfection is made, unless my mom is the one cooking. Café Don Juan is located in Gautier Benítez Avenue in Caguas, Puerto Rico.

Don Angel makes the sandwiches. María and my mom are in charge of cleaning the tables, attending to the customers, and, on some occasions, working at the cash register. Doña Katín, Mariluz, and María Josefina work in the kitchen. My sister and I are in charge of the deliveries. My dad, well, he is all over the place. When something is missing, he goes to Sam’s, Costco, or Oscar’s to buy it. When we have orders to deliver, he comes with us to take them to the place. When the cafeteria is too full, he goes to the kitchen to help. Café Don Juan, open from Monday to Saturdays from 7:00 am to 5:00 pm.

During the week, my sister and I have breakfast at the counter of the cafeteria. Every day we want something different: pancakes, oatmeal, omelet, a ham and cheese sandwich, hot chocolate, toast, fried eggs, boiled eggs, bacon, milk with *Nesquik* and more. Then, for our school snack, we have a turkey sandwich with Swiss cheese sprayed with a garlic sauce. What? We hate the food from our school’s dining room so that sandwich is also our lunch. My sister, as always, remembers ten minutes before it is time to go to school that she has homework she “forgot” to do. I, as always, end up doing her homework while my mom, as always, starts with the litany, “You need to learn some responsibility. This is the last time your sister does your work.” Yeah, of course. We all know, including my sister, that tomorrow she is also going to forget she had homework. Café Don Juan, a peaceful family environment.

Once we return school, which is three streets away from the cafeteria (approximately a five minute walk), we eat and then we help our parents clean the tables and wash some dishes. This afternoon, my parents have news for us, “We are closing the cafeteria.”

Multiple factors combined to lead my parents to their radical decision. The mall that was constructed a few years ago, not so far from the cafeteria, was attracting our customers. People were looking for places where they could find free air conditioning, so my parents decided to install central air in the cafeteria. Unfortunately, two months after they bought it, someone stole the copper pipe that made it work. Then, the bills started to accumulate – our school tuition, the

electricity bill, the water bill, the house mortgage, and the rent of the building space. My brother had just been born, and my aunt and my grandmother had just arrived from Cuba which increased the expenses in our house. Last but not least, the new car my mom and my dad bought in order to have more space for the whole family was also stolen. We were broke.

I was incredibly confused. What we were going to do with three new family members, no business, and a huge debt? The place where I practically grew up was closed. Never again would I feel the adrenaline of working there, running from one side to another, taking and delivering the orders. Never again would I be able to hear the sound of the busy and chaotic days. Never again would I be able to smell the delicious odors that emanated from the kitchen. I would miss being in the cafeteria so much. I was happy there; that was my temple and now, it was going to close.

My dad, on the contrary, was not worried at all. As soon as he closed the cafeteria he started a new project. He started making fruit cocktails, with watermelon on the bottom, pineapple, grapes, strawberries, mango, and a piece of kiwi on the top, making a fresh combination of sweet and sour fruits at a price of two dollars per bowl. He went to the mall, store by store, offering them to the employees. He started making twenty fruit cocktails each day, then forty, then fifty, then one hundred. Besides the fruit cocktails, he started selling custards, strawberries with chocolate, brownies, *tres leche* (a delicious moist cake with sweet cream) and sometimes lunch. My mom found a job in Zale's Corporation and, little by little, everything started getting better. We were able to afford more things, buy better clothes, go out on Sundays, and make all the payments on time. However, I still felt like something was missing.

One day my dad was making dinner and he noticed that I was intrigued with what he was cooking, so he asked me if I wanted to help him. At first I helped him with the chopping the vegetables. The next day, I learned how to season the meats. After that, he taught me how to do the rice without burning it, like my mom does. Soon after, my sister joined the cooking lessons. Suddenly the whole family was in the kitchen again. We all share an authentic love for the food, a love that allows us to be closer as a family.

A prodigious culinary repertoire entertained our palates. *Alcapurrias*, *bacalaitos*, *pernil*, rice with *gandules*, *tostones*, fried plantains, *yucca*, *congris*, *pasteles*, chicken fricassee, *chuletas* (pork chops), rice, beans, salads, *mofongo*... The combination of odors and flavors produced an inexplicable happiness in our house. The time to cook was family time. My sister chopped the vegetables, I seasoned the meats, my dad cooked it, my brother decorated the dessert and my mom... well, she washed the dishes.

Dishes, forks, knives, spoons, and glasses clicked against each other. My family sat at the table, we talked about everyone's day, the coquis kept us company with their symphony on the background, the pan cooled down on the counter as it pronounced its last words –sshhhhh. Silence arrived and the craziness of the day and the noise of the scene were replaced by the subtle smiles on my family's faces from that first bite.

A year ago, when I was packing my suitcase to go to college, I felt sad for having to leave my family behind but at the same time relieved because I knew I was prepared to embark on the college journey. I packed all the lessons I learned during those years of working next to my family. The

work ethic that eventually got me a job and a scholarship at the university was next to my bottles of *adobo*. The persistence my posse had when trying to rescue the cafeteria and support our family was next to the *sofrito* my grandmother prepared for me. Next to the leaves of *recao* that my dad cut from the backyard was the responsibility my mom was trying to teach my sister every morning while we were having breakfast at the cafeteria. The memories of these experiences have become my family recipe and I carry these ingredients with me every day.