

They say that music is the way to a person's soul and food is the way to a person's heart.

Although people know me for my music, I actually come from a long line of chefs on both sides of my family. Cuban cooking was at the center of my culture right from the beginning.

My great-grandfather, my grandmother Consuelo's father, was renowned for his cooking, and he served as the personal chef for two presidents in Cuba. His daughter, my grandmother Consuelo, was also an amazing cook. She left Cuba with my grandfather when she was fifty-six years old. At that time, the Cuban government would not allow anyone out of the country with any personal possessions. Even though they arrived in the United States with empty pockets, they were filled with integrity, determination, and hope. So she told my grandfather: "I've got an idea. If it works we're going to be okay. And if it doesn't, then we're going to be living under a bridge."

Her feeling was that if you do what you love, people will love what you do. And her love was cooking.

She had rented a house that had its backyard facing a park in Miami where Little League games were held. One day, she decided to make *croquetas*, tamales, and *pan con lechón* sandwiches—all foods that would travel well and that she could put in a shopping cart. She walked the cart over to the park and the very first day, she sold out of all the items she had brought. Just like that, her cooking became her livelihood. Her entrepreneurship paid off. Before long, she was earning about \$5,000 each weekend—a very successful home business for the 1960s.

As her business grew more successful over time, she began to offer catering services for weddings, *quinceañeras* (sweet fifteen parties) and other occasions for her customers and friends. Despite the growing business, she continued to do all the cooking herself. I lived with my grandma Consuelo, so I would spend my entire day in the kitchen with my *abuela*, helping her and watching her cook. And even today, some of my most treasured memories are of the days I spent with her.

My grandmother loved to feed me—she made it her mission. From her point of view, I was too skinny as a child. I was really just a normal-sized kid, but to Cubans normal is still considered "skinny." She would do anything to get me to eat more. We would start eating at the kitchen table and she would give me my last mouthful of food sitting on the butcher's counter three blocks away. She couldn't stop feeding me. She would say, "Okay, now one more" and "Another one" and so on. It was so important to her that I eat.

This constant feeding frenzy continued throughout my upbringing. She was constantly trying to feed me and make things that I would like. Although, I have to confess, I'm not a martyr. I loved everything she made! There was so much love in her cooking that today, for me, love and food are completely intertwined.

I don't have a single memory of my grandmother Consuelo where she's not cooking. For her, cooking was her life and her art and it sustained her family in every way.

My grandfather, on my father's side of the family, was also an amazing and very successful cook. He actually managed one of the first Cuban restaurants in Miami, Salon Tropical. I remember watching him as he would come over to my parents' house and cook for us.

From those experiences and influences early in my life, I've never really needed to cook from a recipe. Like my grandmother, I'm resourceful. I can prepare a meal with virtually any ingredients I find in the fridge.

My grandmother's dream was always to open a restaurant. When my grandfather passed away, she had to run the catering business on her own. She was resilient and managed to do well, yet her

dream of having her own restaurant never materialized.

Many years later, after Emilio and I achieved success with our music, an opportunity came along to open a Cuban restaurant on Miami Beach. Emilio and I really felt it was a great extension of what we had already accomplished through our music, which was to showcase our culture to the world. It was another way to show our fans who we are—not just through our music, but through our culinary heritage.

The restaurants brought those two worlds together for us. When you walk into any one of our restaurants, you're surrounded by Cuban music while you eat. So it's food and music, two of the best things in life. For us, it was just a very natural progression. And for me there was the added value of making my grandma's dream come true. Although my grandmother Consuelo was no longer with us, it was always something that I wanted to do for our culture, but mostly for her.

Our restaurants allow people from all over the world to discover Cuban food, and learn more about our culture and our heritage. And very often they're surprised by the food. Generally speaking, people think that Cuban food is very spicy, and it's not that way at all. We marinate a lot, so the dishes are very tasty and richly flavored, but not very spicy.

Here, in this book, we hope to share our culture and our food with you. Those who are fans of our restaurants will be able to cook at home the dishes they love. And those who haven't made it to one of our restaurants yet can still enjoy the great foods we make there, and at our home.

We are honored to share them with you the way my grandmother did—with love.

Masitas de Puerco

Masitas de puerco, fried pork chunks, is a typical Cuban dish, born in the island's countryside. After the people made pork, they would leave chunks of the pork marinating overnight. When they went to reheat the pork the following day, it was already saturated with flavor. That's how they made fried pork chunks. One of the great things about *masitas de puerco* is that they serve many purposes. Often enough, we'll serve them as a main course, along with some *tostones* Or *platanos maduros* and rice and beans. For parties you can cut them into bitesized pieces, stick toothpicks in them, and offer them as hors d'oeuvres.

—Emilio

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

- 2 cups mojo (see recipe on page 159)
- 3 lbs of pork loin
- pinch of cumin powder
- 2 bay leaves
- 1/3 cup vegetable oil
- 1 medium onion, peeled and thinly sliced

1. Prepare the *mojo*.
2. Cube pork into 1" x 1" x 1" cubes and place into a large roasting pan.
3. In a small bowl, whisk the cumin into the *mojo*, then pour the mixture over the pork chunks, and add the bay leaves and cover with plastic wrap. Place the pan in the refrigerator and let the pork marinate overnight.
4. Remove pork from refrigerator and heat oil to 350°F over medium-high heat. Then, using a slotted spoon and allowing excess marinade to drain into the pan, remove the pork from the *mojo* and fry for about 10 minutes, turning once about halfway through, until the pork is brown and crisped. Then

- add the onions and sauté for about 3 minutes, until the onions are translucent.
5. Transfer to a serving platter and serve hot.
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