

Oral History Collection

Daisy Mendez

Interviewer: Rubio Ramirez      Date: April 27th, 2024

Place of Interview: Unknown

Rubio Ramiro: Good afternoon. Today I'll be interviewing Daisy Mendez for my Latin American Food History class. We'll be going over how she comes in contact with food on a day-to-day basis, what inspired her, and what she's doing now.

Daisy Mendez: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to share my experiences.

Rubio Ramiro: Today, for our conversation, we'll explore Daisy's involvement in food preparation for the church community, and her efforts to support her family during the pandemic through food. Let's start by learning a bit about your background and how you got involved in these activities.

Daisy Mendez: I got involved in food preparation through the church when I was a kid. Because when I was doing my first communion, the church will ask for volunteers in the kitchen. On Sundays, my mom will volunteer me. And as time grew, I enjoyed being a cook and helping prepare food for others.

Rubio Ramiro: Okay, so you started as a child with the church, but how about the pandemic? How did that come about?

Mendez: Okay. So for the pandemic, it started out when my mom and I, we both decided to cook and prepare meals for our family members that were

quarantined and those that were high risk of getting COVID. We didn't want them to spend money since some of them did get laid off. So we decided to cook and deliver those meals to their houses.

Ramiro: Oh, yeah, I remember you posting about it on social media. But before we dive into details, can you share with us your passion for cooking and what drives you to prepare food for others, both within the church and your family?

Mendez: So for passion, I look up to my mom. As a child, I remember always helping her cook. And preparing food, whether it was a simple dish or a dish that require more of an effort. My mom will always ask for help and I will always be willing to help her out. And for drive. It's the happiness and fulfillment that it gives me. I love seeing the faces of the churchgoers as they receive their plate. And during the pandemic, I love seeing my family members happy as they receive a homemade dish.

Ramiro: Um, okay, um, let's start off, let's start off with your involvement with the church. Can you tell us about your role in preparing food for the church?

Mendez: When it comes to preparing food, I go grocery shopping during the week for the ingredients, as each member of the kitchen is assigned a dish. For example, this week I'm in charge of tacos, and the salsa, and all the condiments that go into making it -- into a taco. So I'll go to the grocery store sometime between Monday and Friday, and I'll buy the tortillas, the meat, the cilantro, the onion, and the tomatoes. And all other ingredients that go into a taco.

Ramiro: Okay. So, it's a week long process. But how about on Sunday? What time do you get here? How do you prepare for it for the day? And about what time do you leave?

Mendez: The time I arrive depends on what I'm making for the week. For example, if I had a breakfast dish then I would have to be there around 5 a.m. Because the time it takes to get there, prepare the food, and to put everything out, it takes about like two hours. Church starts at 7 a.m. and ends at 8. So, by 8 o'clock everything has to be ready to serve the church goers. But since this week I have a dish that is not breakfast, I will be going in around 10 a.m. When I get there, I first prepare the simple stuff. For example, I'll start with cutting the veggies to

make the pico de gallo. Then I will prepare the salsa. That usually takes about an hour to prepare, and since church doesn't start until 12, for the remainder of the time, I help serve breakfast.

Ramiro Okay, so church just ended, and the churchgoers are coming out at 1 o'clock. Do you -- when is the process you start making tacos? At what time? How do you do them? And how does the ordering go?

Mendez: When church finishes at 1, I start to put the meat into the griddle at around 12:30. Therefore, some of the meat is already ready whenever the church goers come out. Once they come out, they get into a single file line. They tell me how many they want and I'll prepare it for them. I do ask them if they want onion and cilantro on their taco. As for the salsa, we do have a little station area where they are able to put the salsa themselves.

Ramiro: Oh, okay. So one question I do have is. What is done with leftover food? Do you guys throw it away? Do you guys donate it or do you guys take it home?

Mendez: Oh, great question. I do know that we do donate the food that is leftover, I don't know the process

since I've never had the chance to go out and donate. But I do know that the higher ups go out and give it to the shelters and the homeless.

Ramiro: That's cool to hear. Um, I want to ask you, um, do you have any favorite recipes or food traditions that you've introduced to the church?

Mendez: Oh my God! Yes! When I was a kid and I first started out here, the only thing that we will prepare and make were hot dogs, nachos, hot dogs, corn and sandwiches. But as I got older, I got accustomed to the place. My friend and I decided to go to the higher ups and tell them that it would be better if we were to make food that people of the Hispanic community would eat, especially since the majority of the church goers are Hispanics. At first, the higher ups were skeptical of the idea, but we convinced them. Whenever we decided to start selling tacos, as soon as they noticed that tacos were a big sell, they came to us with an idea to revamp the menu. We decided to keep breakfast the same, since, all we made for breakfast was egg, sausage, bacon, pancakes, and cereal. But for the afternoon lunch, we started out with tacos, tortas and gorditas. With the tacos and gorditas, you were able to pick out if you wanted

a single taco or a single gordita. Or we also had a meal where you would get three tacos or three gorditas with rice and beans, and tortillas. And the torta came with fries. Now, as we have more people on our kitchen staff, we have introduced more items. For example, we have introduced pozole, enchiladas, Mexican burgers, and quesadillas. We did keep nachos and hot dogs and corn for the kids, as some kids are picky eaters. We have also introduced new drinks like aguas frescas with many flavors to choose from.

Ramiro: Has there been a challenge introducing a dish onto the menu?

Mendez: Yes, there are many dishes. However, the only ones that come to mind are zacahuil and barbacoa.

Ramiro: For those that don't know, can you tell us what zacahuil is? Because I know it's a foreign dish that not many of us have heard of.

Mendez: Yes, of course. I would like to explain further as zacahuil was one of my favorite dishes growing up. Zacahuil is a dish from the Huasteca region of Mexico. I like to say that zacahuil is a cousin of tamal. Since it looks similar, the big difference of a zacahuil to a tamal is that it's very big. I have made a zacahuil that are about four feet wide. A zacahuil is made in banana

leaves, and inside you will find chicken, pork, masa, salsa, and corn. One of the challenges to making zacahuil is that because it is so big, it takes a long time to cook.

Ramiro: Okay, with that being said, can you explain to us why barbacoa and zacahuil have been challenging when you're trying to bring it onto the menu?

Mendez: I would love to bring zacahuil into the menu because of how unique and rare it is. When I make zacahuil and bring it for the kitchen staff for them to try it, they always ask me that we should add it to the menu. I always tell them that I would love to add it to the menu, but the challenge is that we don't have an oven big enough to cook the zacahuil. And it takes a long time to prepare. And if we were to add it to the menu, then we will have to cut items from the current menu, as it will consume way too much time to prep and to cook. As for barbacoa, the process of which barbacoa is cooked takes a long time as well. And we don't have a hole in the ground. I know there are ways that we can make barbacoa in a crock pot, but I would rather do it old fashioned. Where we dig a hole in the ground and smoke the meat in the ground as it's covered in maguey leaves.



Ramiro: Okay with having so much to with having so many items on the menu and preparing um food for a large group, as it can be challenging can you share some of the challenges you faced and the most rewarding aspects of this experience?

Mendez: Feeding 300 people is no small task. It's a labor of dedication and logistical planning. Behind the scenes of every church event lies, careful navigation to ensure that every member is fed. First and foremost, among these challenges is a scale. When preparing food for such a large group, the sheer quantity of ingredients needed can be staggering. From pounds of meat to gallons of water. Every dish must be multiplied to accommodate the hungry people. This requires careful planning and coordination to ensure that enough food is prepared without excessive waste. Yet, quantity is only half the battle. Quality is equally important, if not more so. Each dish must be prepared with care and attention to detail. For many volunteers, this means spending hours in the kitchen, shopping vegetables, stirring pots, and seasoning dishes. It's a labor intense progress, but one that is essential for creating a memorable dining experience for the people. But preparing the

food is just the beginning. Serving its presence is its own set of challenges. With 300 hungry mouths to feed, timing is of the essence. Volunteers must work together seamlessly to ensure that each dish is brought out hot and fresh, without long delays or bottlenecks. This requires clear communication, organization, and a sense of urgency to keep things moving smoothly.

Mendez: Logistics also play a crucial role in the success of any church meal. From sourcing ingredients to managing budgets, there are countless details that must be attended to behind the scenes. Volunteers must coordinate shopping trips, negotiate with suppliers and keep meticulous records to ensure that everything stays within budget and on schedule. It's a juggling act that requires careful planning and attention to detail. Accommodating the diverse dietary needs of a large congregation adds an extra layer of complicity. From vegetarians to gluten free individuals to those with food allergies. Volunteers must be prepared to cater to a wide range of preferences and restrictions. This requires creativity and flexibility in menu planning, as well as careful labeling and

communication to ensure that everyone can enjoy the meal safely and comfortably.

Mendez: Despite these challenges, the rewards of feeding a congregating of 300 people are immeasurable. For many volunteers, it's not just about the food. It's about the sense of community and connection that comes from serving others. To sum it all up, preparing and serving food for a congregation of 300 at a church is no small feat. It requires dedication, organization, and a deep sense of community spirit. Yet, it is through these challenges that volunteers find fulfillment and purpose knowing that they are making a meaningful difference in the lives of others. As long as there are hungry souls to feed, there will always be volunteers ready to rise to the occasion, armed with pots, pans, and an abundance of love.

Ramiro: You talk about meeting the dietary need of others. Can you elaborate on that and how you incorporate that onto the menu?

Mendez: Accommodating dietary needs starts with careful planning and communication. Church organizers often reach out to members to gather information about their dietary restrictions. Whether they may be vegetarians, vegans, to certain foods.

This step ensures that everyone feels valued and included in the communal dining experience. Once dietary preferences are gathered, the next step is crafting a menu that balances variety and accessibility. Vegetarians and vegan options are incorporated seamlessly into a meal plan.

Mendez: In addition to catering, To specify dietary needs, church organizers prioritize food safety and allergen awareness. Dishes are labeled clearly to indicate any potential allergens, and precautions are taken to prevent cross contamination during preparation and serving. This extra level of care ensures that everyone can enjoy the meal without worry or discomfort. Fostering a sense of belonging and unity among all members of the congregation. Some of the dishes that we offer that meet others dietary needs are vegetarian tacos, which include corn or flour tortillas with grilled vegetables such as bell peppers, onions, zucchini, and mushrooms, topped with salsa, guacamole, and cilantro for a flavorful taco experience. A bean burrito that comes in a warm tortilla around a filling of seasoned black beans, rice, lettuce, tomatoes, and avocado. One dish that we are about to introduce is a vegan tamale, which will have

a filling of seasoned vegetables, such as squash, carrots and potatoes. Oh, yeah. I also forgot we also offer fruit!

Ramiro: I am aware that the church that you attend has a annual celebration Where it's once a year you guys pull up a bunch of tents with food. Can you explain the process of that? How does. How do you guys distribute food? How is the day? How, how do you prepare for that pretty much because I'm pretty sure it's a it's a difficult day?

Mendez: Oh yeah. The week leading up to the festival is a very stressful, as I have prepared more for more than 300 people as people from the community, regardless of religion come to the festival. I will buy all the ingredients at the grocery store on Monday, and then the very next day is when I start to prepare the zacahuil. For the festival, I usually make one chicken and one pork. On Wednesday, I will start to build a shape of zacahuil. I use about six to seven pounds of banana leaf to make the shape of the zacahuil. On Friday, I will start to marinate the chicken and pork in a homemade sauce. And then on Sunday morning At 5 a.m. I will start to get everything into the banana leaf. As I start to build the zacahuil, I preheat the ovens as they can take

up to a day to cook, depending on the size. As the zacahuil cooks, I start to prepare the pozole and the desserts. On Sunday morning at 6, I wake up to bake the brownies and start to make the pozole. And that usually takes around 2 hours.

Ramiro: Oh, wow. Um, do you do this alone or do you have someone else help you? Because doing this all looks like it's a very, very challenging day or week.

Mendez: Oh, yes. I do receive help. My mom and friends help me out. They usually help me prepare and move things around. For example, my mom helps me when preparing the zacahuil. She will help me add the masa, meat, and other ingredients into zacahuil. And my friend helps me move the food to the church. They're both very helpful.

Mendez: Oh, okay. No, that's really good that you get help. Uh, but let's go back to the festival. You told us how you prepare the food, but tell us about the actual day of selling the food.

Mendez: Oh yeah, so on Sunday, I go over to my station at around 10 a.m. and start to get the condiments ready. Once the church is done, the festival officially begins and we sell the food. The festival will last all day or until I run out of food.

Ramiro: I have personally been involved in the festival as well, so I know how hectic it gets. I do want to transition and move on to the second part of our interview. I want to talk about COVID and how you cooked food for your family when they were in quarantine. I want to ask, with the pandemic bringing so many challenges to everyone, how did you adapt your food preparation practices to ensure safety to your family during that time?

Mendez: Yes, well, just FYI. I mean, for your information. Even though, before COVID, I washed my hands and cleaned all the surfaces. But when COVID happened, I washed everything. I became a clean freak. I was so scared that we were going to get sick. But a couple of things that I did change up was that before and after handling food, I will wash my hands and clean the surface where I was cooking. Another thing that was clean was the fruits and veggies. I cleaned the veggies and fruit when I bought them, and when I was about to use them.

Ramiro: Okay, with you teaching up how you clean the food, I want to ask about shopping for groceries during a pandemic. During the pandemic, when stores closed down, how did your shopping habits change?

Mendez: When the pandemic hit and the stores started to close down or they had limited hours, my grocery shopping changed so much. Before the pandemic, I could go to the store whenever I wanted. But when COVID hit, everything changed. I had a specific day when I went shopping to avoid crowded stores. Instead of going whenever I wanted to the grocery store, I bought stuff in bulk. So I won't have to go every other day to the store. I also bought canned foods that lasted longer. Sam's was my go-to store.

Ramiro: I want to ask about online shopping. The pandemic, online shopping. During the pandemic, online shopping increased as stores implemented adjusted schedules. For example, I did most of my grocery shopping online. Did you also use online shopping?

Mendez: Yes, I did use online shopping for my groceries. I mainly use online shopping when there is a high risk of people being at the store. I did not want to get sick, like I am right now. So online shopping helped me out a lot.

Ramiro: Was there any negatives in online shopping? Because I had a couple, like for example, it was um, it got busy real, it got busy because a lot of people used online shopping. It was expensive.



And, and sometimes they, uh, and they didn't, uh, grab the correct products.

Mendez: Yes, of course. I remember one time I ordered fresh fruit and vegetables from a grocery store through the online feature. And when I went to go, and pick up my order, the person that picked out the fruits and vegetables picked out the most beaten and old fruits and vegetables. So from then on, I physically bought the fruits and vegetables and ordered, canned goods and food that does not have to be hand-picked.

Ramiro: Yeah, I had that issue as well over here, but okay, so we did talk about how during the pandemic your cleaning habits were adjusted to the point where you cleaned everything all the time. And how you used online shopping to help you out, how you bought in bulk and all that. Now I want to talk, now I want to talk about the food you made and how you handled that.

Mendez: Okay, so when COVID, COVID hit and many of my family members had to be quarantined. Since they could not leave their house and wouldn't be able to get groceries for food, I decided that I will cook for them so they wouldn't have to go out every day.

Ramiro: Did you cook for them every day? Mm hmm.

Mendez: No, I cooked for them probably about two or three times in a week.

Ramiro: Oh, okay. So what, like what, what was a meal that you cook for them for like -- how many times and like how often?

Mendez: So throughout the pandemic, I will cook for them many Mexican dishes. Some dishes that I cook for them were rice, chicken in mole sauce and beans, chiles relleno, tamales, tortas, quesadillas, caldo de res, enchiladas, and flautas.

Ramiro: Oh, oh, oh wow, um, you were busy during the pandemic. I want to ask how you delivered it to them with them being isolated.

Mendez: When delivering food to my family, I felt like a door dasher because I would leave the food in front of the door and then leave.

Ramiro: I do want to ask, what lessons have you learned from your experience, your experience during the pandemic, both in terms of food preparation and supporting your family?

Mendez: Certainly, as a cook who prepared homemade meals for my family during the pandemic, I've learned several valuable lessons that have shaped my approach to food preparation and supporting my loved ones. First and foremost, I've learned the importance of [stutters] a, of a, oh my god, I

am so sorry about that. Adaptability and flexibility. The pandemic brought so many challenges from supply chain distribution to change, to changing of safety guidelines. It taught me to roll with the punches and five, create solutions, and challenges as they arose, whether they were substituting, or our meal plans. And what was available at the store being adaptable became crucial and assuring that my family needs were met. Secondly, I've gained a deeper appreciation for the power of cooking with dining out and social gathering limited. Our kitchens became a focus point and cooking became not a chore but a source of comfort. Sharing homemade meals with my family became a ritual. They brought us back together. Even though they were isolated, the pandemic brought the importance of being prepared and resourceful. Stocking up on pantry and pantry items. Learning how to stretch ingredients and making the most of leftovers became an essential skill by being mindful of food waste and maximizing the use of every ingredient. I was able to ensure that we always had nutritious meals on the table. Overall, my experiences during the pandemic have told me the importance

of adaptability, the value of home cooking and being prepared.

Mendez: These lessons have not only shaped my approach to food preparation, but I have also deep in mind standing of what it means to support and care for my family during these times.

Ramiro: Oh, yeah. No, I agree with you. I do believe that the pandemic definitely brought so many challenges when it comes to food preparation and supply chain distribution. And I also do agree with you as well, whenever you were talking about how, um, it brought families together. Because not like, for example, before the pandemic, my family and I, we would, we wouldn't really have dinner together. We'd usually do our own separate meals, but once the pandemic hit and fast-food restaurants closed down Um, we started to have dinner together. We cooked homemade meals stayed at home and pretty much became a better family. I want to say. But I do want to go on and ask another question. I think it's going to be one of the final questions I'm gonna ask today Which is let's see. As we move forward, what are your plans for continuing to support your family and community through food?

Mendez: Okay, for the community aspects of it, I'm still at the church cooking food on Sundays. Although I have taken a step back in the role at the church since my friend and I have started. I want to say like a little local food business, business. So pretty much we promote our dishes online and people are able to place an order on the meals that we cook, which are mostly Mexican dishes. And for my family, I still cook meals for my close family like mom, dad, and even siblings. But for my extended family, I stopped making meals when the pandemic ended, since it's expensive and it's time consuming.

Ramiro: Okay, that's, uh, that's nice. Um, I do want to ask one final question, which is a, uh, question that we have to ask. It's, um, how do you see food in North Texas as in the accessibility to it?

Mendez: Okay, for the accessibility of food in North Texas, I believe it all depends in how you want to look at it. For example, we do have a lot of grocery stores nearby, so going and actually grabbing the food is real easy. But as for the accessibility, as in being affordable, it all, it all depends on where you're coming from. I do understand some people cannot afford to buy

healthy food here in Texas, as prices here have been going up. But there are, there are stores where they sell at a low price, like Aldi, which is a really great store, that a lot of people should go to. But there is also a great discrimination of grocery stores here in Dallas, for example. And in the parts of the city where it's a low-income community, you'll see more corner stores where they sell like cheap food and frozen food. And in the higher areas, you see more of Whole Foods, Target, and Sprouts. Well, you'll see more of the healthier options. So, there are things that Dallas needs to work on.

Ramiro: No, yeah, I do agree with you with the um, the great discrimination here in Dallas, I, coming from a low-income community, I did see a lot of corner stores and how they'd sell frozen foods and cheap foods. And now that we were able to move into a more upper-middle-class, middle-class community, um, I see more of a Whole Foods, Sprouts, where there are healthier options. But I do believe that Dallas as a whole needs to be able to have grocery stores in low-income communities to sell food for cheap, whether, and it has to be healthy as well. And I think with

that being said, I want to thank you for coming and having this interview with me. I really enjoyed talking to you, whether it was about you telling us about your church involvement and how you dealt with that, which was amazing. How you fixed the menu up and pretty much, in my opinion, rebuilt that whole church. And also, I loved talking to you about how you've pretty much fed your family during the pandemic, and how you worked through it, and how you learned a lot. I just, uh, I want to thank you for that.

Mendez: Oh, okay. Thank you. I enjoyed having this conversation with you today.

[End of Interview]