

Oral History Collection

Betsy Aponte

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Francisco Mendez: Hello, this is Francisco Mendez, for the final project of Latin American History foods and I'm here with Betsy Aponte and I'm going to be interviewing her. So, can you tell me a little? About yourself. Hi. Good morning.

Betsy Aponte: Hi. Good morning. Yes, my name is Betsy Aponte. I am from Puerto Rico. I am 53 years old, and I've been living in Fort Worth, Texas for the last 10 years prior to moving to Texas. I've lived in Puerto Rico all my life and my first language, as you can tell by my accent, it's not English, it's Spanish.

Francisco Mendez: OK, so, what was your primary background with food? How did you get into food?

Betsy Aponte: Food, it's something that is my love language and. I started cooking very early in my life, probably by the time that I was seven or eight, I was doing prep work with my mother. We -- I have very humble beginnings and part of my upbringing was to do chores in in the house, I have an older sister. I am the second sibling on a family of four. But. We were kind in two batches, my older sister and me were the big girls, quote-un-quote.

And they're -- it's a six year lap gap. And then there were my other two siblings, which are six and eight years younger than myself. So, my mom kind of tasks us with taking care of them, and that included preparing their meals. So, my older sister was in charge of my younger sister, and I was in charge of my younger brother, so since the time that he was two, I recall or even earlier. Maybe I was in charge of preparing his milk, preparing something for to eat in the mornings, and then when he went to kindergarten. It was my whole responsibility to prepare his food for school, so I've been in the kitchen since very, very early on in my life.

Mendez: OK, so you said that cooking was your love language and you've been in the kitchen for your on in your life. So, what exactly take -- led you to take up cooking?

Aponte: Well, I think that as part of this childhood background, my older sister. She didn't want to do anything with the kitchen. But my mom very, I mean, we were supposed to either clean the house or cook, so I didn't like to mop and sweep and do beds. So,

we kind of split so she will do the cleaning, and I will do the cooking so. Very earlier on, I enjoy it. And I think that it was the fact that there is some instant gratification when you prepare a good meal, which is that the people that you serve it to, they will, I mean, give you feedback. OK. This is good or this is awesome or, yeah, well, it's bad. You have to improve for the second time. So, if you get those cues, you will instantly be able to prepare something that your family likes. And when everybody, I mean, sits and eat and the food is good, at least there is some good energy and probably I kind of got that message earlier on. So, it became part of me as a person to try to cook for people not to only satisfy their hunger, but to kind of express my love and my care like. Try to cater to what they want, and you know, as I grew up and as I raised my own family and. It I had the means to be more, I mean to pamper my kids and to pamper my husband and. And since I like to cook, it doesn't matter. Whenever I had the time, I was going to cook whatever they want. So, it was kind of my way of showing them my love.

Mendez: OK. What made you cook primarily Hispanic food and not other types of food?

Aponte: Well, of course, that was I what I was raised with.

But I have to say it's I. I have evolved in my cooking and my menus and what I'm able to cook very well. Cause growing up and probably my early years, I will cook mostly Puerto Rican. And Latin staples, rice, beans, a lot of beef stews, a lot of plantain in all different shapes and form. I will do like fried plantains or mofongo or whatever we cook as

our regular day-to-day staples, but as I -- I'm through my work, I was able to start going into work assignment to different countries and that actually opened like this whole world of what actually. The potential of flavors and meals and different things that you can cook, I consider myself more a cook than a Baker, but I can bake several good dishes. Baking is more of a science cook for me it's more of a creative. A method or a creative avenue. So, I was able to go to Europe to I started in. I first probably trip was to the UK outside going several places in the US, so you start thinking different things, different

ingredients. I went to France and I and then I started since I was really into cooking one of my mandatory non tourist touristic destinations, for me it's always go to a local supermarket. I really want to know whenever I go to a new place what the people cook with and what are the things that are normal. to them that I really are probably not familiar with and trying to learn what you do with that ingredient. So again, I had the opportunity 10 years ago to come to the US and work in in a company that was doing. A global project, so in eight years I was able to go not only to Europe like France and Czech Republic, and I don't know many other places with within Europe, Switzerland, Italy, Germany. But also, I was able to get into some Asian countries, so I was able to go to Japan and Singapore and every single time and I went. There and for example in Singapore, they have like a little India. And also, I had a I got influences from India from many of my coworkers. So, you start sharing food, you Start learning that some of the same ingredients that you try at home are tried in other places. In the world, but with a whole different twist. I mean, in a whole deep

different profile of flavors. For example, in Puerto Rico, we'll use tamarind and we will do -- we will do maybe like some use the pulp for having a drink, very refreshing drink and summer time. But if you -- If you look into Asia, like my Indian colleagues will have tamarind like for chutney or for dipping sauce. So, it's the same ingredient. But some people use it for completely different things. So, if you are willing to learn and kind of have open minded because in my mind doing something that I will usually use for something sweet. Using it on a savory dish. That's the whole complete ball game and then -- Even when I started going to these places in, in addition to go to a supermarket, if I was to able to get some exposure to some culinary lessons or culinary experiences, including cooking lessons, well, I will try to do so and. I will try to bring my family whenever it was possible and engage them in that. So that is how from cooking like my favorite Latin foods, I was able to get into other types of food trying different ingredients and. Today I will say that in my household today. We can cut anything from Latin to French to Asian and everybody kinds of

have their preferences, but from the exposure point of view, I think that we can appreciate that the flavors of different cultures are really, really good and interesting and with cooking you can turn like a single time to eat into a family experience. If you get people around the kitchen, if everybody pitches in and try to collaborate when we are cooking well, that is always awesome. Nobody wants to do the dishes. But still the experience I think that I love having that my in household.

Mendez: OK. You said you liked exploring in different countries and they're like spices and their supermarkets. Which one was your favorite country, or which one surprised you the most or one of each?

Aponte: Well, I think. I think that in terms of surprising anywhere that -- I went to Slovenia and -- The food is amazing, but when you go to a super, they first they don't have like this big supermarkets that we are using in the US or anybody that it's like Puerto Rico we have like this big, even super simple supermarket. You will have half a variety of cereal or a lot of. That kind of food in in most

of the countries, whether it's a small town or even a big city, you will have different type of supermarkets, but the level of processed foods is not the same. You will get more like fresh ingredients than what we get here particularly, I was mentioning this place in Slovenia in in Slovenia, because there was very little box things we were in Kranjska Gora, which is a town outside of Ljubljana, which is the capital and or one of the bigger cities and there were like two small places where you will get your groceries and everything was like --

Mendez: All right, we're back. Small interruption. Go ahead.

Aponte: So, I was speaking about the two places in Kranjska Gora where you can get your groceries and everything was like, very fresh, a lot of produce, very little or no packed goods. Well, they had like packed goods but not like cereals, like brand cereals, they will have everything like in small bags of -- you will see the oatmeal, but you will not see like frosted flakes or things like that. And a lot of fruit. And they had like meat, the meats were probably even though the currency, it's

less expensive there, the cost of the meat? The proteins are a little bit higher, but everything seems so fresh and local, so that for me was kind of a big surprise in terms of countries or flavors that I really -- I was also surprised on the flavor profile. I think that I will have to say Indian food because I was surprised on the fact that there are so many ingredients that we share in common and the other thing that was surprising for me is that I wasn't aware that so many ingredients that we use in Puerto Rican cuisine are also used in some Asian like Vietnamese and Asian foods, so sometimes that was very surprising for me.

Mendez: OK. Going back to Hispanic food, what sets Hispanic foods apart from other cuisines like Asian cuisine or let's say, Mediterranean cuisine? And do you think they share a lot of similarities? Or do you think they're more apart than they are similar?

Aponte: Well, I would like to probably categorize my understanding of Latin food. Latin food is not a one-size-fits-all. I mean Latin what we call Latin America, it's a big, big region of the world and I can probably speak about Puerto Rican food, but

even within the Caribbean, the Puerto Rican food, Dominican food, Jamaican food, they are completely different in Puerto Rico. We do, and even with the same ingredients in Puerto Rico we do a lot of plantains, and we use mofongo, which is smashed plantains with a garlicky flavor profile. In Santo Domingo or the Dominican Republic, which is the nearby neighbor island, they do Mangu, which is also smashed plantains, but theirs are boiled, ours are flat fried. There's more like a vinegar profile into it. We don't do that, so. Latin America, if there is something that I will like to leave this message or convey a message, is that Latin American food is not one thing. Caribbean food is one -- it has some ingredients and similar or similarities in their flavor profile, but I cannot compare that with Mexico because in Puerto Rico we don't do spicy food. There are regions of Mexico that they do really spicy food and some other regions that they don't. In Jamaica, we always think about Jamaican jerky or jerk flavors. They are spicy, but they are a lot of pepper based. And in Mexico you will get like more chili base. You go to South America, Chilean, Chilean food. They don't have a

lot of spices to them, or as spicy as heat, they do a lot of -- they have their spice profile and then you go to Argentina, and they have no spices at all. They all have their different flavors and so it's hard for me to answer what sets Latin American food apart because it's not a monolithic kind of flavor profile, right? I can tell you about Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, and I can say I'm biased. So, what sets Puerto Rican food apart if you are not desperate in the need of heat in your food, which you can always put, it's the -- Many cultures have the same Trinity. When you start cooking, you start with either a French mirepoix, which is the celery, carrots, and onions. Then you -- and that you can change one or two ingredients and almost every culture have the same base. Ours in Puerto Rico will be peppers, onions, and garlic. That is what we use to prepare more -- most of our, anything that is stew, that is what we start with and a little bit of oil and vinegar, and that is going to be our similar sofrito. Which Italians have their one, everybody has their own thing. Ours has a little bit, not very heat. It has a good base of acidity, or a balance of acidity, and also has

depths in spices. We, in addition to those three, will have oregano, we will have coriander leaves. We will have a lot of ingredients only for the base sofrito that we have that will give that particular taste. The other important thing about Puerto Rican food is that we have a tradition that comes from three big influences. Puerto Rico was a colony -- or was discovered in Spain in the 1400s, and there were some local inhabitants which they had like roots, and they will have cassava which was one of their main roots and tropical plants. The Spaniards came with their own European influences and then with the African slaves they also brought their influences are there and their flavors, so we have a foundation of three very distinct cuisines when we --

Aponte: So, with these three distinct cuisines, which are the Spaniards, the Africans, and the local indigenous inhabitants. We had three different distinct flavor profiles and that became the foundation of our cuisine. So, in our cuisine we were also -- We have rice, we have beans, we have cassavas, a lot of root vegetables that like taro and the conditions of our very early colonial stages set

the tone, so we will start putting more herbs and spices that were local into our cuisine and that actually gives our very distinctive flavors. We also had a very good, the terrain in Puerto Rico, we have hills and mountains, and we had very good agriculture when we started in the 1500s and 1600s and then we had a lot of sugar cane. So that also had local sugar that will help people develop more and more, not only sugar-based cooking but also rum and some of all those elements create very good food. We had very good raw materials available and the creativity of that comes from three different distinct cuisines and that, kind of, is the foundation for what we enjoy today. And then we also got the US influence and when Puerto Rico was colonized by the US in the beginning of 1900s. Then we added this additional influence, so it also enhanced the whole cuisine. So, Puerto Rico has more than rice, beans, and plantains. You will get like high end cooking, we had a lot of fusion with not only Latin, or if you go to old San Juan in you will get restaurants of any given kind and with local flair to it. Or people that will do, they're very pure French, Asian, whatever kind of food you

want. So, it's always good to be able to have your pure Puerto Rican food. It's awesome, it's good and it's comfort food, and it can be comfort food elevated as well.

Mendez: All right. You said there are three main types of food that came into Puerto Rico. We had the African, the Taino, and then the Spaniard. Out of the three, which one do you think is more prominent? And if you think they're all equally as prominent, can you explain why?

Aponte: I think that the least that is still, as of today probably, is the Taínos because unfortunately during the colonization they were kind of, I mean they were...

Mendez: Genocided?

Aponte: Exactly. So, there is -- some of their initial food which was cassava based and some of the local herbs, it was a very rustic kind of food. So, we still eat a lot of cassava, but we don't have a lot of historical reference on how they will eat it, and the couple of ways that they will eat it, they were -- we can do it, but it's not as flavorful as comparing. Of course, the Spanish and the

African influence -- we can still see it on some of our dishes, but we are talking about over 600 years of history, so we can trace back some of our food and our cooking methods to either Spain or African influences, but it's the Creole that all those cultures gave birth to that gives birth to the Latin cuisine, and in this case Puerto Rican cuisine. If you ask me which one, I think that it's more prominent, I will have to say that it will be the Spanish one and that is on what we call like Puerto Rican food. If you go to Puerto Rico today, there's still a lot of influence from everywhere in the US so I will not call a hamburger Puerto Rican food by any means or a hot dog or a pizza, but you can get them anywhere and everywhere. But that is not what I will call like, something that is part of my cultural example of what is a Puerto Rican food.

Mendez: All right. So, you said culturally, the United States and Puerto Rico did some exchanges. I would like to hear about what exchange Puerto Rico had on the US like the most pivotal or like the most outshining one, the one that you see the most. And

then on the other side, what US cultural device or food or anything like that shined in Puerto Rico?

Aponte: Wow, that is a big question. The US is a very big place. OK, so I cannot say that there is a Puerto Rican influence on the in the US. I know that I can, and I will not attribute it to Puerto Rico. But a lot of places where you have a lot of Cuban and -- You have Cuban and Puerto Rican influences locally. You will find people eating Cuban sandwiches and you will have them eat drinking mojitos. The Pina Colada was invented in Puerto Rico, that is. I think that if you are going to say the single most Puerto Rican thing that it's no all over the US will be the pinnacle in terms of food, I think that the prominence of the plantain has to do not with Puerto Rico, but with its consumption, and I think that Latin culture. So whenever you find a place where Latin population is served, you will very likely find things like plantains and local fruits, and that is what I can say that from that from the US, I have to say that everything that it's like fast foods are things that are very prominent prevalent in Puerto Rico that will come from the US and it's like our they,

I mean they became part of our day-to-day in terms of. I'm trying to think what it's hard for me to say, OK, what is the main typical dish of the US? Because you don't have one. You have one per region. We don't. We do grilling. We don't do smoking as much, but we do grilling is. That the 4th of July typical grill of hamburgers and hot dogs. We do that on 4th of July too. I don't know if I answered your question, but at least they there are some influences that are there. We have to understand also that Puerto Rico, its territory has been a territory of the United States for more than 100 years. So, there are some things that are already part of our culture just because of the political relationship and food wise as many as the ingredients that come from the US have become more and more available. That has an impact on what you eat. So.

Mendez: OK, so back to foods and ingredients, I want to ask. Primarily in Puerto Rico, where do you where and what did you source when you were cooking Hispanic type food and then visa versa in the US? Did you find it harder to find those same ingredients, or did you find them just as easily?

Aponte: Mmmm. OK. In Puerto Rico, of course, I will go to the local supermarket. And I mean, and when my grandpa was alive, he will have like a big lettuce kind of he will have. It's a local garden and he will have a lot of lettuce and he will have like plantains and bananas and so that will come from my very local grandfather's backyard and my father had also some plantains and bananas because it's a tropical weather so you can grow your peppers and your small fruits like in your backyard every 360 days a year and a lot of people will have if they have space and they live. On a non-urbanized area that you will have at least 1/4 of an acre you will something will grow. And actually, my in-laws, they all had a mango tree on their house, and they had some coriander leaves, so they will have also their small. Fruits and vegetables that they can grow and so it was local. Of course you will get from your parents or your people that you know and your neighbors, if they had a excess of plantains, they will share, so that was very normal when I came here to the States and it took me a while to figure out and but I was I didn't lack of many of the ingredients I just have to look where to get

them to my surprise and most of the things that were like very I was able to get everything, all my seasonings, my gorgeous stuff. I was going to. I will get them in, in, in Walmart. I mean it's not that I need to go to a specialty supermarket. They are all. And even in Kroger they had like an aisle of international foods, and I will get some of the seasons, things that I struggle with were like the roots, like the taro roots cassava roots go get those and the coriander leaves. Some of those things, and I end up finding them either in Mexican restaurants like Fiesta. But to my surprise. It was the Asian supermarkets which had most of the specific things that I wanted, like I mentioned, like Taro root, cassava root, malanga roots, those kind of things. They were nowhere to be found in like the regular supermarkets, but they were fresh and plentiful in in Asian supermarkets. So as soon as I was able to identify where to get those, I will just go there and get. As of today, I can't say that I really need any ingredient, and I can even sometimes find the brands that I used in Puerto Rico. So, if I there are several Walmarts nearby, that will bring Arroz Rico, which is one

that I used to. It's. Puerto Rican brand of rice. Not every Walmart has it, but there are a lot of Walmarts that bring them. So, when I find that, I just. Pour them and rice will not go bad, so you look to my pantry today I have like 60 pounds of rice, and they will probably not last that long because my family can eat rice so. I mean I am lucky that I have my cooking has not suffered or at least not because of a lack of ingredients.

Mendez: I want to take you back to the part of Community you said back when we were talking about Puerto Rican ingredients, how you sourced them, that you had them from your parents. Grandparents, your neighbors, your in-laws, all that. How do you feel that community has changed or the way people look at community in the states versus in Puerto Rico? Because I saw some like in the United States when you said you want ingredients, you said I get them from the grocery store, supermarket, but in Puerto Rico you said, oh, yeah, I have the supermarket, but.

Aponte: Mhm. As well, we have we grow them, and we exchange them, and we have them all together. Well, yeah. In

my personal case it's different because of course I grew there, my family and extended family was there. I don't have that here, so for starters it's my personal condition. The other thing is that. Probably it's because I don't have like a strong community that I have that going on for me. That's what I don't get it. I don't know if people that are born here and have, like, a strong family and community ties. They have like a common garden, or they share their excess. Or surplus a harvest? Yeah, I think that it has to do also with the weather in Puerto Rico. You have like this weather that. So. It was a the concept of annuals and perennials. It's something that I learned just ten years ago. I was never aware because we don't have cold winters, that they are just plants that will just you cannot have every. I mean all year long in that same. By that same token, there are plans that you will never grow in Puerto Rico. You cannot grow apples, you cannot grow pears because the weather you will not have the freeze hours. So, the fact that people are sharing is because you have a constant supply of crops. So, you know that you know you can share because they're a couple of

months again, you're going to have another harvest and that also it's very Puerto Rican you will share. And I mean I think that is part of the culture there that you have very close bonds with your neighbors and your family, and this is a very small island. It's very likely that you either are related with the people that you live nearby or that you know them from work or that so. Since it's a smaller island, communities are tighter. It doesn't mean that doesn't happen here. Is that, given my particular set of circumstances, I didn't know anybody, and I didn't do the job or the work to have those close community ties.

Mendez: Have you ever experienced the communities in like the major pop ups in the United States like New York, Florida and Texas or Houston? More specifically of Puerto Rican population? And if so, do you think they've? I guess evolved or like mutated away from the traditional Puerto Rican experience. Or do you think it's more just they've more adapted to their circumstances in the United States? Food wise. Or just food wise, culturally.

Aponte: Well, I think that at least from Puerto Ricans, when they will adapt, but they will maintain at least some basic essence. The basic essence of what they are. I can give you an example, I mean I've been here 10 years, and you will still go to my kitchen, and you will find rice beans and chicken Stew or a pork chop or carne frita or whatever. My food is not changing just because I came here. Definitely I have incorporated some things that I never have cooked before. Now I even own a smoker, and I smoke brisket and ribs, so it's a. I think that it's a process. You incorporate what you like the good things that you can find from your environment, and you keep the one that makes you I think that community wise it's the same they are and it's a very personal experience. There are people that are going to be more open. To their environment and they're going to be people that will not even experience something different, but it's personality. It's very I think that is very dangerous to try to generalize. And say that all Puerto Ricans are all people or all whatever are X or Y, because at the end it's a very personal experience. You will have some common traits

because you have some common upbringings or common experiences or common culture, but at the end everything is an individual experience and what you do with it. It's a personal decision.

Mendez: All right. And finally, let's bring it to a more lighter topic. I want to ask you, what is your favorite dish to prepare and why is it your favorite dish? And can you take us to the step by step on? How to make it?

Aponte: OK, so if I have to, I have -- I have a couple. I think that I'm going to go with the one that my family, well, like the most, and I think that it's going to be white rice, pink or small red beans and fricassee or it's chicken Stew. So, for the white rice is not the same Asian white rice you boil water ratio 1/4 of a cup to a cup of medium grain rice. It's medium grain rice and you put it teaspoon of salt and a tablespoon of oil. You bring your water to a boil when it's boiling, you put the rice. Let it boil for five to six minutes and then you cover and let it simmer there in low heat. 15 minutes in you turn it once and you let it cook

there in small in slow heat. The bonus prize --
it's El Pegao, which is the part that that crunch.

Mendez: Mm-hmm.

Aponte: The part of the rice that it becomes sticky, or actually it sticks to the pot where I use the same aluminum cast iron pan that I've been using probably for the last 20 years, so that it makes a beautiful pegao, which is that crunchy rice that sticks to the bottom of the pan and that it's the crown the jewel of the crown. So that's the white rice. The beans you start by boiling probably 1/4 cup. No like half a cup of water, some potatoes and pumpkin. And when the potatoes and a little bit of cubes actually smoke ham, you put that you put it on in boil once it's boiled and you put the sofrito, it's something that we do in advance, or at least in my house, or we do in advance in huge batches. Put it in Mason jars and freeze it, and whenever 1 Mason jar is gone or that 16 ounce Mason jar is gone, you take the next one from the freezer but OK, so the sofrito it has it's it has Peppers and onions and garlic and coriander leaves and what else I put in it? And basically, that's it. So,

you prepare a bunch of that, and you keep it in your fridge. So, I will take like a big tablespoon of that and put it in the water with the potatoes and the beans. Sorry, the potatoes, the pumpkin, and the ham, once everything is tender. Tablespoon of tomato paste, and I will put some powder chicken bullion into that. Put the beans in it and let it simmer. That will be beautiful beans. And then for the chicken Pollo Fricassee which is the chicken Stew, you will put some chicken thighs. It's my favorite. Take the skin off. Put the chicken in the in the pan again 2 full tablespoons of the sofrito and the chicken. You need to add the Waterloo which is put adobo on top of it before you put it on the pan to seal it. You cook it with a little bit of oil and once it's sealed in or I mean back and forth, you put it there, you throw your potatoes and. At least one beer and chicken bouillon and another set of cubes of the ham and your tomato paste. And you let it rest there until the potatoes are good and you have to put in order for it to be a fricassee. It needs to have Laurel, a Bay leaf. Sorry, Bay leaf. And that beer. And then you leave. Leave it there. Slow heat for at

least 25-30 minutes, the chicken will fall off the bone. The stock is going to be thick and really flavorful, and I forgot that you have to also put like a very big portion of piano that will give that chicken like a very good flavor. You serve that and you have to have some tostones, which is the fried plantains you have to. They are double flying. You cut the plantains, fry them, smash them, fry them again. So that is that because we need to have something green. On that plate, we are going to have avocado. On the side with a little bit of olive oil and a sprinkle of salt and that will be the best Puerto Rican dish that you're going to have.

Mendez: And why is that your favorite dish?

Aponte: Ohh, because I like to eat it and because again everybody, if I, I mean it's it. It takes a little bit of time but it's really, really good. It's warm and it's salty and or savory. And I mean and you have texture, I mean textural. You have something crunchy. You have the chicken, and you have the rice and a little bit of pegao, which is also crunchy. And you have the seeds the pumpkin gives

that little bit of sweet to it, and then you have the tostones riser, crunchy. You have the avocado that is creamy. So, what is? I mean you don't you have everything in a single plate. What is not to like? And at least in my household, if I I'm 100% that I do that. If I cook that, everybody will be a happy camper.

Mendez: Alright. Well thank you for that interview. This is me, Francisco Mendez, signing off till next.

[End of Interview]