

RENATA SOTO
Conexion Americas – Nashville, TN

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Interviewer: Jennifer Justus

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Interviewee: Renata Soto
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START OF INTERVIEW

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Jennifer Justus: This is Jennifer Justus for the Southern Foodways Alliance and I am at Casa Azafrán in Nashville. It is May 17, 2016, and I'm with Renata Soto, and I'm going to ask her to introduce herself and say date of birth, please.

[00:00:16]

Renata Soto: I am Renata Soto, and I was born on May 26, 1972.

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JJ: Thank you. So let's start with where did you grow up and how did you end up in Nashville?

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RS: I was born in San Jose, Costa Rica in Central America, in the early '70s, to a middle class family; many women around me, two older sisters, a mother and a grandmother that raised me. I came to the US when I was about to finish college. I got the opportunity to go to Kenyon College in my senior year, sort of my year abroad as a visiting student, and that's what brought me temporarily to the US, but love kept me here indefinitely. I met my husband, who I later married. He's from the States and we stayed here, and I came to Nashville in 1996. His job brought us here and we have been here since then, now twenty years.

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JJ: Okay, and so, when you came to Nashville, what line of work were you in and how did you transition from that—if it was different from what you're doing now—to this type of work?

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RS: My work in this area of the nonprofit, and working with immigrants and Latinos in particular, began in my first job in Atlanta right after my husband and I got married. I worked for the Latin American Association, and I worked there for just a year and a half before his job brought us to Nashville, but by the time we came here I knew that I had found my path. I wanted to be a journalist. I went to school for communications and I wanted to change the world through the power of the written word, and I saw myself doing that in Costa Rica, so when I decided to stay here and marry Pete and make a life here it was a great beginning but it was also a tough transition for me because I always saw myself as a reporter in Costa Rica, and so I had to adjust my sense of where I was headed and also really find how I would see myself fitting in this country.

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I felt that in English I didn't have the licenses to write that I had in Spanish, right, it was my second language and certainly by then it was not as—you know, it was more elementary English. So, getting into the nonprofit world and working with Latinos in particular gave me sort of a bridge between being in the communications and marketing world and using my bicultural and bilingual self. When we moved to Nashville there was not an organization like that, that existed here, but by then my path in the nonprofit world was pretty strong and I felt that that's where I wanted to be. I worked for United Way for five and a half years, both in the grant-

making side, in the communications side, and then later in community development, managing a network of family resource centers in low-income neighborhoods. They were trying to bring different resources under one roof, which later informed the vision for Casa Azafrán, where we are today.

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I was there for five and a half years. On the side I co-hosted a radio show, on one of the Spanish language radio stations, as a volunteer project. That was my way of staying in touch with my community, you know, doing a little radio reporting or talk show kind of format, and I did that for almost four years and through that radio show I got to meet a lot of the people in Nashville that were trying to reach the Latino community, either the health department, other Metro departments, and certainly other organizations in the nonprofit world that were already sensing the growth of the Latino community. So, after four and a half years of doing that and being involved in the community in general, and as a grant-maker at United Way, I felt the need for a holistic organization that would take on addressing the opportunities and challenges that the growing number of Latino families who were moving here were facing, and that, while I saw organizations doing important work in addressing unique needs, it was a very isolated effort, like girls, young people, English classes.

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At that point also is when, because of the growth of the Latino community and the demographic change, you started seeing at the state legislature the sentiments of elected officials who were not so sure that they were welcoming that change, and we started to see a lot of anti-immigrant bills and proposals that really were things that we needed to fight but there was not an organized effort to do that. The organizations that were providing services to Latinos were not

comfortable in the policy arena. So I started, with a group of other people who were interested in that and were concerned, fighting issues of driver's licenses in the early 2000s, and that also informed our desire to start Conexion Americas as an organization that would not just understand the complex political, cultural, legal, social environment in which Latinos find themselves when they arrived in Nashville, but that also understood the need for being a voice at the state legislature, here locally in Nashville, as the community was grasping that change. It was not just to provide tools and support to the Latina family who was trying to buy a house, or start a business, or learn English, but it was also that we needed to be intentional about being in conversations with our host community as they were also adjusting to a changing, more diverse city.

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So we did that in 2002. As in any start-ups of any kind, it's all about the right time and the right people, and at that time I was meeting Jose Gonzalez, who was in business, and Maria Clara Mejia, who was an anthropologist who was coming here to teach here at Vanderbilt, and the three of us—. Life brought us together in different ways and the three of us shared a sense of wanting to address all that I just mentioned in terms of the void in our community in what was being done, offered, or not, and we decided to start Conexion Americas in 2002, and we've been around since then. We are celebrating fourteen years this month.

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JJ: And then the community center came along at the tenth anniversary of the organization, right? Can you talk a little bit about why you wanted a community center as part of what you were working on, and about the location of that community center, and this road in particular?

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RS: So, we understood that the Latino community continued to grow in the first five years we had been around, and we also understood that, while the demand for our services was growing, the kinds of needs and aspirations that people were pursuing were also more complex and growing. We understood that Conexion Americas couldn't possibly do it all; that we had some strengths, that we were doing some things very well, but there were other things that our community needed that others should step up and help us address.

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Informed by my experience at United Way with the family resource centers of trying to bring together several organizations or resources under one roof, when we were about five years old we really were thinking that we needed a new home on Nolensville Road where the families that we serve live and go by. We needed to be closer. We needed to be on Nolensville Road because this is the place that first saw the signs of a changing community, already the place that many of us in Nashville identify as the international district, and we certainly saw the benefit of having more visibility and easy access for people to find us. So the search for a home for Conexion Americas became the search of a home for larger umbrella organizations that we wanted to bring together under one roof.

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We moved here when we turned ten in 2012, but the process actually took five years. We started working on the notion of Casa Azafrán in 2007, and it took us five years to assemble the team of nonprofits that today are here with us, raise the money, find the property—that was one of the most difficult things—here on Nolensville Road, but we knew that we wanted Casa Azafrán to be not just a place that was home to a collaborative of nonprofits. We knew that Casa

Azafrán was also a process in its own way of bringing people together that shared a vision for a welcoming city and of creating a landmark that symbolized, in a good way—physically and metaphorically, right—the presence of immigrants and the desire to build a beautiful place that ennobled the possibilities of everybody and that celebrated all the many people who have made their way to Nashville, and that this building would be a symbol and a reminder to Nashvillians of how we have come together to create a place like this, but also a reminder that you have to always make deliberate choices about continuing to build an inclusive city. It doesn't happen just by becoming diverse, right. Being inclusive requires deliberate resources, policies, conversations, and that we were hoping that Casa Azafrán would be a place that reminds all of us the importance of that.

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So, we moved here in 2012, crowning our tenth anniversary, and we are now a collective of ten groups, both nonprofit organizations and government agencies. Our newest partner is Metro Schools here in Nashville with a pre-k center that serves eighty children, four-year-olds, who are here getting an early start in their education, and we're about to expand that to add another classroom for a total of one hundred kids. So here you find nurses and doctors at the neighborhood health clinic; you find counselors providing mental health counseling in a culturally component way by Family and Children's Service; you find legal services provided by Justice for Our Neighbors; you find financial counseling by United Way and the mayor's office; you find an opportunity to be engaged and become a leader and a voice for your own community, thanks to the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition; you have English classes and you can become an entrepreneur and buy a house through Conexion Americas; and you have performing arts and music lessons for young kids and adults by the Global Education

Center. We truly are a conglomerate of organizations that are distinct in what we do but that bring together a desire to offer opportunities in an efficient way but also by making sure that we create a welcoming community for ourselves, right, that all the employees who are here are also sharing in our vision for creating a welcoming and inclusive Nashville.

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JJ: Thank you. So, can you talk a little bit about the kitchen? Since this is the Southern Foodways Alliance we're obviously interested in that. When did the kitchen come along, and how did you have the idea, and why was that important to have here at the community center?

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RS: So, here at Casa Azafrán, I think, as in any home, the kitchen is the heart and center of our community center. Conexion Americas has been in the business of supporting small businesses and entrepreneurship since we have been around and for many years we have offered a class, a basic business class, for all kinds of aspiring entrepreneurs: people who want to start a construction business, landscaping, web design, but also a lot of people who are in the food business, small caterers who were doing some cooking from their homes, trying to do some wholesale products. Throughout those years we learned how difficult it was to get into the market and really meet all the health department codes and all the regulations that a food business must meet.

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One of our cofounders, Jose Gonzalez, who teaches that class, was in New York, in Syracuse, and he saw a shared commercial kitchen run by a nonprofit organization that precisely offered that shared space at an affordable price to budding entrepreneurs who were then not in a position to try to make that big investment by themselves but actually had access to a shared

space where they could start lunch or grow a food business. So, he came back from that, intrigued by the idea that maybe that was part of what we should do to support food entrepreneurs who were graduating from our small business class. So that seed was planted, and when we were starting to dream Casa Azafrán, and all the ways not only in which we were going to invite other organizations to be here but in all the ways we wanted to grow and expand the reach and the depth of what we were doing, certainly the dream of creating a shared kitchen like the one he had seen became a top priority.

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What we did, we then went to see other shared kitchens, primarily La Cocina in San Francisco, and learned about their model and how is it run, how is it managed, how is it staffed, the pros and cons, the challenges and the rewards, and the kitchen was always part of our dream to create here at Casa Azafrán as we were building office space. The kitchen opened a little bit after we opened Casa Azafrán, in April of 2013. Today we have twenty-two entrepreneurs fulltime, meaning they have twenty-four-hour access. Most of them—. I think only three do not run their business as the sole source of income for themselves, so all of them, this is what they do fulltime. Many of them have started the business out of our kitchen, either a truck, a catering business, or wholesale for retail, but one of the things that the kitchen has done—. We never realized this is what we were doing. We knew the value of a shared, affordable, licensed kitchen and what that meant in terms of helping somebody grow and start something, but the kitchen actually has brought more value to those food entrepreneurs in the sense of community, mentorship, and networking, and the support that they receive from each other. So, while the access to the facility is very important and the first thing that brings people here, for sure being in a place where other people are also challenged by the same challenges, having fun and

enjoying the same rewards of running your own business, sharing the passion for food, and just being in a community of like-minded entrepreneurs, it's really an important value that people who are part of that community receive, and that has been great.

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One of the interesting things about the kitchen is Conexion Americas has traditionally been an organization serving Latino families, and we created that kitchen inspired by people like Karla Ruiz and Elvira Vasquez, who we knew could not grow their businesses, their catering businesses, if it was not because they needed access to something like this. But what happened is that more people, not just Latinos, needed that resource. The kitchen today is our most diverse community—. I guess it's the most diverse community in its own way, because we have not just Latinos but we also have native-born Nashvillians and people from the US, from other parts of the country that ended up here in Nashville. We have people from Egypt. We have people from Africa. So it was one of those cases where we built it and they came. It was a resource that was needed not just in our Latino community but for food entrepreneurs of all kinds, many of them who were starting and many of them who already had been running a food truck successfully for a couple of years but didn't have the access to a kitchen that would be a constant support that they could count on and something that they can commit for a longer term.

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So, the kitchen is called Mesa Komal. "Mesa" is the word in Spanish for "table," and "Komal," K-o-m-a-l, is the word in Kurdish for "community." We have the largest Kurdish community here in Nashville and when we created Casa Azafrán, we wanted to make sure this was not just a center for Latinos but for the very large and diverse community of immigrants and refugees who have come from all over the world, and the kitchen was a place where we really

wanted to intentionally bring people from all over the world who are here in Nashville. So Mesa Komal is literally a table that brings food entrepreneurs together, creates a community that supports each other, but is also a table that brings Nashvillians of all walks of life, brought together by the call of a warm meal. We offer cooking classes as a way to other Nashvillians to be able to meet some of the cooks who call that kitchen home, but other great cooks that we have around Nashville who might not be professional cooks but who we believe have such richness to share through the traditions of our cuisines from the countries that we come from, and it's certainly then an important way in which we are bringing people together through food, not just entrepreneurs who are running businesses but also the community at large who we bring together by coming to enjoy a class by a woman from Ghana, or South Africa, or Japan, or Colombia.

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JJ: Can you talk just a little bit about what kind of energy that kitchen gives to this place, and maybe some experiences you've had in there, you know, some things that you've seen happen and that kind of thing?

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RS: Yes. So, one of my—. Since we moved here, I've been parking in the back, where the food entrepreneurs park, and I do that in part because it's so great to start my day coming through the kitchen as my way in to work. If it's at 7:00 a.m. when I'm coming in, or 8:30, or 9:00, or I'm leaving, going home at 5:30 or 7:00 p.m., there's always a lot of energy, even if there's just one person working there. I think that the kitchen, it's really a bustling place of creative energy. When you have often two different businesses at the same time, you see the exchange that happens between them, not only because they promote each other and they take each other's products into opportunities that they open for themselves, but also in the way that

they share advice, support. It's certainly a place where they have to keep each other accountable about leaving the place as we found it, right, because we all have to meet Metro Health Department codes, so there's a lot of accountability to each other that each business has to be responsible for, to themselves and to the rest of the community that they are part of.

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One of my favorite stories was one Friday, it was early summer, and we had six different businesses in the kitchen. This was about 5:30 p.m. and I was getting ready to leave, and I was going through the kitchen. It was a busy weekend, obviously, for many of them: food trucks, catering, everybody was busy. We had six businesses, which meant we have more than six people, right, because some of those businesses already have one or two employees. Elvira was trying to prepare patacones, tostones, that green plantain that goes through a couple of steps before it becomes this nice toasted piece of plantain that you eat, and she was preparing this large amount and was peeling one by one, and I remember there was another food entrepreneur from one of our food trucks, Carlos Davis, who came and said, "Elvira, you know I think I have a tip for you on how you can make this faster. If you boil a big pot of water and once it is boiling just drop the green plantains for like three minutes, and then you take them out and the peel will be so soft. You're not cooking them but the peel will come so quickly, I can assure you, you can cut by half the amount of time that you're investing in trying to peel one by one each of these plantains." I remember Elvira's face was like, "Wow! That makes so much sense!" right? So she immediately went and got a big pot and boiled the water, and it was so great because she was certainly in a rush and appreciated so much the advice from Carlos. I remember that that day they both—. You know, he learned a little bit about making patacones and she also learned a way in which she could cut her production time in half, and it was great.

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I remember that day because there were so many people there, and it requires a lot of—. Like, when you belong to a community like that, space is limited, right, and the rules are clear. You really have to be both a good enforcer for yourselves and for others but also come into it knowing that you have to be flexible, right, that people might need your help, and that certainly you are always in the receiving end of help from others. I think that, for me, the kitchen is that one place where you get, like maybe no other place here in Casa Azafrán, the vibrancy of people starting something, either because they're really creating a new recipe or they're starting a business, and they are bringing their creativity and their hard work and determination. They work long hours; it's tough work, right? It's fun to be able to be creative and create a recipe but you also have to clean the kitchen, and get dirty, and wash, and, seeing all the dimensions of what it takes, it certainly brings to the rest of us who are here appreciation for the food that we eat anywhere, but certainly we also are so appreciative of how giving the people in the community are to the rest of Casa Azafrán.

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We have a rule here. So, in the staff breakroom, there's a table and this is where staff comes to eat lunch or pick up your coffee in the morning. It's a great place. That's where I meet the nurses from the clinic, that's where I see my friends from TIRRC, right, that's where we congregate. At any point of the day you would see people from the other organizations because that's where we eat our lunch, that's where we drink our coffee, but that is also where the food entrepreneurs from Mesa Komal, on that table—the rule is anything on that table is to share. There's something every day that one of the food entrepreneurs sends our way, either because they're trying something or because they just want to share the bounty of their beautiful

creativity. We have brownies, we have salads, we have desserts that they're testing, we have all kinds of good, yummy stuff and it is, again, for me one of the ways in which they share not only their creative abilities and their amazing culinary skills, but it is a way in which they share appreciation for being part of this community. They might be most of the time just in the kitchen but they know, I think, that we all know here at Casa Azafrán that we belong to a special community that is first built by the people who work here, who come here every day, and then that is expanded by the people who come here to enjoy the resources and opportunities that are available to them.

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I think that the food entrepreneurs have a way of bringing us together, the employees of the other organizations, and also in ways that I would have not imagined, just by the simple gesture of every day, at that table, we find something delicious to share. It is an opportunity for a call to everybody, "There's something on the table. Come and enjoy it," and that, I think, is a beautiful gift that those food entrepreneurs give us. It's not just the reward of seeing them grow and expand—and some of them leave the kitchen because they're so successful they need their own place, or they're opening their own café—but it is also how much they give to the rest of us in bringing us together by offering something that we can find at that table.

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So certainly I think Mesa Komal is bringing a community of food entrepreneurs together, a community of other Nashvillians who come here to enjoy a cooking class, but they are bringing the Casa Azafrán community also together by sharing their gifts, and certainly I know it is one of things—. It's one of the perks that people here at Casa Azafrán would see as high on our list.

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JJ: And you might have mentioned this, but Carlos Davis is from Barbados, right, so their work with plantains might have been different culturally but ultimately—

[00:29:18]

RS: Yes!

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JJ: —came together. Okay.

[00:29:19]

RS: Yeah, no, exactly. Sometimes it's actually the sharing of ingredients that somebody from someplace uses in a different way, or gets prepared in a different way, right, and so in all that it's also been great to see how people shared spices or how each of them have influenced each other's menus. I know that Karla Ruiz, for example, you know, who has a very broad sense of what she wants to offer as a caterer, is often inspired by Carlos Davis' Caribbean food, and Java's Mediterranean food, right, and so certainly that is also part of the gifts that they're giving to each other.

[00:30:03]

JJ: So, this brings us to, well, food for you personally, so can you talk about, to start—. Well, do you like to cook, and if you do—which I know that you do—how did you learn?

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RS: I do love to cook, and I think it comes from the fact that I grew up with a mom and two grandmothers who also love to cook—and my father is also a good cook—and in a very organic and spontaneous way. My mom is one of those persons who can cook without a recipe and it's actually so hard to get something from her because you eat it and it's delicious, like, "How did you make it?" and she just says, "Well, I added this, this, and that, and the other," but

there's never portions and it's just so hard. But I guess that was good training because I think that I myself find not being scared about just trying a few things here, not having to have the right size or having to follow a recipe step by step.

[00:31:09]

I think that through food is the way in which, at home, I bring my family together, right, like I think I feel most balance in my family life when we have had several meals at the table that we cooked, that we shared, that we made at home. It certainly creates the opportunity for a mother and a father of two teenagers to have quality time and stop and just be about ourselves and what's in front of us in our plate, and it is certainly a way to bring friends and the family that I have created here in Nashville together. I love to cook for friends and invite them over, and it is one of the ways in which I think I not only demonstrate to them my love for them and my enjoyment for the conversations that I share with them, but it is certainly a way in which I feel that I disconnect from maybe the other concerns of the world, right? When I'm in the kitchen trying new recipes, or trying to come up with a menu, having to go shopping for the groceries, it certainly puts my mind in a space that often is hard for me to get to if it was not because I'm cooking, right? I think when you're running an organization like this you could be about it all the time. You could be about it twenty-four hours a day, right. You always [have] a sense of urgency, what else should you be doing, everything is important, right, and food is one of those ways in which I find my balance in creating limits, not only for family life and enjoying my friends but also just connecting in a new way in the world around me.

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That said, though, it's a place in which I so feel connected to the work we do here. A lot of my own cooking now, and many of the things that I have learned lately, is things that I have

learned from Karla and Elvira and people in the kitchen, right, and so I am never totally disconnected but actually when I'm cooking and cook for a group of eight people I realize the talent that it takes for these caterers to cook for five hundred, right? So it's a great appreciation.

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But I think for me cooking is about the senses, right, I love the smell of sautéing onions and garlic, and I love Moroccan spices and playing with cinnamon in so many kinds of recipes, and that capacity to awaken all of your senses is one of the things that I love about cooking. It's not just about the chemistry that you're trying to put together between ingredients but it's also how all of your senses are awake and you're tasting, you're smelling, you're hearing the popping things frying on oil. So, I enjoy that part. It's a very sensorial experience in all ways. It really takes me there. I'm all about that onion that I am sautéing.

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JJ: Do you remember the first thing that you ever cooked on your own, maybe with a little bit of supervision?

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RS: Oh, my gosh. Let me see. I don't think I remember precisely the first thing I cooked without supervision, but what I do remember is, at my house, our grandmother, during the week, is the one that made the meals. My mom cooked over the weekend when she was not working. What I do remember as special is, during Christmas, we traditionally in Costa Rica, like in many places in Latin America, you make tamales, and it's a very long, tedious process if you make it from scratch. So what I do remember as a young child every year, getting together with another uncle and his family, and my family, the process would start at 5:00 in the morning when we would go to the mill to mill the corn, and it was a whole-day gathering, right, from assembling

the ingredients at the farmers' market, to stopping at the mill, to creating the tamales later, and pulling the long plantain leaves and cleaning the leaves, right. Like kids had certain jobs: we had to clean the leaves. And then assembling and wrapping the tamales and then tying it, and then having to wait several hours for the tamales to be cooked and be able to enjoy the first one. So probably that's one of my first memories of food and getting to collaborate with the adults, making tamales every year, and it's still one treasured memory and something that I wish I could pass on to my kids, but I don't know how to make tamales by myself. *[Laughs]*

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JJ: Do you think that's something that, in the future someday, you might want to learn or teach them down the road?

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RS: Yeah. You know, our grandmother, who made the best tamales ever, passed away this last year and, as life often happens, her departure gave my sisters and my mom and my grandmother's sisters this desire to reconnect with her memory by making her tamales, and that is actually one of the things that is hard about being away, right? I was not able to be there because this is all happening in Costa Rica. So, one of the things that I do want to do, this Christmas we will be going to Costa Rica for Christmas, and I actually hope that we leave earlier than we would have usually, because I want to be part of that and I want my kids to be part of that. So certainly, as I said, this is a very collective kind of work, and I still need to learn first, but I do feel that my sisters and I have a sense of getting to know that from my mother and my grandmother's sisters so that we don't lose that recipe, but more important that we don't lose that tradition of bringing kids and adults together to make the tamales over Christmas. So I certainly

hope that this Christmas I will get to participate and that my kids will get to participate for their first time.

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JJ: I was going to ask you what, if anything, you really miss about the way people cook and eat in Costa Rica as opposed to the way people cook and eat here, and how those two cultures are different in that way. Would the tamales be the thing, or are there other things that you think of?

[00:38:14]

RS: Yeah, I think that the spontaneity of how people come together, and usually around food, right—like families often get together on a Saturday or a Sunday and everybody brings something or everybody gets together and they make a meal together—I think that certainly is something I miss. Like I think here we plan more a gathering, right, you set up a date and there's more planning behind. I miss the spontaneity of people visiting you, stopping by, enjoying a cup of coffee and some pastries that somebody brought you, or saying, "We're getting together on Sunday and everybody bring something," and it happens often and without a lot of planning, but that's how families often get together, and I do miss that. I do miss the spontaneity of people getting together on a weekend and just bringing food along and either sharing what you bring or making something together, wherever it is that you're getting together.

[00:39:22]

JJ: You mentioned Moroccan spices, and I remember from the Dirty Pages project, which is a recipe storytelling project that, Renata, you were part of, and it was a Moroccan recipe. So, can you talk about why you are into those flavors and that recipe in particular and what it means to you here in Nashville?

[00:39:49]

RS: Yeah, so, I don't know. I have a thing for all Moroccan things: design, colors, architecture, and certainly food. I was introduced to tagine by a friend here in Nashville. She's French of Moroccan descent and an amazing cook, and she has us and other friends over one evening and made this tagine that I had never tried before. It was the most beautiful mix of spices and colors and textures, and she shared the recipe with me and I've been making it since then. I had the opportunity to go to Morocco three years ago and got my taste of the origins of this dish, which is actually how it is cooked, right—tagine is both the name of the dish and the vessel in which you cook it—and tried so many of them. But I think that what I love about tagine is it's a slow-cooked mix of vegetables and meat. I love the idea of spices, like turmeric and cinnamon, together. I love—. Speaking of the senses, right, like maybe no other dish, the smells while the spices are being combined but then a couple hours later when the tagine is cooking and what comes out of it, right, the tenderness of the meat, because of the slow-cooking processes and how the vegetables just suck in all the juices and all those beautiful spices.

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So, I don't know. I have an attraction for Moroccan and Middle Eastern food, I would say, in general because of that combination of spices, and the visit to Morocco certainly was like this encapsulated moment of being stimulated all the time by the markets that you passed through and all the countless spices that I didn't even know existed, but then also how they are combined to create different flavors and seasonings for so many things. So, you know, that tagine is the one thing that transports me back to Morocco and all that I love about North African and Middle Eastern flavors, and it is great that I can make it right here in Nashville.

[00:42:27]

JJ: Okay, so just a couple more and then we'll be done. It seems like your work collectively is about creating a welcoming place for diverse people, and we've touched on this a little bit but how does food help facilitate that and help us understand one another?

[00:42:51]

RS: Yeah, I think, you know, food has a way of, first of all, reminding us of the basic needs that we all have, right? We all need to eat, we all enjoy a good meal, and maybe because of that food has a way of helping us discover the humanity in each other in ways that maybe we don't sometimes know, and I think that that's the power of not only creating a kitchen where people can pursue their creative talents to share that with others, but certainly, either because of a cooking class, or the Battle of the Paellas that we also have—an annual event that we created a couple years ago—I think that food has that power of connecting us with basic needs that we all have, and then in the face of that all the many common things that make us human beings and help us discover the humanity in each other. I think that's the power of food.

[00:44:14]

JJ: So, I wanted to ask you, too, about when President Obama came to this place and then afterwards went to La Hacienda. Were you along for that part of it, and did you have any part in that, that it would be a visit along Nolensville Pike, and can you talk about that a little bit?

[00:44:38]

RS: Yes. Well, the visit by the president was for sure a highlight of our life here at Casa Azafrán and will still continue to be a big milestone for all that it represented. Actually the White House staff had asked for recommendations: If the president has time to make another stop along Nolensville Road, where would that be? So I suggested La Hacienda and I said for many reasons. One, that's the restaurant that has been here the longest and probably the one that signaled to a

lot of people a changing Nashville. It was the first Mexican restaurant, the one that became very visible to the community at large. In fact, you know, the clientele of La Hacienda is very diverse. It's not just Latinos. A lot of people from all over Nashville come to La Hacienda, so I think that is has an important place in this corridor in sort of signifying the many food entrepreneurs that later opened up restaurants all over Nolensville Pike. I also recommended Guantanamera, which at that point was still open—unfortunately is no longer—as another representation of an entrepreneur, Alfonso Nieto, who was bringing together Cuban and Colombian food. But I did say that's further along; it's kind of right further on the Nolensville corridor. La Hacienda is just a few steps away near us, passing 440.

[00:46:09]

What I did not know is that they actually were going to do it. Of course, as you could imagine, there's a lot of secrecy, so I knew all that was going to happen here and again I knew that they had asked me, but by the time the visit happened I thought that they were not going to stop anywhere else because, you know, the day felt already pretty full. So I was, of course, so glad, being surprised by the fact that they actually visited La Hacienda right after the town hall meeting finished here, for all the reasons that I just mentioned, right? I think that La Hacienda and that family deserved more than anybody else that tribute because of what they represent to Latino business owners and restaurants in particular. They're such a landmark on Nolensville Road, and I am so glad that the president paid a visit, but I had no idea that they were actually doing [it.] The only credit that we take is that we recommended La Hacienda, but they kept it as a very high secret, so I actually was not part of that visit.

[00:47:18]

JJ: So, I think this'll be the last question. What are you working on next and what are you hoping to cook next?

[00:47:35]

RS: Oh, right! So, we are in the middle of raising money to expand the kitchen. We have twenty-two entrepreneurs, but we have more than twenty-five on a waitlist, and we want to make sure that other people can benefit from that community and that resource, so we hope to break ground at the end of this month or early June and we will double the size, which will allow us to double the number of food entrepreneurs who can be here. In addition to that we're also going to create a co-working space because what we have learned is that not only entrepreneurs need a place where to cook but they also need more traditional office space where to run the business side, where to send quotes, where to send invoices, where to work on your marketing and post things on Instagram and Facebook, and what we've learned is that often we see them, right in the back where they park, with their laptops doing that from the car, or often sometimes if there's a meeting room available here at Casa Azafrán you would see Java or Karla with their laptops trying to do that, but it's certainly not the most ideal environment, nor is it always something they can count on. So we're going to create a co-working space where food entrepreneurs and other entrepreneurs graduating from our small business classes can access amenities and resources that you find in traditional offices, like Wi-Fi, a printer, a phone booth for private conversations, a meeting room, and so we're excited that we're actually getting ready to support food entrepreneurs and aspiring micro-entrepreneurs of all kinds in new ways by offering a co-working space where they can share another space that meets other needs that they have, and as with the commercial kitchen I am excited to think about the possibilities of that space to also nurture collaboration and networking and mentoring among the people who will use it.

[00:49:43]

We are also working on creating a park next to Casa Azafrán. That's a partnership with the city, and we are hoping to create a landmark park that, like Casa Azafrán, will be a place that symbolizes people coming together to build something that all of us can enjoy and that brings attention to the fact that this corridor is so full of assets and resources, but that we need further public and private investment to make it even a better place to live for people who live here and for businesses who own businesses here. So, we are really—. As we are looking internally on how we grow our businesses and how we deepen the ways in which we support all kinds of families pursuing their American dream, we are also looking outwards at how can Conexion Americas be a catalyst for positive development along the corridor that brings more crosswalks, brings a park, bus stops that are covered and that may be our opportunities for public art, and just a community where all of us feel that we can enjoy, and not just by cars but by pedestrians, and in ways that really celebrates the many businesses who are in this corridor and the many families who live around. So we hope that, you know, we will be partnering with city departments and other private entities to bring development to this corridor, like maybe the seed that we planted through Casa Azafrán, the kitchen, and then the park.

[00:51:27]

And what am I going to cook? That is a good question. Let's see. What day is today?

[00:51:34]

JJ: Tuesday.

[00:51:36]

RS: Yes. So I have this new challenge. My fourteen-year-old daughter three weeks ago declared that she's a vegetarian, and so I am now all the time thinking about how to cook

vegetarian dishes that are high in protein, so I am always looking for those recipes and so I'm sure this weekend I will try a few more because this mother has been challenged by this new [Laughs] by this new inclination of her daughter. So, if you have some good vegetarian recipes that are good sources of protein, I would love to have them.

[00:52:13]

JJ: Is there anything else you'd like me to know, or us to know, before we end?

[00:52:21]

RS: Mm. Let's see. [Unintelligible] Well, I am excited that the Southern Foodways Alliance is coming to Nashville and that in particular it's interested in the stories of food entrepreneurs in this area. Nashville is certainly a representation of the demographic change that has happened in the Southeast and that is happening in other areas in our country, and I think that food is one of those ways, one in which, first, that change is evident to other people, because you see the kinds of restaurants and markets and stores that open up, so it makes it obvious to others. But it is also again the opportunity that we have to bring people and have conversations about the value of a more diverse city, acknowledging that there are challenges that we need to face as people need to learn English, as people need to learn new customs and new ways of going about your life, but that food is one of those ways in which we first encounter each other and hopefully also the tool through which we deepen our understanding of who is here in Nashville.

[00:53:37]

JJ: Well, we just want to thank you so much for your time today.

[00:53:42]

RS: Thank you.

[00:53:55]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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