

unity



Celebrating Food, Art & Culture

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Famed chef helps to place Mexico 'at the culinary global table'

INSIDE:

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Unity is published in February (Black History Month), March (Women's History Month), May (Asian Pacific American Heritage Month), June (Pride Month), September (Hispanic Heritage Month) and November (Native American Heritage Month).

Songs in the key of creativity and change



Martha Gonzalez with Sandino Gonzalez Flores, left, and founder of Quetzal, Quetzal Flores, right. Photo courtesy of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

In 2017, [Martha Gonzalez](#) led a group of teenagers, living in the King County Juvenile Detention Center in Seattle, Washington, through a songwriting workshop. Over five days, the teens wrote three songs using an activity she and her husband, Quetzal Flores, developed over many years. They call it the [collective songwriting method](#), influenced by the Zapatista community of Oventic in Mexico.

"We came out with three songs that were absolutely mind-blowing," says Gonzalez, an East Los Angeles-native.

Gonzalez calls herself a Chicana artista, a combination of her Mexican historical heritage and artista, which combines art and "activista," the Spanish word for activist. Gonzalez earned her doctorate in gender, women and sexuality studies from the University of Washington in Seattle. She also wrote "[Chican@ Artistas: Music, Community and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles](#)," published in 2020.

In 2022, Gonzalez was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship, or "Genius Grant," through the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. "I've been able to coalesce music work, academic work and transnational relationships between different communities in Mexico and here (United States). It's (the fellowship) a nod to what we're doing and an encouragement to keep doing what we're doing."

Since 2013, Gonzalez has taught classes such as "Women Who Rock" and "Chicano Music From Genre to Experience" as an associate professor of Chicana-Latinx Studies at Scripps College in Claremont, California.

While growing up in Los Angeles' Boyle Heights neighborhood, Gonzalez's father instilled the value of music into her and her siblings. Even after their father left, music remained central to the family. "We spent a great deal of time learning the different traditions in our culture," she explains. "Music was part of our ongoing formation. It's given us opportunities and has been cathartic for us during difficult times."

Gonzalez and Flores have been members of Quetzal, a Chicana rock band, for 30 years. Quetzal received a Grammy Award for its album "Imaginaries" in 2013. Gonzalez's newest project, "Memory and Return," is with David Hidalgo, a member of the legendary band Los Lobos. "We are from the same neighborhood as Los Lobos," she says. "We've been close allies for many years."

In addition to releasing eight albums and performing all over the world, the band focuses on community work. "We haven't just dedicated our lives to our success on the stage," Gonzalez says, "but also our time, energies and music methodologies are in grassroots community organizing."

The collective songwriting method grew out of the idea that songwriting is an important way to express emotions and educate about political and social issues. "When you practice songwriting as a community," she says, "it takes the analysis and creativity to another level. People really enjoy it, and they're surprised by it. They tap into their own sense of creativity. It's beautiful for a lot of folks."

Challenge accepted. Passion realized



Juan Pablo Soto is the first battalion chief with a first-generation Hispanic heritage in Charlotte, North Carolina. Photos courtesy of Charlotte Fire Department

Juan Pablo Soto moved from his hometown of Guatemala City, Guatemala, to Charlotte, North Carolina. Then 18, he intended to follow in his dad's footsteps and join the Marine Corps, earn his undergraduate degree and return to his home country.

But fate intervened: Soto met a Charlotte firefighter who worked alongside him at a Charlotte restaurant. "He (the firefighter) told me I should think about the fire department," Soto says. "I took the test, and I got a letter (stating) that I'd passed."

Soto started [Charlotte Fire Department's](#) recruit school, a 20-week firefighter training program (the program is now six months), in January 2003, exactly a year after moving from Guatemala to Charlotte. In 2003, Soto was one of four Hispanic firefighters in Charlotte Fire. The number of Hispanic employees in the department has increased; in 2022, there were 50 Hispanic firefighters and support staffers.

Even though he learned English growing up, Soto had difficulties with certain words related to firefighting and medical terms he needed to know for his emergency medical technician certification. "I had a great group of guys," Soto says. "I'd write down the words I didn't understand, and they'd work with me. I not only had to study for the tests, but I also had to learn the language."

Soto knew if he wanted to advance within Charlotte Fire, additional education would be required. While working at fire stations within the city limits, he finished an associate degree in fire science at the local community college and an undergraduate degree in emergency management from Fayetteville

State University in North Carolina. "Being promoted pushes me to learn more, to grow in many ways."

Soto was promoted to captain 10 years after joining the fire department, and then battalion chief in 2023. He could have taken the test for captain and battalion chief earlier but decided to wait. "I was driven and motivated to be better," he says. "It's extremely difficult and challenging because I don't have the background and history that a lot of these guys have. These guys grew up in the fire service. Sometimes I question myself, 'Can I be a captain? Can I be a chief?'"

Soto's the first battalion chief with a first-generation Hispanic heritage. In this new position, Soto can influence recruitment within underrepresented communities. "Not everybody grew up in a volunteer fire department, not everyone grew up with their daddy and granddaddy in the fire department," he says. "Not everyone has this passion at 18, 19, 20 to be a firefighter because a lot of minorities don't know it's even a possibility."

As battalion chief, Soto will serve in a relief capacity, filling in where needed over the next year or so. Once he has a permanent position, he'll oversee five to seven stations.

The fire department has set protocols for incidents. Usually, the captain in the fire truck arriving first to the scene assumes command until a battalion chief arrives. The officer in charge assigns orders to everyone. "There's only one person in charge," Soto explains. "Decisions we make as captains and chiefs can impact people's lives."

Realism, in paintings and photographs

The innovative artworks of these Latinx artists - with roots in Mexico, Nicaragua, Spain and Venezuela - represent the vast diversity of their cultures.

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TONY ARMENDARIZ

In "The Liar Returns," the cloudy but piercing eyes of an older gentleman hold the viewer's attention. The artist, Tony Armendariz, uses tight brushstrokes of watercolors to bring the man's vibrant skin, long white beard and red cap to life. The social realist painter portrays real people, like the elderly face in this portrait, that he meets during his travels as an homage to a lesson his mother taught him. "Through my mother," says Armendariz, "I learned that art surrounded us every day and that it was a normal part of life to be involved with it."

Born in Chicago, Tony Armendariz grew up in a Mexican and Nicaraguan family of graphic artists. While his mother taught him the intrinsic value of art, his father taught him "the more technical aspects of art that involved working with people and architecture. Things like composing and design and editing."

The artist continued his education at the American Academy of Art in Chicago and studied under acclaimed watercolor instructor Irving Shapiro. During this period, Armendariz began working professionally as a graphic artist, illustrator and web designer. Throughout his decades-long career, he created pieces for clients and had his work published in magazines like American Art Collector.

In 2020, Armendariz painted "Modern Man," another watercolor inspired by a Black man. The artist copies the tightly wound expression on the man's



"The Liar Returns"
by Tony Armendariz



"Modern Man"
by Tony Armendariz



"Havana Pharmacy" by Tony Armendariz

face in washes of brown to depict the deep thought Armendariz's subject must have been in when they met. The man's coiled locs spiral toward the sky with the help of a camo scarf.

Another painting, "Havana Pharmacy," takes a wider view than "Modern Man" and "The Liar Returns." The artist saw this quaint scene, of employees working inside a drugstore as a woman walked out, while in Cuba. "The building seemed to emote a personality of its own. The features of the building were incredible, and the scenes of life with the people inside was just a part of the story," professes the Latinx artist.

MARIA MIJARES

"My work as a contemporary realist painter began with an unconscious intent to understand and hold on to personal experience," explains Maria Mijares. Born in New York City, Mijares grew up traveling between urban New Jersey and her ancestral homeland, Santander, Spain - near the Altamira caves in a pueblo with her last name. "I'm not saying I am related to the cave painters," the artist declares, "but I certainly share the instinct - I am an artist compelled to document my experience!"

Living between urban New Jersey and the Spanish countryside left Mijares feeling like a stranger in both lands. Ultimately, this proved to be an advantage



"Casino Nocturne III"
by Maria Mijares



"Twilight Boats" by Maria Mijares

in her artistic development and encouraged her to generate a "heightened visual awareness beyond language."

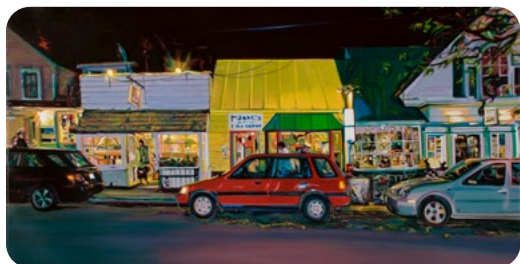
Mijares' "Casino Nocturne III," an acrylic composition on linen, portrays a glamorous nighttime scene of the exterior of a casino, teeming with elegantly dressed people and a nice car. The artist takes great care to emphasize where the light creates shadows along the building's facade. The scene perfectly reflects Mijares' sentiments of the mysteriously decadent scenes of European life in comparison to New Jersey.

After high school graduation, Mijares pursued higher education at the New England School of Art before transferring to Rutgers University. She earned a bachelor's degree in fine art from Rutgers. However, she remained inspired by the memories of Spanish summers, which reignited her passion for her ancestral home as seen in "Twilight Boats." In this painting, Mijares immerses the viewer in the coast's skyline and a boat yard filled with vessels.

"Through my paintings, I bring home and preserve sweetened souvenirs," she says.

In "Uncle Larry's Woodstock" (2007), the artist decided against creating a lush European scene of her ancestral home; instead she opted for a scene familiar to many Americans: small cars parked along a bright street filled with interesting shops.

Unlike most of her contemporaries, the artist starts with a photograph and paints without sketching. This allows Mijares to begin seeing "a collection of abstract shapes, translating realism into a compilation of poetic vignettes."



"Uncle Larry's Woodstock" by Maria Mijares

KAREN COX

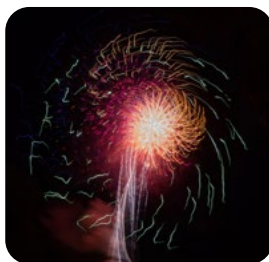
Photographer Karen Cox takes pride creating innovative works in her self-taught practice.

"Buena Aura" displays a circular whirl of pigmented light beams. At the center, orange rays of light move in the opposite direction, creating a beautiful contrast from its purple and green counterparts.



"Buena Aura" by Karen Cox

Cox was born, and spent most of her adolescence, in Caracas, Venezuela, with her family. At age 15, she immigrated to the U.S., where she still currently lives, and began experimenting with photography. She attended workshops to learn more about photography and to sharpen her skills. "I started playing with my cameras everywhere I went and slowly learned how to become better," Cox says. She also entered photography competitions and used the judges' feedback to further develop her practice.



"PuraVida" by Karen Cox

Love for her Venezuelan culture is reflected in the Spanish names for her photographs, including "PuraVida" and "El Circulo Electrico." She also deeply appreciates her experience in the U.S., and celebrates this in the photographs taken

on the Fourth of July. Cox proclaims, "I wanted to try something different with the fireworks since they mean freedom and happiness for everyone."

In "PuraVida," the viewer can see the remnants of a firecracker soaring toward the sky, with a flash of red and orange and flicks of green shooting out around it. Similarly, in "El Circulo Electrico," the firework creates an even larger universe of color and light that swirls beautifully around the composition's center. To create this, Cox explains, "I put it on a slow shutter speed, twisting and moving my lens in different directions as well as shooting manually."



"El Circulo Electrico" by Karen Cox

Famed chef helps to place Mexico 'at the culinary global table'

Chef Pati Jinich, executive producer and host of PBS Primetime special "[La Frontera](#)" and the Emmy-nominated PBS series "[Pati's Mexican Table](#)," which enters its 12th season this month, has dedicated her career to shining a light on Mexico's food traditions and culture.

"Food is part of life," Jinich says. "There's always a reason why people want to cook and get together. Food was a big part of my family growing up in Mexico City. It was how we showed we cared and that we loved each other, that we were thinking about each other."

Jinich is author of three cookbooks including "[Treasures of the Mexican Table](#)," named one of the best cookbooks of 2021 by The New York Times, The Washington Post and other entities. She's a contributor to the Times and recipient of three James Beard awards. "I am so honored and so happy by the nominations and awards we've gotten," she says. "They all fill different spaces in my heart. I love the idea, by way of those awards, seeing Mexico get a seat at the culinary global table."

Before Jinich pursued a career as a chef, she was a political analyst for 10 years including time as a research assistant at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica (Center for Research and Teaching in Economics) in Mexico City. "I wanted to be an academic," she explains. "I did my thesis on Mexico City and the federal system and democracy. I did a lot of historical and geographical research of Mexico. I was fascinated with Mexico's history."

More than 20 years ago, when Jinich married, she and her husband moved to the United States, eventually settling in the Washington, D.C. area. She missed the Mexican customs she grew up knowing as the youngest of four daughters. Food was how she connected to her Mexican roots. "I come from a family of cooks," she says. "When I moved to the U.S., I really missed that. Food is how we understand ourselves and understand our place."

Jinich's inspiration for recipes comes from traveling to her home country. She realized she knew the dishes of Mexico City and central Mexico but not the ones in other regions. In "[Pati's Mexican Table](#)," she highlights the continuous evolution of food within Mexico. "It's an ongoing journey," Jinich says. "In the beginning, it was the food I missed growing up in



"Food was a big part of my family growing up in Mexico City," says award-winning chef, TV show host and author Pati Jinich. Photo by Angie Mosier

Mexico, but as the years have gone by, it's exploring the Mexico I didn't know."

Corn Soup With Queso Fresco, which accompanies this article, is a simple recipe Jinich developed. She likes disproving the idea that Mexican cuisine is all tacos and enchiladas. "I think it breaks the myth that Mexican food is always complicated or greasy," Jinich says. "Mexican food has salads and soups and vegetables. This corn soup comes together in a snap. It has very few ingredients and is very affordable and accessible."

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Always authentic, on and off the clock



Chef José DeJesus' TV culinary credits include appearances on "Hell's Kitchen" and "Beat Bobby Flay." Photo by Nedim Vrabac

Chef José DeJesus and his wife, Elizabeth Caraballo, met in 1998 when they were teenagers growing up in the Bronx, New York. Over the past decade, they've built Bronx-based [Trill Cooker](#), a company offering private chef services and popup dinners. DeJesus, of Puerto Rican heritage, works with clients such as former New York Yankees baseball player and Minnesota Timberwolves owner Alex Rodriguez, and actor and performer Jennifer Lopez.

Trill, says DeJesus, is slang for "keeping it real and staying true to himself."

When each college he applied to rejected his application, DeJesus decided to pursue a degree in culinary arts and hospitality. DeJesus reasoned he'd always have a job because people always need food. He graduated from the Art Institute of New York City in 2002 and, over the next 11 years, gained experience in the restaurant industry, including a corporate position in an executive dining room. "I learned how to prep and cook food for 50-plus people," DeJesus says. "It elevated my love for food and my love for my career. My passion."

To make time for family, DeJesus left the restaurant scene and ran a secret supper club, Eat Easy, out of his home. It grew to include locations throughout the Bronx.

During that period, DeJesus had time to apply to cooking shows. In 2018, he appeared in season 18 of Fox's "[Hell's Kitchen](#)," finishing in the top eight. In 2020, DeJesus defeated Bobby Flay on the Food Network's "Beat Bobby Flay." "The best thing about the show ("[Hell's Kitchen](#)") was the impact I made on people all over the world," he says. "It opened my eyes to using my platform to inspire others to follow their visions and dreams."

Shrimp Burrito Servings: 2

Ingredients

- Vegetable oil for cooking

Shrimp

- 2 cups milk
- 3 cups flour
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1 tablespoon onion powder
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- Salt, to taste
- Cayenne, to taste
- Cumin powder, to taste
- Coriander powder, to taste
- 10 shrimp

Combine all dry ingredients in 1 bowl and the milk in a separate bowl. Season the shrimp and soak in the milk, and then toss in the flour and deep-fry. Remove from the deep-fryer, pat dry on a paper towel and set aside.

Rice and beans

- 2 cups Carolina rice
- 3 cups water
- Salt
- Butter
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 green pepper, diced
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 Vidalia onion, diced
- 1 tomato
- 1 can pinto beans
- Cilantro
- 3 cups shrimp or chicken stock

Extra filling for burrito

- Two flour tortillas
- Shredded cheddar cheese
- Two slices of Monterey Jack cheese
- 1/2 cup sugar

Directions

Preheat the oven to 350 F.

In a pot, boil the water with salt and butter. Add the rice and cook, covered, until done. In a separate pot, sauté the herbs, garlic, onions, peppers and tomatoes. Season as needed. Add the beans, cilantro and chicken stock and stew the beans for a few minutes to build flavor.

Soak the red onions in the lemon juice. Peel and cut the plantains, toss in the sugar and deep-fry.

When building the burritos, warm up flour tortillas on the stove, add rice and beans followed by the crispy fried shrimp and plantains. Add the cheddar cheese and roll on the burritos. Lay each burrito on a pan and add 1 slice of Monterey cheese, and then put in the oven until the cheese is melted. Plate up and garnish with chipotle sauce and lemon red onions.

Famed chef helps to place Mexico 'at the culinary global table'

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The memories Jinich has of her family sitting around the table enjoying conversation and good food is something she's passed on to her three sons, now in their late teens and early 20s. "My kids have always been involved in cooking since they were little," she says. "I always had a lot of patience. Having little kids join you in the kitchen means that whatever you can do in an hour is going to take four. But I really feel creating that open space in the kitchen where there's more than just cooking and putting food on the table, but connecting, has really allowed for my family to have that 'sobremesa' - the time after you finish eating and linger at the table and engage in conversation."



Corn Soup With Queso Fresco (Sopa de Esquites Con Queso)
Photo by Angie Mosier

Corn Soup With Queso Fresco

(Sopa de Esquites Con Queso)

From "Pati Jinich Treasures of the Mexican Table" by Pati Jinich. Copyright © 2021 by Pati Jinich. Reprinted by permission of Harvest, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

Servings: 6

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup finely chopped white onion
- 1 to 2 serrano or jalapeno chiles (to taste), finely chopped
- 4 cups fresh corn kernels (from 5 to 6 ears) or thawed frozen corn
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt, or more to taste
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh epazote or cilantro leaves
- 8 cups chicken broth
- 1 cup diced queso fresco (4 ounces)

Directions

Melt the butter with the oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Once the butter begins to sizzle, add the onion and chiles and cook for 3 to 4 minutes, until wilted and beginning to color. Add the corn and salt, stir and cook for 3 minutes, until the kernels begin to soften. Add the epazote or cilantro, stir and add the chicken broth. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce the heat to low and simmer for 7 to 8 minutes, until the soup is fragrant and the corn is tender. Adjust the seasonings and remove from the heat.

Ladle the soup into bowls, top with the queso fresco, and serve.