



Heritage and high standards in every dish

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Step-by-step journey to Chicago's Joffrey Ballet

An outreach program at the Hartt Community Dance Division in Hartford, Connecticut, captured Xavier Núñez's attention when he was in second grade. He remembers a friend handing out pamphlets for a dance program and agreeing to attend the summer classes.

"I didn't even know I was dancing," Núñez says. "I thought I was running around with friends."

Núñez's "running around" landed him a scholarship to the main dance school. By age 16, he had fallen in love with dance and decided to pursue it professionally.

Born in Caguas, Puerto Rico, Núñez grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut. He graduated high school one year early and moved to Cary, North Carolina, in 2011 to study dance at the International Ballet Academy under Miguel Campaneria, a ballet dancer and choreographer from Cuba.

As a young dancer from humble beginnings, Núñez didn't always understand where he fit in the world of ballet. Looking back, he sees how ballet and dance performances weren't always accessible to everyone.

"The dance world is often one that is super privileged," he explains. "It was hard to navigate that at such a young age. I was on my own at 16. It was difficult at times, but it was also extremely exciting as well."

Finding a dance home

In 2013, Núñez moved to New York City to perform with the American Ballet Theatre Studio's second company. Over the next few years, he danced with the Tulsa Ballet and the Paris Opera Ballet.

Núñez joined The Joffrey Ballet in Chicago, Illinois, in 2018. The company had been on his radar, even from an early age. When he auditioned, Núñez noticed the vibrant work environment and envisioned himself there.

"Joffrey's known as being the maverick of dance," he says. "It was originally founded by an immigrant, which to me seems important. It's mission has always been to push dance forward and do it in new ways."

Artists at Joffrey are full-time employees and rehearse for six hours a day. Núñez adds physical therapy and other supplemental workouts to keep healthy.



A performer with Chicago's Joffrey Ballet, Xavier Núñez is also a cofounder of a film production company. Photo by Cheryl Mann

"We have a warm-up class, that's typically what keeps your body in shape," he says. "It's a lifestyle. You need to put in a lot of physical effort and also take care of your mental health at the same time."

Storytelling through dance

In 2020, Núñez cofounded [Action Lines](#), a production company based in Chicago, with filmmaker Eric Grant and fellow Joffrey dancer Dylan Gutierrez. When the pandemic shut down dance performances, he and his friends wanted to use their collective energy to tell stories with immersive exhibits through dance. Núñez serves as the company's creative director, working with a team of artists to develop commercials and films for businesses and nonprofits.

Action Lines' first commissioned project, "[Interim Avoidance](#)," included Joffrey dancers performing in a short film. It was projected on a media wall in the lobby of a Chicago building.

"We wanted to give dance a space to exist in a time when it wasn't existing," Núñez says.

"[Cosmic Rhythms](#)," a 20-minute film at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago produced by Action Lines, plays every Wednesday through the end of 2025.

"We created a story in their theater," Núñez says. "The film explores the cosmos and the universe, all told through movement."

Good books for young cooks



September – also known as [National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month](#) – is the perfect time for kids and the adults in their lives to lean into healthy foods. The following cookbooks could stoke readers’ appetites for cooking, and consuming, wholesome meals and snacks.

Real Food for Healthy Kids

By Tracey Seaman and Tanya Wenman Steel

[“Real Food for Healthy Kids: 200+ Easy, Wholesome Recipes”](#) features easy-to-make recipes encompassing breakfast, snacks, lunch, dinner and even parties. Think Carrot Cake Oatmeal, Hail Caesar, Jr. Salad, Happy Apple Toddies or Princess and the Pea Risotto. Every recipe has been taste-tested by children and analyzed by a nutritionist.

Kids’ Healthy Cookbook

By Rise Learning

Thirty recipes for budding and intermediate chefs ages 3 to 18, and mouthwatering food photos fill the pages of [“Kids’ Healthy Cookbook: Fun and Easy Recipes for Breakfast, Snacks, Lunches and Dinners to Cook Together as a Family.”](#) Publisher Rise Learning’s family-centric cookbook, published in 2024, is now in paperback form.

The Vegan Cookbook for Kids

By Barb Musick

Geared to kids in grades four to six, [“The Vegan Cookbook for Kids: Easy Plant-Based Recipes for Young Chefs”](#) breaks down common plant-based ingredients, essential kitchen utensils and cooking safety guidelines. But wait, there’s more – as in 50 recipes representing global cuisines and a guide to skills every cook needs to master in the kitchen.

Healthy Food for Healthy Kids

By Pete Evans

Chef and author Pete Evans delivers a 288-page cookbook filled with paleo- and keto-friendly meals. Baby food recipes, meals such as low-carb Fish Tacos, sugar-free desserts and gluten-free breads are just some of the offerings in [“Healthy Food for Healthy Kids: 120 Simple, Nourishing, Gluten- and Dairy-Free Recipes Your Whole Family Will Love.”](#)

Little Helpers Toddler Cookbook

By Heather Wish Staller

Yes, toddlers can cook, too – alongside adults, of course. [“Little Helpers Toddler Cookbook: Healthy, Kid-Friendly Recipes to Cook Together”](#) introduces budding chefs, primarily ages 2 to 4, to kid-friendly kitchen tools and new flavors. Each recipe features a difficulty ranking, instructions explaining which steps are toddler-safe and space to record the kitchen experience.

Kid Smoothies

By Erin Fletter

More than 40 recipes that don’t require using a stove or tons of equipment? That’s what you’ll find in [“Kid Smoothies: A Healthy Kids’ Cookbook: Smoothie Recipes Kids Will Love to Make.”](#) Newbie chefs ages 6 to 9 will appreciate the simple instructions and inventive liquid concoctions they can make in this 144-page book.

Portraits of pain and resilience

When Catalina Kulczar's grandmother gave her a 35 mm camera, she started documenting family life in South Florida, where she moved to from Caracas, Venezuela, at age 11. Kulczar had been interested in photography since she was 7 years old; her father was a serious hobbyist.

"I grew up surrounded by portraits of nephews, landscapes, photographs of his travels and all this abstract photography he was always testing," Kulczar says. "I would grab his photo albums and sneak them into my bedroom and start looking at his photographs."

Kulczar's passion for photography continued in high school and at Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina. She graduated with degrees in business administration and foreign languages, French and Spanish, in 2001.

"When I graduated college, my father gifted me his Minolta X-700 camera kit, all the lenses, two bodies, and that set me up," Kulczar says. "I started using it all the time."

A pivotal move

Kulczar worked in Charlotte for several years in marketing while moonlighting as a portrait and wedding photographer. The local alternative newspaper commissioned Kulczar for a weekly paid photography gig. During this side job, Kulczar discovered her love for photographing people.

"My work is animated, honest and connected," she explains. "I like to photograph real people. I thrive on genuine connections."

While Kulczar was working as a producer and project manager at a video production company in Charlotte, she and husband Juan Miguel Marin considered moving to New York City. After the move in late 2009, Kulczar gave herself one year to build a business within portraiture and lifestyle photography. She succeeded, and the couple made Brooklyn, New York, their home.

In 2011, Kulczar filmed and produced her first documentary, "La Casa del Ritmo: A Film About Los Amigos Invisibles," to celebrate the band's 20-year anniversary.

"I had been trying to pivot for a long time," Kulczar says. "Photography is a very solitary career. I knew that filmmaking was more of a collective process. I wanted more of that."

A pivotal project

In 2020, when the pandemic shut down many activities, Kulczar, an avid swimmer, couldn't swim at the local pool. In December, she connected with



Director of Photography Catalina Kulczar films on the Ecuadorian coast. Photo by Juan Miguel Marin

11 other people who swam at Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. She fell in love with open water swimming in 40- to 50-degree water.

Kulczar knew there was a story to tell. She asked the swimmers if they would talk about their "why" behind open water swimming. The swimmers invited Kulczar into their homes for interviews.

On April 9, 2021, while making moving portraits of the swimmers for the film, Kulczar learned her mother had died by suicide. Kulczar went into a severe depression for many months, putting the open swim project on hold.

Kulczar spent time going through her mother's papers and photographs. As a young Jewish girl, Kulczar's mother emigrated from Hungary to Venezuela in the late 1950s. She later moved to Florida. The swim project began to take on a new shape.

"I started to wonder what home was for my mom," she said. "It led me to this exploration about our Jewish heritage and our immigration story. It stopped being about these other 11 swimmers. It became about my family ... and the meaning of home and how open water swimming saved my life."

The world premiere for "Daisy" was in Hungary in 2023. The film traveled to eight countries and 14 cities. Kulczar hosts a panel discussion after most screenings.

"After watching my vulnerability, people feel like they are safe to open up about their loss, their grief, their trauma," she says. "We have really cathartic, painful, eye-opening discussions about these topics."

Forever enamored with nature

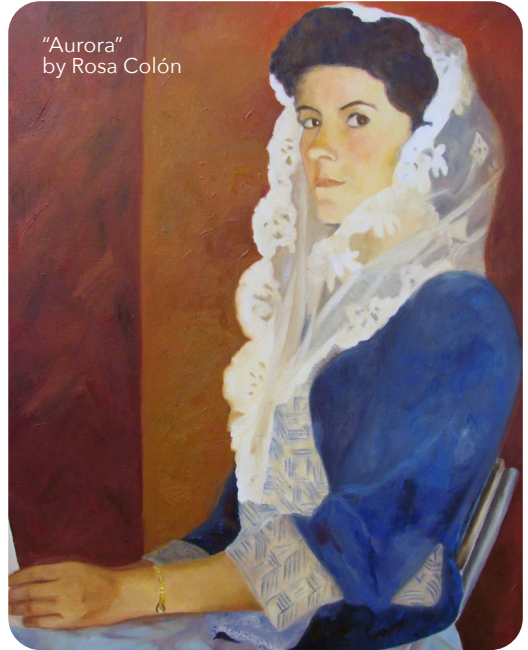
Rosa Colón is a Colombian-born artist whose Hispanic heritage deeply informs her vibrant, emotionally resonant work rooted in personal memories, cultural pride and a profound connection to nature.



In “Together,” Colón paints a pair of purple and white bearded irises against the deep blue gradient background. The work characterizes a key part of Colón’s artistic practice: nature. Raised among Colombia’s vibrant mountains, flowers and wildlife, she developed a deep emotional bond with the natural world. Through her paintings, she invites viewers to share in this connection.

“When I achieve this, I feel happy that others can appreciate the beauty of nature – which we must care for if we want future generations to enjoy it as we do today,” the artist elaborates.

Colón graduated from Jorge Tadeo University in Bogota with a bachelor’s degree in interior decoration in 1985. Her art training also includes architectural expression courses at Bogota’s National University of Colombia and private oil painting classes. In summer 1999, the artist traveled from Colombia to Stamford, Connecticut, for a monthlong vacation at her aunt’s invitation. During that visit, she met her future husband, and their connection quickly deepened. After returning to Colombia, he soon visited her and met her family. They got engaged at the turn of the millennium and she immigrated to the U.S. in 2000. Stamford has been her home ever since.



Her own artwork is rooted in personal connection. She often paints portraits of loved ones using her own photography as reference. One of her most meaningful pieces is “Aurora,” a portrait of her mother inspired by an old black-and-white photograph. She brought the image to life through her mother’s vivid description of the dress’ colors. After her mother’s passing, she discovered the original mantilla from the photo – now a treasured keepsake.

In 2013, Colón co-founded Liber-Art, a collective that supports emerging artists from diverse backgrounds. She connected with artists, organized exhibitions and promoted their work through partnerships with local businesses.

Colón paints images rooted in love, memory and nature and brings beauty to life with every brushstroke. The artist continues to live and paint in Stamford while working as a private art instructor, where her watercolor classes are a favorite for all audiences. She also prides herself on being an avid mentor to other artists and stays connected to the local arts community through her membership in Loft Artists Association.

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Heritage and high standards in every dish



Thompson Hospitality Regional Executive Chef Javier Arambales' greatest achievement in 2025: Earning a Certified Executive Chef designation through the American Culinary Federation. Photo courtesy of Javier Arambales

As a regional executive chef for Thompson Hospitality, Javier Arambales hosts chef's tables at venues throughout the country – something he enjoys very much. Arambales creates a special recipe and displays the dish for guests to taste. If they love it, guests purchase the meal.

"(Guests) love the experience and interaction with me," Arambales says. "We have recipe cards out front, and they will grab them and start asking me questions about the recipes. I explain what to do and how to do it."

Aramboles, born and raised in New York City's Lower East Side of Manhattan, credits his family's celebrations and reunions for sparking an interest in food at an early age.

"I remember... going in the kitchen, helping out, eating all the food and getting kicked out," he explains. "I saw how the food brought everyone together."

In high school, a teacher helped Arambales enroll in a food service program where he learned cooking and knife skills. After a few years gaining practical experience at local restaurants in Manhattan, he attended Johnson & Wales University in Providence,

Rhode Island, graduating in 1999 with an associate degree in applied science with a focus on culinary arts and chef training, and again in 2001 with a Bachelor of Science in food-service management.

"When I got into the business, I started learning Italian American ... then I started learning Asian cuisine," says Arambales, currently a Bronx resident. "And of course, my background, which is Puerto Rican and Dominican, is an influence."

His greatest achievement in 2025 has been becoming a Certified Executive Chef through the American Culinary Federation. After two years of culinary, nutrition, safety and supervision courses, Arambales passed his final test: Prepare a three-course meal for four people in just three hours using ingredients from a market basket. He had an additional 15 minutes to plate the food. In a cohort of 12, Arambales was one of two chefs who received the CEC designation.

"I hold a certain standard," Arambales says. "I go above and beyond, and I expect these standards to be met."

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Chef. Restaurateur. Olympian.



Chef Ted Polfelt likens his first job at a deli in Roanoke, Virginia, to a sporting event. Photo by Jennifer Hayward, Visit VBR

In 2023, when Ted Polfelt decided to open Brood Restaurant & Bar in Salem, Virginia, he leaned into a gluten-free menu. His oldest daughter had been diagnosed in 2020 with celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder caused by gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. Polfelt knew his daughter would be working at the restaurant, and he wanted her to feel safe and offer a place for people like her to enjoy a meal they could trust is gluten-free.

"If you stay away from processed foods, it's pretty easy," Polfelt says, "Any recipe that you bread or deep-fry, you can use cornstarch or any number of starches and gums. You usually don't notice at all."

Polfelt grew up in Roanoke, Virginia, eating processed foods, macaroni salad and undercooked oatmeal he'd learned to cook on his own. In 1998, he landed his first job at Brambleton Deli in southwest Roanoke and stayed until 2002, when he graduated from high school. Polfelt fell in love with the controlled chaos in the kitchen – he likens the experience to a sporting event.

"It was athletic; it was intense," he explains. "It felt like there was a goal."

After Polfelt's freshman year of college, he left school knowing he didn't want to pursue a law degree. The owner of Brambleton Deli suggested Polfelt apply to culinary school – an idea he'd never considered.

In 2006, Polfelt graduated from Johnson & Wales University in Charlotte, North Carolina, with a two-year culinary arts degree. Over the next two decades, Polfelt worked in Roanoke with a food service group, opening several dining concepts.

He spent three years at Roanoke Country Club while teaching classes such as butchery, pastry and plated desserts at Virginia Western Community College's culinary arts program – a job he still has.

In 2020, Polfelt was selected for the American Culinary Federation's Culinary Team USA. For four years, he trained with five other chefs, a coach, assistant coach and six advisers. They discussed food ideas on Zoom and then met in-person once a month at schools willing to host a two-day stay.

"We wanted to bring what is cool and unique about American food to the world stage," he says.

The team competed at the 2022 Culinary World Cup in Luxemburg, and IKA Culinary Olympics in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2024. Polfelt and the other chefs cooked inside plexiglass boxes at the IKA Culinary Olympics competition. Every move they made was watched and judged.

"It was just like the Olympics," Polfelt explains. "They lit a torch. Something like 90,000 people came through to watch the competition while it was going on. It was an honor of a lifetime."



Bacon Vinaigrette

Ingredients

- 8 bacon slices
- 3 ounces vegetable oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 ounce honey
- 1 shallot, minced
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 4 ounces apple cider vinegar
- Salt and pepper to taste

Directions

Cook the bacon. Add the bacon grease to the vegetable oil and set it aside. Blend all the other ingredients in a food processor. Stream the oil mixture into the blended ingredients. Spin until desired consistency is achieved. Season to taste.

This recipe is great on a hearty spinach salad or tossed with roasted Brussels sprouts.

Heritage and high standards in every dish

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Pernil Al Horno (Roast Pork)

By Executive Chef Javier Arambóles

Servings: 15

Ingredients

- 24 fresh garlic cloves, peeled
- 3 tablespoons whole dried oregano
- 1 tablespoon whole black peppercorns
- 2 ounces kosher salt
- 4 ounces Jugo de Naranja agria (sour orange juice)
- 25 pounds pork shoulder or pork butt
- 4 ounces achiote paste
- 4 ounces canola oil

Directions

With a pestle and mortar, crush the garlic, oregano, peppercorns and salt, then add and mix with the Jugo de Naranja Agria. This forms the mojito sauce.

Make deep gashes in the pork. Rub the seasoning into the gashes, as well as inside and

outside the pork. Cover with cheesecloth and marinate overnight in the refrigerator.

In a mixing bowl, combine the achiote paste and canola oil. Mix until combined. Set aside for basting.

Preheat the oven to 375 F.

Remove the cheesecloth and place the seasoned pork in a roasting pan. Cover with foil, place the pork in the oven and cook for 2 hours. After 2 hours, remove the foil and continue to roast while constantly and slowly basting the pork with the achiote oil. A golden-brown crust (chicharrón) will form.

Lower the oven temperature to 350 F and finish cooking uncovered for 1 1/2 to 2 hours, or until completely done and tender with a crust. Cut into serving pieces and serve with the rest of the mojito sauce.

Serve with these suggested side dishes: Arroz Con Gandules (Puerto Rican Rice with Pigeon Peas) and Yuca Sancochado (Pickled Red Onion Garnish).

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