

## Sidedoor: S02E12 – Live! Cookin’ Up Stories

**This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I’m Tony Cohn.**

**When I cook a meal -- even when I spend the time to go grocery shopping, and mix the food together in a way that wouldn’t embarrass to my grandma -- my goal is follow the recipe and wind up with something that’ll fill me up, and hopefully it tastes good as well.**

**But when some chefs cook a meal -- and arguably these are the \*best\* chefs -- they think about way deeper things... sure: spices. A meat’s grain. Eye-catching presentation. But also, they think about what this meal says. In a way, they’re like authors, but instead of words they’re creating stories using ingredients.**

**We eat in the present. But food binds us to the past; it’s rooted in a place and time. Think of cultural celebrations like Passover, or Eid, or even Thanksgiving. The best meals have a lot to say: where we’ve been or where we’re going. They tell stories.**

**So today, we invite you to feast on a live show we produced for the Smithsonian National Museum of American History’s Third Annual Food History Weekend, focused around the theme: “Many Flavors, One Nation.”**

**We spoke with two chefs, from different culinary backgrounds: but one thing they have in common? They both think \*a lot\* about what food says.**

**So coming up next on Sidedoor. We share the stories their menus told. Right after a quick break.**

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**<<PRE-ROLL BREAK>>**  
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**Here’s the live show. Our first story starts almost ten years ago...**

[Live Show]

Tony: The year is 2009 which feels like it was yesterday. Right? But here are some of the things that were going on: Beyonce releases her halo single, Michael Jackson had just passed away, the iPhone is just two years old, “The Hangover” is one of the top performing films of the year, and Barack Obama is inaugurated as the 44th President of the United States.

But the other big thing that happened was Fiesta Latina. It's this huge concert hosted by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama on the South Lawn of White House to celebrate Latino music and culture. It's the first time this has ever happened before. And the Obamas, naturally, go full out. Over 400 people are invited, and it becomes this kind of "who's who" of the Latin American community.

[Tape: "PBS's In Performance at the White House: Fiesta Latina"]

Announcer: The President and the First Lady welcome Marc Anthony, Sheila E., Pete Escovedo...

Tony: And sitting with all these longtime Latinos celebs is a woman who is just about to become a household name herself: Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who was just confirmed to the United States Supreme Court two months before the event.

So it's this big event and it's a celebration with Latin American food and celebrities and music and where there's Latin American food, of course, there is Chef Maricel.

**Tony: OK. I'm going to jump in here for a second to add that Chef Maricel Presilla is a two-time James Beard Award winner, which are kind of like the Oscars but for food.**

**Chef Presilla joined me onstage to talk about developing the menu and cooking for Fiesta Latina. OK back to the show.**

Tony: The White House asked her to cook for the event and she is the first Latin American woman to ever be invited as a guest chef to the White House. Huge! [Applause]

Chef Maricel, you get this call, or text, or e-mail from the White House. You were the first Latin American woman to be invited to cook there. What was happening in that moment? Was it a text message?

Chef Maricel Presilla (Chef Presilla): It was a cell phone call on my Blackberry phone [laughs]. And I was at the Curi Cancha, the Inca palace in Cusco, eleven thousand feet high. And when I heard that the White House wanted me to cook for Hispanic Heritage Month I really felt oxygen deprived [laughs].

It was an usher who called. At first I thought it was a prank.

Tony: You that it was a prank?

Chef Presilla: I thought it was a prank, "Who's going to call me and invite me to cook at the White House?" So I had the audacity to say, "Wait a minute, let me check my schedule." [Laughs] So I just broke into this happy dance, and I said, "Yes."

After I hung up the phone, I did not realize that I was cooking an entire meal. I thought I was making dessert, for some reason [laughs]. So it was only two days later, when I arrived home, that I had a group call with the usher and the Chef of the White House that I realized that I was supposed to do the entire menu.

Tony: So what do you next? How do you begin to conceptualize a menu like that?

Chef Presilla: The thing is, of course I was extremely excited about this, and thinking about history, and White House menus in the past, which I knew, I had studied them. But the first thing you ask... You know that the event is going to be big; they had already told me it was Hispanic Heritage Month. I knew it was a big deal. They had said 400 people. So you need to know more; you need to have more information before the philosophical aspects kick in. They told me who was coming. And of course, you know, Sonia Sotomayor was the name that really impressed me, besides obviously the President and the First Lady.

So, I wanted to know more about the kitchen. So they explained that it was not a gigantic kitchen; that it was very efficient, but not big.

But I had no idea that they wanted so much of me. I didn't know, for example, that they wanted me to set the tone even in the way in which the place looked.

Tony: Wow.

Chef Presilla: For example, they asked me, "What kind of flowers do you want?" And I said, "Oh my God, flowers?" I said, "Peppers. I want chiles." [Laughs] So they took me...

Tony: Peppers instead of flowers?

Chef Presilla: Yeah, instead of flowers. I went to the florist's house, and I gave him the name of my suppliers, so they sourced chiles that I wanted. I wanted Peruvian peppers. I wanted ají amarillo and recoto.

Tony: So you're thinking about this huge event, and the menu, and the flowers, but what's that story? In one sentence, when you began to understand the logistics, what story did you want to tell?

Chef Presilla: I wanted to tell the story of the staples of Latin America, and that's why I chose peppers, because peppers are very key to Latin American cooking. So then, I decided that I could not do a menu based on countries only, but I wanted dishes that would represent styles of cooking and also that feature the main staples of Latin cooking: corn, beans, pork, the special things that make us Latin American. And so, that's how I composed the menu of seven savorys and seven sweets.

Everything has a story to tell. And I wanted to insert subliminal messages, because as a historian, I know what historians do when they look at menus; they analyze them carefully. So I

wanted to tell stories that were not even evident. And particularly I said, "Who's the guest of honor, besides the Obamas?" And it was Sonia Sotomayor. So, for a Puerto Rican like her, pasteles.

And so we did this incredibly complex type of tamal that calls for plantains – green bananas, the fruit – and malanga, which is a kind of taro, squash, and a filling of pork, which is also marinated in a very complex sweet pepper sauce– the key ingredients are cilantro and this tiny pepper called ají dulce. And pastels are hard to make. Usually it takes a village to make pasteles; you need the whole family, everyone in the neighborhood.

Tony: Or it takes a Maricel.

Chef Presilla: Or it takes me [laughs] and a Filipino Chef who's ready to do anything.

And then, I made a sauce which is very dear to Puerto Ricans called Ajilimójili with this, again, tiny sweet pepper with a little bit of a kick, because I got so many hot peppers from my suppliers. It was amazing. I had boxes and boxes, I could do anything I wanted. But also I could go to the garden, and I did.

Tony: To what? The garden at the White House?

Chef Presilla: Yes, the White House garden. And I picked peppers, I picked parsley, tomatillos, a number of things that maybe I didn't need because I had enough stuff, but I said "Symbolically, I want to use these ingredients."

Tony: "If I'm getting to go to the White House garden, I'm taking everything that I can fit in my pockets." [Laughs]

Chef Presilla: I did. So I filled my pockets. And then the Obamas' personal chef was a bit concerned because I was taking everything from the garden. [Laughs] But I did. It was a symbolic act. I also used honey to sweeten some of my chocolate desserts, because I had seven desserts and six of them had cacao and chocolate, because of course, that's a main staple in Latin America.

Tony: So you figure out all the logistics... First, you realize it's not a prank, that you're doing this. Then, you figure out all of the logistics. Then, you start to conceptualize the story of telling the Latin American experience. You get the ingredients. Now, it's a day before the event. It's game time. What are you doing?

Chef Presilla: Well, actually the whole work was spread out over three days. So the first day, I walked into the kitchen and I feel that I'm at home, that this is my restaurant kitchen: ethnically diverse... It was like being back in my own restaurant kitchen.

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We were working very hard, but usually, when you're making a big menu like this, the day before the event, which was October 13th, is the key day. It's crazy, I would imagine. It's insane. And I was planning to do most of the work for the pasteles on October 12th. But guess what? It was a holiday, and they didn't want to pay overtime [laughs].

Tony: Do you mean there weren't other people in the kitchen?

Chef Presilla: Yeah, they were thrifty. [Laughs]

Tony: Wait, what?

Chef Presilla: They were thrifty. And so I walked in the kitchen, and I said, "Chris, where's the rest of the people?" They had the day off. [Laughs] And she said, "Don't worry. We'll manage today, and tomorrow it will be great." It was just before the event, so it was Chris and I.

Tony: So you're cooking for 400 people; it's the who's who of the Latin American community. And it's the day before the event.

Chef Presilla: Exactly, the day before and it's just the two of us. [Laughs] But you know what? That woman was the... I went with my business partner, but she's front of the house. I mean she wears high heels [laughs]. And in the kitchen. But she was very helpful. But the thing is that I'd seen Chris do so much, including washing the pots, the dirty pots. And it dawned on me that this was, you know, this was a job. This is the kitchen. And it's also the home kitchen.

So I did exactly what she did. She worked hard. I worked hard. I also helped with the dishes and the pots until somebody Barbados came in. You mean you're washing the dishes? Of course I did. And she swept the floor, so I did the same thing. So it was... We were both women working in a home kitchen. And it just made me feel so much better. I had a sense of intimacy about the whole place.

Tony: So once you have that day where it's just you and your colleague in the kitchen, sweeping, and cleaning, and cooking, what's the date like? On the actual event, are you dancing with Jennifer Lopez? Are you cooking...?

Chef Presilla: On the day, everyone was there, everyone came back to work, and so we were doing the finishing touches. And through this whole process, we were missing ingredients and we had to improvise. I decided to marinate bacon to serve over a Cuban-style corn polenta, which is something that I love. And when we looked at the bacon, it was pork belly. It was not bacon. So Chris said, "Don't worry about it. We can smoke this is no time." So she brined it. She created a smoker in the steamer, and we had bacon. So things like that; when an ingredient didn't work, we used another. It's what happens in any kitchen.

Tony: But what about that night? What are you doing? I mean are you serving the food?

Chef Presilla: No, no I'm working. We are done. When I walked out, because they asked me to walk out, normally you don't. You stay back...

Tony: Are you in your chef's uniform?

Chef Presilla: Yeah, I'm in my chef's uniform, looking as if I had not done anything, but I did. [Laughs] And just meeting people, meeting senators, and being totally in awe of things, and taking pictures. And just... When I saw my vision realized in such a grand manner and beautiful style... I saw the peppers in those tall cylinders, the foyer and the blue room, next to my food and the food looked so beautiful...

Also, I was talking to the butlers, whom I had met during lunch, and one of them really liked me. And so he came back and said, "I just talked to Sonia Sotomayor, Justice Sotomayor, and she said that your pasteles are as good as her mother's." [Laughs] And that was it. I said, "I did my job." That's exactly what I wanted. I wanted that reaction because I made them with a sense of pride and affection for this woman and her accomplishment, and it resonated and she noticed. Nobody told her that I had made the pasteles for her, but she sensed it.

Tony: Thank you so much, Chef Maricel. Can we please give Chef Maricel a big round of applause?

[Applause]

**Coming up next, we hear from a chef who designed the menu at the one of the hottest restaurants in DC. But it's not what you'd expect of a James Beard Award nominated restaurant. It's a museum cafe that serves 400 pounds of collard greens each day, and tells powerful stories of the African American experience.**

**Stay with us.**

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<<Midroll Break>>  
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**For the second half of our live show, we spoke with Chef Jerome Grant. He's the Executive Chef at the Sweet Home Cafe. It's located in the Smithsonian's newest Museum and it is SO good. People wait in long lines just to get inside the restaurant. But it's not just for the food; it's for how the food tells the of African-Americans... and of America.**

**Okay, here's the show.**

[Live show]

Tony: Sweet Home Cafe, which is the restaurant inside of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, serves anywhere between 2,800 and 3,500 people a day. That's nearly 100,000 a month. Every day they cook 400 pounds of collard greens, 600 pounds of chicken, and a 100 pounds of catfish in order to make that happen [laughs].

If you couldn't tell from those ingredients, this is not your typical museum fare. And Chef Jerome spent over two years conceptualizing the menu, because they wanted to tell the story of African-American history and culture, very similar to how the museum does. It's like their own edible exhibit. I've heard you say that, Chef Jerome.

Chef Jerome Grant (Chef Grant): Yes, that's correct.

Tony: And it shows. So the other day, in preparation for this live show, I stopped by The Sweet Home Café at the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, and I want to share with you some of the things that I heard people saying.

[Audio: Sweet Home Café Montage]

Tony: What did you order?

Guest 1: I ordered trout.

Guest 2: I had catfish.

Guest 3: Yes, it's just Southern-fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, collard greens, rice and peas because I was real hungry, and some cornbread.

Tony: Does the food remind you of anything? Does it conjure any memories or is there a special reason you picked that dish?

Guest 4: Well my reaction would be that it's kind of... I don't know, almost soothing or something, the food. It's like... I guess it reminds me of home.

Guest 5: Home.

Guest 3: It's more like reminding me of my grandmother's house in North Carolina.

Guest 6: Yes, as I'm eating I'm thinking about my mother. That's that's the truth.

Guest 7: I think that it's very cool that the whole range of kinds of food is represented.

Guest 8: But it's not burgers and chips.

Guest 9: I mean it's all like representative of all the different areas that African-Americans grew up in.

Guest 4: And I think it gives some nice offering for people who come from all over the country.

Tony: Where are you visiting from today?

Guest 10: Richmond, Virginia.

Guest 2: We're from Baltimore.

Tony: And what did you eat today?

Guest 8: This is my fifth time at the... Yeah, my fifth time. And four times I've had this shrimp and grits.

Tony: Why have you had it so many times?

Guest 8: Because it's delicious.

Guest 11: I love it. It's fantastic. Way to go. Thank you, Jesus. [Laughs]

Tony: Chef Jerome, how does it hear to hear people saying that about the food you cook at the National Museum of African-American History and Culture?

Chef Grant: Oh I know, it's amazing. you know. When we first started, we never anticipated how big we would be. I remember us first opening up our doors on September 24th and literally serving 4,000 people plus. And that's when we knew we were in trouble. [Laughs]

Tony: You know, the menu on the website, it describes it as telling the whole story of African-American history and culture, but there's one dish that I want to talk to you about, and it tells a very specific story. It's called the Thomas Downing Inspired Oyster Pan. So before we dive into the narrative behind that dish, what is an oyster pan?

Chef Grant: So an oyster pan roast is like a traditional-style, New York fare of the times in the 1800s. It's a quick sauté of oysters, butter, a little bit of Worcester sauce, and white wine, and just toast was just the thing back in the days believe it or not. And we thought that we mimic it, and modernize it a little bit, but still keep it true to what those days where. It's one of our more standout dishes that we have, and it's definitely something that coincides with the story that we tell upstairs in our Food Ways exhibit about Thomas Downing.

Tony: Okay so, perfect segue, who was Thomas Downing, and why does he have an entire dish named after him at Sweet Home Café?

Chef Grant: Thomas Downing was a son of freed slaves from Virginia, African-American man, that was intrigued by fishing. Growing up as a boy, he went out and gathered clams, dug for clams, gathered oysters, and that was just his thing being a kid that grew up on the opposite side of Chesapeake in Virginia.

So he migrated New York City and became an oysterman, selling his oysters to local taverns and bars throughout the New York area. It's kind of hard to believe at that time New York had such an abundance of seafood.

Tony: I also want to add that this is happening, as you said, in 1791. And in 1793, for context, the first fugitive slave law was passed, and that allowed slave owners to cross state lines in the pursuit of fugitives and make it illegal to help runaway slaves.



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Chef Grant: Exactly. So with him selling these oysters, he went ahead and said, "You know what? I might as well get in the oyster business myself, and benefit from it."

Him being a son of freed slaves, he was actually able to do that. African-Americans that were still slaves couldn't purchase land, couldn't open businesses. But he was able to. So he started his oyster cart on the corner of Grand Central Station, and literally, literally folks would line up around the block just for his oysters. They'd wait in lines like... You know this wasn't going to a José Andres place, this was a black dude on the corner selling oysters, man. [Laughs]

It gets a little scary when you see people on lines.

Tony: I read a really interesting excerpt, because I asked myself like, "What made his oysters so special?" And there was an anecdote that he used to row his boat out into the ocean to meet the oystermen at sea, get the first pick of the oysters in the middle of the night, and then go back and sell them to the public.

Chef Grant: Exactly. So he was like a hard negotiator too. He'd wait there for them to come back. And even if they had the best stuff, better than his, he would negotiate to get their stuff. But it was all to give the people of New York the best quality oyster. So eventually he went ahead and opened up his own tavern, where they had live entertainment. You'd see a lot of black entertainers coming in there. There'd be all sorts of people in there.

So what he did was, he would sell his pickled oysters all over New York state, all over the world, and at the same time run this tavern. But the great thing is that his tavern doubled as a stop on the underground railroad.

[Audience: "Wow..."]

So not only was he helping runaway slaves escape slavery, but he was also helping them by providing them with that chance. A lot of them were entertainers and they sang and danced right in his spot before going on to their new beginnings. And it just goes to show you that... They were running all throughout the night, and they would get into the cellar, and the first thing they'd do is sit at a table. They would eat they would, they would converse, which I think is just truly amazing. To nourish somebody and to sit there and say, "You know what? Everything's going to be OK. We have newer beginnings. We're going to make this work." It's just tremendous. And food plays a major part in that.

Like, [Chef Presilla] as you said, food is comforting, food is nourishing, things are done subliminally. You know, this is why we do this. And it's just an amazing story in itself. And we thought that we'd honor that, and really showcase that at one of our stations, so people could see that story.

One of the other amazing things is when Thomas Dowling passed away the whole Chamber of Commerce of New York City closed down for his funeral.

[Audience: "Wow..."]

This is in 1871, I believe. In 1871, the whole city of New York shut down for an African-American oysterman.

[Audience: "Wow."]

Tony: Yeah, 1866 the New York Chamber of Commerce shut down.

Chef Grant: So that's the kind of touch this man has created around the oyster. Food, something that he sold to people, something that people looked forward to at the end of the day, something that people can relate with. In that sense, it's probably one of the most powerful stories in American history, I believe. So that's why we do it.

Tony: Well, I think it's... Thomas Downing, I did some more research, and not only was his tavern a stop on the Underground Railroad, he also saved the dinner at the New York Herald from going under by advancing a loan of ten thousand dollars.

Chef Grant: Yes.

Tony: He employed, as you said, black musicians and some have credited him with helping spark Harlem's jazz scene. And, I mean, what's just so amazing to me about his tavern being a stop on the Underground Railroad is above that is the social elite of New York City: businessmen, politicians, the tops of society were there, and yet they're having the same experience over food as the slaves who were trying to run away to freedom.

Chef Grant: Exactly. And that's just the amazing time. Like try to envision that going on right now, you'd just be like, "Woah. This is wild." And he drove that. He took his opportunities that he was given to provide opportunities for other people.

Tony: So for people who haven't been to the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, the cafe is located when you come out an exhibit, a lot of which focuses on the history of the slave trade in the U.S.

So, Chef Jerome, if I'm an individual who has just come out of that exhibit, which is very heavy, and I come to Sweet Home Café and I order the Thomas Downing Inspired Oyster Pan, what do you hope I'm thinking about?

Chef Grant: I'm hoping that your understanding the story behind it. We try to talk about the story as much as possible to our guests that come in so you can literally see and feel like, "Wow."

We've taken this story that a lot of us haven't heard about, we've put it into this beautiful museum that's been 100 years in the making, and I'm able to actually sit down amongst everybody and have this meal.

I think that goes to show you the resiliency of African-Americans and what we've gone through, and what we've done to push our culture. But at the same time, how we have all been able to meld together. We've all been able to come into our cafe after we've seen some serious things in the history gallery, and do the first thing that we do when we have a bad day or something happens, we run to the refrigerator. So you run into our cafes and you identify with something that you've seen throughout your life. You identify with macaroni and cheese and collard greens. But at the same time you're doing it through the eyes of African-Americans too. And I just want to take the credit for putting the food on the table, that's pretty much it [laughs.] So, that's what we really go for there.

You know it's "Sweet Home Café." We're welcoming you into our homes, we're nourishing your bodies, and we're wanting you to live with us, in other words.

Tony: Chef Jerome, thank you so much for sharing that story with us.

[Applause]

**You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.**

**If you want to eat some of the stories we just heard, Chef Jerome Grant's Sweet Home Cafe is located \*inside\* the National Museum of African American History in Washington, D.C. And Maricel Presilla's restaurant is called Cucharamama, and is in Hoboken, New Jersey. You can also check out her new cookbook, "Peppers of the Americas."**

**Special thanks to the fine folks...**

**We want to send a special thanks to Chefs Jerome Grant and Maricel Presilla for joining us live on stage and sharing their stories with us.**

**Also... if you have a question that you think a Smithsonian curator, historian or scientist could answer... email it to us at sidedoor at si dot edu. We're planning future episodes and we want to know what you want to know. That's sidedoor "at" si "dot" e-d-u. Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Rachel Aronoff, Jason Orfanon, Gabe Kosowitz, and Jess Sadeq. Extra support comes from John Barth, and Barbara Rehm. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. I'm your host, Tony Cohn. Thanks for listening!**

**And here's the live show... Our first story starts almost ten years ago...**

**So of course when you're throwing a party to celebrate the biggest Latin American stars... you'd need one of the best Latin American chefs...**

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**Ok, back to the show.**

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**Ok, here**

**It's located in the Smithsonian's Newest Museum... and it's... SO good.**