

ABY ALDANA

“I am my parents’ American dream” is a quote from Aby that resonates strongly in her story. She is here to share a very traditional Guatemalan comfort food recipe with us while also speaking of her family. “Jocon de Pollo” is served both at public gatherings and at home, utilizing one’s own home-grown chickens. As the warmth of the broth with fragrant bay leaves fills the air, Aby’s calm and confident skill at both cooking and storytelling begin.



Aby has family roots that stem from Guatemala, in the Quetzaltenango region, and she preserves her heritage through recipes that she learned from her grandmother. She is aware of the importance of connecting her upcoming generation’s children through what she learns and shares, just as her parents did for her. Knowing that Aby would learn and master English once she began school as a child, her parents required her to speak only Spanish at home while growing up. This was key in Aby mastering Spanish and enabled her to be able to reach so many people in ways she never thought of. Back then, she says that she couldn’t have imagined that she would spend so much time speaking Spanish to her community members in her everyday work and life. Food and language are the main way that her entire family stays connected, as her family is in Houston where she was born, but after graduating from college, she now lives and works in north Texas.



The aroma of the vegetables' essential oils is enchanting as Aby blends the vegetables in parts.

While she blends the healthy vegetables and herbs for the sauce, Aby transports us back to a time when she was 16 years old, when she first went to visit Guatemala and experienced culture shock. Although there was no air conditioning and there was a lack of running water, she wanted to stay for longer than she initially thought. To her, it was an amazing experience where she first learned to dance, Marimba specifically, along with her cousins in Guatemala as the music would play in the streets. Most of the family had conjoined houses close together on the property, and all lived within walking distance of each other. We were able to view photos of this lovely village in Santa Rita where the mountains are visible in the background, and the two-story apartment style homes are usually built with a courtyard in the middle.

Her grandparents had an outdoor kitchen and a water well outside, although most of the cooking was done inside. "I love to cook!" Aby confirmed when asked the question, and it shows in her cooking today and in her enthusiasm for learning traditional Guatemalan family recipes. The irony does not escape her as she remembers that she first resented cooking. She was 8 when her mother first began teaching her, and as the youngest child, she didn't like that her siblings were not helping. However, now that she is older, she wants to learn as many of the family's traditional recipes as she can.



When her grandmother was losing her sight, she taught Aby a new way of cooking by using her own senses of touch and smell, and from this she could tell what the recipe needed and how to check for doneness. As to whether Guatemalan cuisine is typically spicy, Aby explains that although there are a variety of traditional dark chiles and jalapeños available, spicy food is not typically eaten and usually there are lots of sauces that are eaten on the side instead.

As we get to enjoy the deliciously warm yet vibrant flavors of all the ingredients in the finished dish, Aby was asked whether she would like to visit Guatemala again. She is hoping that next year, she and her family can take her mother there because she hasn't been able to visit in 34 years. To this day, her family in Houston gets together after church every Sunday. The tradition of the women cooking and serving continues during these family gatherings, but Aby shares that her father also makes breakfast a lot of the time and has always shared in the task of washing the dishes. As the years inevitably pass, and roles can change little by little, the precious time shared together is what resounds and will lay the foundation for her family's culture.



Aby's mother is wearing a traditional indigenous dress, which is hand woven on a loom.

There is a lot of history in this "Jocon de Pollo" recipe; that of tradition, love, cooking, and family gathering together. Aby is wise beyond her years and reminds us of the importance of preserving our heritage and celebrating it.



An original photo of Aby's grandparents.

Jocon de Pollo (Chicken with Green Vegetable Sauce)

PREP TIME: 1 hour
COOK TIME: 45-1hr
SERVES: 8

INGREDIENTS:

- 5 lbs of Chicken
- 2 lb of tomatillos
- 4 deseeded jalapeno peppers
- 2 bell peppers
- 1 full bunch green onions
- 1 full bunch fresh cilantro
- 1 head of garlic
- 1 head of lettuce (iceberg or other type)
- 1 small day-old bread- to thicken the sauce. (bolillo/hoagie or 2 sandwich slices) *
- ½ cup pumpkin seeds
- 2 cups long grain white rice
- Spices
 - 1 tablespoon Maggi sabor de pollo (chicken bouillon)
 - ½ tsp cayenne pepper
 - 5 bay leaves
 - salt (for taste at the end of cooking)

EQUIPMENT:

- 2 medium stockpots
- Cutting surface/board
- Bowls for separating ingredients
- Sharp Knife
- Spatula
- Ladle
- Oven
- Stovetop
- Food Processor/Blender

*For a gluten-free option, try a small ball of masa de maiz/corn masa or gluten-free bread.



-Keep In Mind-

- Before cooking the rice, rinse the rice 2-3 times.
- When blending the vegetables place the watery vegetables in first – tomatillos & iceberg lettuce.
- Put chopped vegetables in blender in portions (1-2 handfuls at time).
- Best to rip the bread into smaller pieces to make it easier to blend!
- As you blend it together, start with pulsing the blender then hold it for a smooth blend.
- When blending the mixture, bring it to a smooth thick consistency with no large chunks.
- Potatoes and carrots are sometimes included in the white rice.

Jocon de Pollo (Chicken with Green Vegetable Sauce)

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Place chicken, a lot of water, and 5 bay leaves to a large pot. Bring to boil and skim as needed.
2. In the meantime that the chicken is cooking, place 2 cups of rice in a pot with 3 cups of water, Cover and cook for 16 minutes and then turn off heat and let it sit for 10 more minutes, keeping the lid covered. Put aside to serve when the Jocon de Pollo is ready.
3. Toast the pumpkin seeds in a separate pan. Stir as seeds start to toast.
4. Rinse and chop all your vegetables.
5. In a blender or food processor, blend all the vegetables and the pumpkin seeds in parts. Add the bread in bits into the blender as you make the sauce. You can pour the sauce into a large bowl as you make it in parts.
6. When chicken has fully cooked, pour out most of the broth but leave enough water so the chicken is covered.
7. Add the blended sauce, Maggi bouillon, and the cayenne pepper.
8. Bring to a boil and reduce to simmer to cook another 10 minutes.
9. Serve the chicken with sauce along with the white rice.