

**ALICIA VILLANUEVA**  
**Alicia's Tamales los Mayas – San Francisco, CA**

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans  
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**[Begin Alicia Villanueva Interview]**

**00:00:01**

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Monday, May 20, 2013 in San Francisco, California, at the offices of La Cocina. And I’m here with Alicia Villanueva. And, if you would, please say your name and what you do, please?

**00:00:18**

**Alicia Villanueva:** Sure. Hi, my name is Alicia Villanueva, and I am the owner of Tamales los Mayas, the owner and the chef and—here in San Francisco and I’m in the program at La Cocina.

**00:00:31**

**AE:** May I ask you to also state your birth date for the record?

**00:00:33**

**AV:** Sure, it’s April 27, 1961. I just get fifty-two years old.

**00:00:42**

**AE:** Oh, with a recent birthday. Happy Birthday.

**00:00:44**

**AV:** Thank you.

**00:00:44**

**AE:** So tell me where you’re from.

**00:00:48**

**AV:** I’m from Mexico—from Mazatlan, Sinaloa. It’s beautiful, small, paradise-like place in Mexico.

**00:00:54**

**AE:** And when did you come to San Francisco?

**00:00:56**

**AV:** In 2000. I’m—I’m sorry, 2000 is—I’m sorry, it’s August the first, 2000, *si*.

**00:01:06**

**AE:** You remember it vividly. What were you doing prior to coming to San Francisco?

**00:01:10**

**AV:** I’m—I was working in Puerto Vallarta in the tourist industry. Yes.

**00:01:18**

**AE:** Which is big there. There’s a very big tourist industry. So what made you make the jump, the move to San Francisco?

**00:01:25**

**AV:** You know like everybody is following—follow our dreams? And I really have my American Dream. [*Laughs*] And right now I’m living my American Dream in San Francisco at La Cocina, raising my business.

00:01:41

**AE:** Did you know people when you came to San Francisco?

00:01:43

**AV:** Oh, yes. Yes, I do. Yes.

00:01:48

**AE:** Other family or people from Mazatlan?

00:01:50

**AV:** Oh no, no, no. It’s—no, it’s all my friends are just I met(ed) here in—in the United States in San Francisco. No, I don’t have any family right now with me, just my three kids and my husband and me.

00:02:05

**AE:** So how did you choose San Francisco, then, to make your American Dream?

00:02:10

**AV:** Because, you know, it’s California, it’s close to Mexico, and I love it. [*Laughs*] I like—I like this—this state. I like it.

00:02:21

**AE:** Was there something about landing in a—in a bigger city in the United States that was attractive?

**00:02:26**

**AV:** Actually, like, it was more easy for me to come from Puerto Vallarta to the United States—to California because it’s a really direct flight from Puerto Vallarta to California, San Francisco, so I just decide like that way. **[Laughs]** Yeah.

**00:02:49**

**AE:** That works for me. So do you remember what you felt when you first got here in 2000?

**00:02:55**

**AV:** I—I get really surprised or—how can I say it—like really like always I say really interested to see a lot of different cultures in the United States. And I—I really realized that I want to bring my culture and let everybody know my culture through my cuisine. It’s a Mexican cuisine, and I specialize more in tamales. Yeah.

**00:03:25**

**AE:** So tell me how you learned to make tamales.

**00:03:29**

**AV:** Since I was—I was a kid, yeah, I just enjoyed to cook with my mom and my grandmom, so that’s—since I remember I really—since I was a child, I really enjoyed to cook and with my family and my mom. Yes.

**00:03:48**

**AE:** Would you all cook together, the three of you?

**00:03:52**

**AV:** Yes, and sometimes more than the three of us—you know, in the house and cousins and everybody. Yeah.

**00:04:01**

**AE:** Yeah, well, and I know that’s the thing about tamales: it’s a food of celebration and brings people together. Can you talk about that a little bit?

**00:04:08**

**AV:** That’s the reason—a really beautiful tradition because we use—in Mexico or Central America we really enjoy to cook tamales when it’s like a big celebration days like, let’s say Christmas or the New Year or weddings or—yeah, something really big and everybody just likes to cook tamales for everybody.

**00:04:29**

**AE:** And another part of that is that tamales are so much work that you do—you make them all together. Can you explain why you wanted that to be the—the food that you made your—that you built your dream on?

**00:04:45**

**AV:** Yeah, sorry, can you repeat that?

**00:04:48**

**AE:** I just—I want to know why tamales, specifically, is what you wanted to build your business on here?

**00:04:55**

**AV:** Because I think that the tamales is really, really a nice tradition and—and culture that we have in Mexico, Latin America, like came from Los Mayas and the Aztecs too. It's a really nice history cuisine, like really, really interesting. Yes.

**00:05:17**

**AE:** When you were cooking with your mother and your grandmother do they—did they tell you stories about the history of tamales and—and the history of your culture?

**00:05:27**

**AV:** Yes. [*Laughs*] My mom did. Yeah, my mom. And it's like you know it's like if you—if you see—if you're interested in the—for example, Los Mayas culture, you can see when—when they—they cook the tamales it was a really gourmet plate for the kings and queens and the really rich people that it was a really gourmet plate for—for them. But you know since that time it's coming like tradition right now and everybody loves to cook the tamales. Yeah.

**00:06:05**

**AE:** So did you know that's what you were going to be doing when you came here?

**00:06:08**

**AV:** Yes. I—I really—I really like the food industry and I really like to—to have my own restaurant. I really want to.

**00:06:24**

**AE:** Did you always cook tamales at home yourself?

**00:06:27**

**AV:** Yes. Before yes, I just start my business, you know, like—let me tell you. Before I came to La Cocina I—I just started to raise my business by myself, but it was really hard. And I just cooked the tamales at home. And as soon as I cooked them, I just go to the street and sell them. You know, I will start to knock [on] doors around my neighborhood and in—you know, introduce myself and telling that I was cooking these delicious tamales, and I really liked that if they are interested, to taste them. And as soon as they taste them, become my really big customers since. [*Laughs*] Ten years ago, I—they just called me and they said, “Hey, Alicia. I need some tamales for any dinner”—or whatever they have.

**00:07:17**

But right now is more formal, what I’m doing here in La Cocina. Yeah, I’m—I’m—I have like three different companies who are catering, and I do festivals and I have like four points of sales, like as in—in Off the Grid and Fort Mason and Upper Haight and Larkspur in Marin [County]. So I—I have a lot of activities selling my tamales right now.

**00:07:47**

**AE:** That's wonderful. And Daniella [Sawaya of La Cocina] mentioned to me earlier before you got here that you started selling—in addition to knocking on doors, that you started selling at your church?

**00:07:56**

**AV:** Oh, yes. That's true. It's in—we call it Santa Isabel [Saint Elizabeth] Church in—in Oakland and I just, you know, cook my tamales and set up a small table with my kid. He was eight years old, and he was collecting the money and I was just serving my tamales. But it was kind of risky because I didn't have any permit, and so I was kind of afraid that, you know, they came and they say hey, why you are selling tamales here? You don't have any permit, so—. It's—it's very stressful when you do it like that way.

**00:08:28**

But now I feel really happy because I have all my permits and everything under code.

**00:08:37**

**AE:** Yes, that's important. So in your neighborhood—you live in Oakland or Berkeley?

**00:08:42**

**AV:** No, right now I have like eight—nine years living in Berkeley, yeah. My first three years—two years was in—no, three years—in Oakland. Yeah. In Oakland.

**00:08:56**

**AE:** And so when you were knocking on doors and selling at your church, were your customers, were they—were you in an immigrant community? Were there other Mexican immigrants there or—or who were your customers then?

**00:09:07**

**AV:** No, it was an Anglo—Anglo and Asian cultures, because where I live there is you like a really nice and beautiful residential area. So I decided to go to that area. And then maybe because I know a little bit of English it helped me, and yeah, I decided to go and explore another culture besides mine. And it's so funny because when I decided to go to my—how can I say—community, Latino community, they don't buy too much. It's more like, you know, another like I say another culture, they are more interested. I think that because the Latino is more like can they cook the tamales in their home and by their own—so, yeah, that's—I think that that's the way. Yeah.

**00:09:58**

**AE:** So did many of those people in that neighborhood where you first sold, were they familiar with tamales or did you have to educate them about what a tamale was?

**00:10:07**

**AV:** Both. Some of them know about the tamales, but some of them don't. And then I have to educate them how to, you know, how to open the tamale and how you say—and grab it. And grab? Yeah. And serve the salsa and tell them how they can eat it. And they love it. **[Laughs]**

**00:10:28**

**AE:** What kinds of tamales were those first ones that you made and sold?

**00:10:32**

**AV:** The chicken tamale. The chicken tamale is like with some carrots, potatoes, zucchini, peas, and *salsa verde*. And then the *carnitas* is the pork tamale with *salsa chipotle* and the Oaxaca cheese—with green pepper and *salsa verde*. They are really good.

**00:10:51**

**AE:** I watched some of the women you work with who were prepping for you this morning. I think they were making the chicken tamales.

**00:10:57**

**AV:** Yes. Yeah, we—but we prepare everything—the veggies, the chicken, the *carnitas*, and the cheese, the Oaxaca cheese. Yeah, we—we prepare everything in the morning all—all—our whole production—salsas and all this stuff that is in the tamales. And then on Tuesday—from Tuesday to Sunday, we just sell tamales. Yeah.

**00:11:19**

**AE:** So, is that something that—explain to me what it was like to go from just selling by yourself in your neighborhood to the scale of producing tamales that you are now, because they're—they're so much work.

**00:11:32**

**AV:** It is really if—you know, like, when we cook tamales when you say a big party, like, for example, at Christmas, you have to spend like around between four, six hours. And when I was cooking by myself, raising my own business by myself, really, I just spent like maybe four or five hours cooking the tamales. Now, we do the same hours, but there are six ladies that they are working for me. And when I start to cook my tamales, I start like with 100 tamales, and it was, for me, really a big amount. But now things got—we are—our production is like between 2,500 tamales to 3,000 per week. Yeah. It's a lot of work, really. But I feel so happy because I have this really nice team working with me. There are six ladies, and I feel so happy to support them, you know. And right now, all my community here in San Francisco, they really support my business, you know, buying my tamales and, at the same time, I'm supporting my ladies that they have their own families. So I'm—I'm really happy.

**00:12:42**

And sometimes it's kind of stressful, but at the end it's really a big satisfaction after they—you get so tired and stressful, it's just with all feelings and at the end it's—it's—the feeling is really nice, happy. Yeah. *[Laughs]*

**00:12:59**

**AE:** So the women who work for you are—do they come to you because they know who are now, or do you look for them?

**00:13:05**

**AV:** Both. Yeah, because I—they—there was at one point that I couldn't do all by myself because, like I say, I have three companies that I'm doing delivery service, and between the

production, buying the ingredients, cooking, and selling and delivery was really big, too—how can I say—hard—really hard work for me. So I really decided to start to make a nice team.

**00:13:37**

And right now I can say that I have a really, really professional and responsible team working for me, but to do this team, takes me since last year since August to now, that it’s not easy to get the right person that you want to and that you believe in them, so—. Now I think I have it. Yeah.

**00:14:00**

**AE:** Well, and tell me more about your tamales. I saw, for example, today the—when they were making the *masa* that there was one batch of *masa* that they put this beautiful liquid salsa in with the cilantro and the mint. Tell me about that.

**00:14:16**

**AV:** Oh, yes. This is our kind of—how can I say it—our secret recipe [*Laughs*] that makes the *masa* really delicious, but we do some nice salsas that we—we—how can I say—blend in our *masa* and then it comes really delicious, yeah.

**00:14:42**

**AE:** So that’s like a signature touch?

**00:14:45**

**AV:** Tamales Los Mayas, yeah.

00:14:47

**AE:** So tell me about the different kinds of tamales you make now in your business.

00:14:51

**AV:** Okay, right now, like I say, I have—I have like the basic ones that is four flavors—that is the chicken one—. [Alicia’s phone sounds an alert.]

00:15:00

**AE:** We can pause.

00:15:09

**AV:** Sorry. Si. Yeah.

00:15:09

**AE:** We were talking about kinds of tamales.

00:15:11

**AV:** Yeah. We—we have four different flavors that I say is the chicken tamale is with breast—breast or white meat with the carrots, potatoes, zucchini, and peas with *salsa verde*. And the pork tamale is *carnitas* with *salsa chipotle*. And the cheese is Oaxaca cheese with green pepper and *salsa verde*. And I would—the—the other one is the vegan—the vegetable that is 100-percent vegan. All of them are gluten free. And—and the vegetable [tamale] is with garbanzos and *nopalitos*—*nopalitos* is cactus—and green pepper and bell pepper and black olive salsa. It tastes really good, that one.

**00:15:55**

**AE:** Tell me how you—you had to have developed that one.

**00:15:59**

**AV:** The—the vegetable was more like my—my recipe. Yeah, because I realized that in San Francisco it’s a lot of people who are gluten free and vegan 100-percent, so I decided to—to do this—this recipe and it tastes really good.

**00:16:19**

**AE:** And tell me about the black olive salsa.

**00:16:21**

**AV:** Oh, the black olive salsa is, like you say, it’s a touch of the—how can I say—the taste is—is really a good one. So I was doing my—how can I say—experimental—experiment, yeah, and came a big explosion of flavors I love. *[Laughs]* Yeah, really good.

**00:16:50**

**AE:** I imagine that would be very popular here.

**00:16:52**

**AV:** Yeah. Yeah.

**00:16:53**

**AE:** So how many of—of all the things that you offer on your menu how many are—are new recipes like that that you’ve come up with?

**00:17:00**

**AV:** Well in one—another thing that I do is the *pozole*, it’s a Mexican *pozole*, and it’s like Mexican soup and—and that one is my mom’s recipe. She was so famous doing this—this soup and it’s—it’s getting famous right now in—I’m selling the *pozole* in—when I go with my *carito* [cart] to Fort Mason. They really—they really start to buy it and every Friday they come back again, “Hey, Alicia. I come for the *pozole*. It’s so delicious.” So they—it’s—it’s getting famous.

**[Laughs]**

**00:17:38**

**AE:** And that’s—in my mind, it’s such a home-based dish that it like—it’s like a really nurturing role that you take on when you’re serving and selling something like *pozole*.

**00:17:49**

**AV:** Yeah. Yeah, but how you call it the—*los granos de pozole*? Like? Hominy. It’s hominy. And then, can I say it in Spanish? **[Describes the *pozole* in Spanish]**

**00:18:22**

**AE:** I want some.

**00:18:24**

**AV:** And tostadas. *Y tostadas. Si. Si.*

00:18:29

**AE:** So is that something that you wanted to offer and sell, or is it something that people asked for when they got to know you?

00:18:35

**AV:** No, I—I really want to—to have this formal plate on my menu, yes. As well as the *tostadas* and the *tacos al vapor* [steamed tacos]. I'm doing little by little but my main one is tamales, yeah.

00:18:51

**AE:** Now are your grandmother or mother still living?

00:18:56

**AV:** My mom, yes. My grandmother, no. She passed away. Yeah.

00:19:00

**AE:** So your mother has been able to see you make this life for yourself here. What does she think?

00:19:04

**AV:** Oh, she's so happy. She's—she is so happy, and she said that she is proud of me. *[Laughs]* Yeah, she's—she's really living my—my dream with me, yeah. She's in Puerto Vallarta right

now but, you know, every—every other day or every week we—we talk and I just tell her everything that has happened with my business and my family and—and she’s happy, yeah.

**00:19:34**

**AE:** What does she think about you making use of family recipes and her mother’s recipes to build your business?

**00:19:41**

**AV:** She gets—she couldn’t believe it, but right now—she came like six months ago, and she was really surprising that my business is getting really big. Yeah, really big, and she’s happy.

**00:19:59**

**AE:** Wonderful. So do you offer any sweet tamales or dessert tamales on your menu?

**00:20:04**

**AV:** Oh, yes. I’m, sorry, yes, I do. I’m sorry I didn’t mention that before, but I do the mango—the mango with a little bit of coconut. And the other one is pineapple. And with the mango I get the first in a contest. I get the first place, yeah. And it’s with—the mango is with mango salsa, and it tastes really good like a really nice dessert.

**00:20:33**

**AE:** Tell me about your phrase that’s on the back of your tee shirt that the women who were helping you—or working for you this morning were wearing. Tell me about that.

00:20:41

**AV:** Yeah, it’s like when I was in the pre-incubation [program] in La Cocina, they teach us everything, you know, marketing, and there was a class that we have to make our own slogan. And then one afternoon—one day my—my son see me that I was doing my homework and everything but—and I was kind of, you know, getting kind of hard time, but I needed to get my slogan really good and between he and me, we made it. And the slogan is for everybody, like I say: my tamales are stuffed with love, and the best people I stuff with my tamales.

00:21:19

**AE:** So great. I love it. I love it. So tell me more about growing your business and what you see for the future of Alicia’s—Alicia’s Tamales Los Mayas.

00:21:29

**AV:** Well, I really—I believe in my business right now, and I’m very confident, but it’s a little bit tired, too, I can say. But I really—how can I say—*visualizer* my business?

00:21:53

**AE:** Visualize.

00:21:54

**AV:** *Si*. My business in like, hopefully in three years, I really want to get my own restaurant and like—like a distribution center of tamales. And doing catering, too. So and I think that it’s going—it’s going to happen. **[Laughs]** But it’s like I—I have to work more for this, yeah. And

I’m working on my second business plan right now. And as soon as La Cocina approve this, so I’m going to go for it, yeah.

**00:22:30**

**AE:** Also tell me where all you’re selling now? Where—where can people find your tamales?

**00:22:35**

**AV:** Okay, right now I’m in—in Off the Grid; I have three points of sales that is in San Francisco. It’s in—in Fort Mason in Off the Grid, in Upper Haight in Off the Grid, too, and in Larkspur in Marin [County] and it’s the same thing in Off the Grid, and—and in SOMA StrEat Food Park in—by the 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Bryant. But if you go to my website, you will see over there times and days that I’m selling the tamales.

**00:23:11**

**AE:** So, Off the Grid, it’s like the street food park? It’s a collection of—of food truck vendors and—and stands and carts?

**00:23:17**

**AV:** Yes, it is. Yeah. They have it in—in Fridays, Thursdays, and Sundays, yeah.

**00:23:24**

**AE:** What do you think about that venue for your—you and your product?

**00:23:29**

**AV:** I love it because everybody is knowing about the tamales and they get really—I like it because the people get so interesting to get my tamales, yeah. They—they like it.

**00:23:44**

**AE:** I bet they're also interested in seeing you.

**00:23:47**

**AV:** *[Laughs]* Oh yes, too, yeah. *[Laughs]*

**00:23:50**

**AE:** So what does—how many children do you have? You mentioned your family.

**00:23:55**

**AV:** I have three—three kids, three children, and it's Gracia, she is nine years old, and then Pablo, and he is eleven years old, and Peter [Pedro], he's twenty-one years old right now.

**00:24:09**

**AE:** Are any of them helping you in any way with the business?

**00:24:12**

**AV:** Yes, always. Yeah. Pedro my—my old one, he really helps me in doing everything. Yeah, but he's—he's doing—he's studying right now, so when he has free time then—because I don't want to affect his studies, so he helps me, yeah. And Gracia and Pablo, they do on the weekends, yeah.

00:24:36

**AE:** How about your husband?

00:24:38

**AV:** Oh, my husband, he helps me too. He—he helps me more to do the deliveries. Yeah, and driving, and he's a big support right now.

00:24:47

**AE:** Does he have another job in addition, or is the whole family with Tamales Los Mayas?

00:24:52

**AV:** Right—my—my husband has his own business but it's more like—like Tamales Los Mayas, they are really seeing that I—I getting a lot of jobs so they—they get kind of worried that I'm—they don't want that I get so stressful, so that's why they—they really support me.

**[Laughs]**

00:25:14

**AE:** So tell me about—because we were talking about how you know selling to your neighbors and just making 100 tamales a week to managing employees and making thousands of tamales a week, how—can you just talk about that kind of change and how you have to work differently and what that's been like?

00:25:35

**AV:** Yeah. Well to—to see this big difference right now is because I can handle this because I'm in [the] La Cocina program and I think that without La Cocina I—I can do it but not like in the same way that I'm doing really, you know, professional in all the aspects in—in marketing and the financials and all these really important points that I have to do in my business. And when you do it by yourself, it's not—like this way because you are not educated, you know, for raising a business like the way that I'm doing right now. Because for example, in La Cocina, we must have like a goal planning and they—they supervise all the process that we are doing, like every—every month, every two months. So they really take care of us—how we are doing in raising the business, yeah.

**00:26:39**

**AE:** And everybody who comes from here—through here has a specialty and yours is obviously tamales. Can you talk about what it means to you to represent your Mexican heritage through food?

**00:26:53**

**AV:** I can say that I feel really proud to—to, you know, introduce my—my culture through my menu, my tamales, because it—like in La Cocina, like I get—for example, in La Cocina, it's so wonderful to see all my friends' business—friends that they are there working that they're from another different countries, and you can taste all kinds of food like some Japanese, Asian, from all around Europe and Latin America and Mexico. It's really nice and, you know, in Mexico I have my tamales, so—yeah. It's—it's nice.

**00:27:39**

**AE:** And what about being in this community of women and—and empowering women through creating business through food?

**00:27:46**

**AV:** I—I really admire all—everybody at—at La Cocina. My friends—how can I say, my business friends—because I see that they are working hard too like me, you know, follow their own dreams and really we share all our dreams and everything in La Cocina, yeah.

**00:28:11**

**AE:** What do you eat at home? Do you have time to cook at home?

**00:28:15**

**AV:** You know, yeah, I—I try to cook in the evenings for my kids at least the dinner, but sometimes, to be honest, I can't because I—sometimes I get kind of late. But my son, my old—old son, Peter he helps me; he cooks for me, yeah. But, for example, all my business friends in La Cocina and me sometimes we kid—we're kidding each other because we make a big production of food, but we don't have the time to eat. That's so funny that we don't, you know, because we are working and doing the production. And sometimes we can go and sit and eat. It's really—it's really strange that we go and see them relaxing half-hour on lunch, but we—we are just cooking, but we don't eat, yeah. *[Laughs]*

**00:29:11**

**AE:** Do you eat many tamales?

00:29:12

**AV:** Sometimes, yes. [*Laughs*]

00:29:15

**AE:** Do you have a favorite one?

00:29:17

**AV:** Um, all of them are my favorite ones. But, for example, Gracia she—my—my daughter, she likes *carnitas* and Pablo, he likes the Oaxaca cheese, and I like the—I really like all of them, like, you know, chicken. The *carnitas* is really good. And my husband likes *carnitas*, too. So yeah—.

00:29:43

**AE:** Well could you—I know that it’s—there are a lot of steps, but could you just kind of tell a short story—explain how to make a tamale and what your process is?

00:29:52

**AV:** Like the—the production of the tamales? Well, we do—for example, you have to—when you are cooking, first you have to have your—the husked corns [corn husks] in—in the water, dipped in water while you start to prepare your *masa*. And, for example, if you want to do the—the chicken—the chicken tamale, you have to boil it and, you know, make the—the rice *sazon*—seasoning, yeah, for the chicken. And it’s a lot of work. You know, it’s chopping all day. The vegetables go in the salsa, and as soon as you have everything, you have to have your *masa* and

you start to do this—your tamales, the rice, like different steps and—for the process to cook the tamale.

**00:30:49**

**AE:** And are all the tamales filled by hand?

**00:30:51**

**AV:** Yeah.

**00:30:54**

**AE:** Can you talk about doing that? Explain that?

**00:30:56**

**AV:** Yeah. Can you repeat again the question?

**00:30:59**

**AE:** How they’re put together and how they’re filled and then rolled and then cooked?

**00:31:04**

**AV:** Yeah. But I have a—like every tamale that I do is this same size, this same weight, and we have the—the right amount for every one. You know, it’s like if you weigh every—every tamale it’s the same weight and the same—how can I say it—amount of filling and the salsa. And that’s the way that we do it, yeah, but we—.

**00:31:29**

**AE:** How do you make sure they're all the same?

**00:31:30**

**AV:** Because we have our own tools and measures that—that we do for our assembly. When—it's an assembly production, yeah, we have the right sizes that we use for doing the tamales.

**00:31:50**

**AE:** And so they're rolled in corn husks and then steamed?

**00:31:57**

**AV:** Oh yes. Well as soon as you cook the tamale and as soon as you have all the tamales already—how can I say—wrapped?

**00:32:10**

**AE:** Wrapped?

**00:32:10**

**AV:** Yeah, you—you have to have your own steamer ready to boil—you know, the steam—the steamer with water and boiling. And then, as soon as you have this, you have to have all the tamales in the steamer and leave them for like an hour and a half or two hours. And, for example, in La Cocina we have a big steamer that if I have like 250 tamales, they are ready in thirty minutes. But it's a really big nice industrial steamer. **[Laughs]** But you—you can do it at home with a normal one that we use, but it's like in an hour and a half or two hours more or less, yeah.

00:32:55

**AE:** So tell me, for example, on a day like Thursday which looks like a really busy day for you, do you—and you're selling at two places that day, tell me how that day works and when you come here to have fresh—freshly steamed tamales, how you do that.

00:33:12

**AV:** Okay, well, for example, Thursday I—I—the ladies have my deliveries that I do in the morning ready but for example, in—in SOMA StrEat Food Park I have to be there at 11:00, and then we cook the tamales and we put it in a hot box, ready to eat, but as soon as I be in my *carito* [cart] set up and everything in SOMA StrEat Food Park, I just put these tamales on the steamer and they are—they are ready to eat, as well—as soon as—. We finish at three o'clock, and then I have to pick up my *carito* [cart] at 3:00 and go to Upper Haight in Off the Grid in—after 3:00, yeah. And then it's the same—the same process, you know, it's—they're going to have—they're going to be in a hot box, whatever I have to sell, or I need to sell, and then I just take it and put it in the steamer at my *carito*.

00:34:15

**AE:** Now are you the only one selling, or do you have help with that as well?

00:34:19

**AV:** No, I need to have at least one—one person helping me, you know, because I—it's sometimes it's a big line, and you can't serve and collecting the money, so we have to be at least two persons over there, yeah. And besides that we—we sell *elotes* [grilled ears of corn] and then

flan and *arroz con leche* [rice pudding] and *aguas frescas* [drinks made from fresh fruit] too, so at least we have to be two. Yeah.

**00:34:46**

**AE:** Do you have one item that’s the most popular or more popular than others?

**00:34:50**

**AV:** The tamales. [*Laughs*]

**00:34:52**

**AE:** Well, how about a tamale that’s the most popular?

**00:34:54**

**AV:** The—the tamale? It’s because like I say, that’s the really nice and beautiful thing that the United States has—this country—that you have a lot of cultures and I see like for example, from the India, they are more like—like vegan, you know, all the Hindus—how can I say it, the Hindu culture, they really love the vegan. And then Anglo, they like really chicken and the Asian, they like pork. And it’s like you know when I see the customers just in front of me I—you know, I think by myself they’re going to ask for pork or—and that’s true because it’s a lot of cultures that they—I like that every culture is like the way that I’m telling you. You know, it’s like so interesting.

**00:35:49**

**AE:** Yeah, like they—they want something familiar, but they want to try something new at the same time.

**00:35:52**

**AV:** Yeah, uh-hmm. No, but, for example, like I said, the Hindus I think that they like more vegan. Yeah, always they like more vegan. And the Asians, they like more like kind of pork. Yeah, *carnitas*. They really enjoy it.

**00:36:09**

**AE:** So you mentioned very early on that you want to eventually have a restaurant.

**00:36:14**

**AV:** Yes, I do.

**00:36:15**

**AE:** Tell me why.

**00:36:16**

**AV:** Oh, because it’s my goal. It’s my goal and I really—I really want to have my own restaurant, a Mexican restaurant, yeah. But when I have it, I would like to have a—my menu be more with more variety of Mexican food, yeah.

**00:36:38**

**AE:** So people can come to you instead of you having to go to them?

**00:36:42**

**AV:** *Si.* [*Laughs*] Yeah, that's true. That's true, but I'm going to see because I really want to have like something really nice for my customers, but I really want to show them my real culture and I would like to have like mariachi, and folkloric ballet, and like a really nice show for everybody. So I'm going to see if I made it.

**00:37:12**

**AE:** Do you have ideas—do you think it will have the same name, or do you have a name in mind for a restaurant that's different?

**00:37:17**

**AV:** Oh, the same name. The same name, yeah. Yeah, I want.

**00:37:23**

**AE:** Wonderful. Well do you anticipate—and I guess I had this question in my head earlier and it may not make sense now, but if, you know, as you develop like the—the vegan tamale, do you have ideas about other tamales that you want to try and make in the future?

**00:37:42**

**AV:** Right now, I have three different recipes that I didn't work on it—cooking it—well, I did—I cooked already for my—my—for myself. And it was the pumpkin tamale—tamale—*un tamale de mole de calabazas?*

00:38:08

**AE:** Pumpkin mole tamale?

00:38:08

**AV:** Pumpkin mole tamale, yeah, for Thanksgiving. It’s with turkey—really good. And—and then another one that we say *mole poblano* with chicken and it—they are three—three different *moles* that I want to have like on my menu, and they are really good. [*Laughs*] But I have to, you know, make the budget and for big production so I don’t—I have to work on it, yeah. But I already cook it for myself and I—I love it. They are good.

00:38:46

**AE:** Well, I’m going to mention this and probably confuse you entirely, but I told you earlier that I’m from Mississippi—I think I told you that—and you probably—or maybe you do—have heard that there are African Americans in the Mississippi Delta who make tamales. And it’s a huge—it’s a huge culinary tradition in that part of Mississippi. Have you ever heard of that?

00:39:09

**AV:** No. [*Laughs*]

00:39:11

**AE:** I’ll have to—I’ll have to find a way to send you some.

00:39:13

**AV:** Please—please do, yeah. I will love to know.

00:39:18

**AE:** They—they’re very specific things and they’re cooked—and they’re not steamed. They’re simmered in water, so they’re very different from what you make. But anyway, it’s a part of Southern culture that I’ve been researching for a long time of—of Mississippians who make and sell hot tamales and so it’s just—it’s—.

00:39:37

**AV:** It’s different?

00:39:38

**AE:** It’s very different.

00:39:40

**AV:** I will love to—to know more about that, yeah, sure.

00:39:45

**AE:** And it’s—because tamales are also so wonderful because—especially it’s how they’ve stayed popular in the Delta is that they’re very inexpensive and filling and portable and all those wonderful things about tamales that have kind of taken a foothold in that—that place.

00:40:02

**AV:** Yeah. Oh, that’s nice. [*Speaks to Daniella in Spanish*] There is like another history of tamales in Latino America. [*More to Daniella in Spanish*].

00:41:13

**AE:** That was beautiful. And we happen to have Daniella Sawaya here who can translate a little bit of that for us and catch us up. Thank you, Daniella.

00:41:22

**Daniella Sawaya:** So the tamales originated in Latin America because wealthy people would have these banquets and parties, and they’d have tons of leftovers, so the poor people would take these leftovers. They would grind the corn and make the *masa*, and then they would fill the tamales with whatever leftovers they had. And that’s when they started calling them tamales. And so, for example, in Colombia—I mean tamales from different parts of Latin America have different fillings, so, for example, in Colombia, they put eggs and olives, which you don’t typically find in Mexican tamales, but she really appreciates that as the history of tamales.

00:42:02

**AE:** *[To Daniella]* Thank you. *[To Alicia]* Yeah, that was beautiful to hear you speak Spanish, so thank you. Well, is there anything that we haven’t talked about that you’d like to add?

00:42:12

**AV:** That I really, if, you know, for some reason, I think that there is a woman that they want to do or follow their own dreams in the business [of] food, I really encourage everybody that they really have a dream on their heart, just made it and go for it. You know, nothing is impossible; there is, you know, time that you feel kind of stressed or whatever, but it doesn’t matter. At the

end it’s a big something special when you are realizing that you are getting your dreams. So I just want to say that if you have a dream, just go for it.

**00:42:58**

**AE:** Well, perfect ending. Thank you so much, Alicia. I appreciate it.

**00:43:01**

**AV:** Thank you. Thank you so much.

**00:43:03**

**[End Alicia Villanueva Interview]**