

**Cesar Gonzalez**  
**Sabor Caribe – Memphis, TN**

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Interviewer: Simone Delorme  
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Delerme: Today is April 11, 2017, and we are at Sabor Caribe in Memphis to learn a little bit more about the restaurant and the stories behind the food.

So, to begin with, could you introduce yourself?

[0:00:11.7]

Gonzalez: Thank you, Simone, for come, for give an opportunity that show what is the restaurant, Sabor Caribe restaurant, you know, in Memphis, Tennessee. Well, my name is Cesar Gonzalez. I'm from Venezuela. I'm forty-five years old. I living in Memphis ten years ago. The restaurant, you know, is Latin American food, Caribbean food, and the most popular dish we having is the Venezuelan, Venezuelan food.

[0:00:46.0]

Delerme: Venezuelan?

[0:00:46.8]

Gonzalez: Yes.

[0:00:47.5]

Delerme: Okay. And when was your birthday?

[0:00:48.7]

Gonzalez: October 26, '72.

[0:00:53.9]

Delerme: And where in Venezuela are you from?

[0:00:56.0]

Gonzalez: Maracaibo. Is Zulia state. Is exactly in the border with Colombia, you know.

[0:01:06.6]

Delerme: And you came directly to Memphis from Venezuela?

[0:01:09.7]

Gonzalez: Yeah. I come to Memphis directly here because my brother-in-law living here for twenty years ago.

[0:01:21.7]

Delerme: Ah, okay.

[0:01:22.8]

Gonzalez: I came a couple time, you know, vacation. I saw the city, you know, like a story, rock 'n' roll music. The food is different, too, you know.

[0:01:36.3]

Delerme: So what was your impression those first two times you came to visit? Did you see any similarities between culture back home and southern culture?

[0:01:45.1]

Gonzalez: Nothing.

[0:01:46.0]

Delerme: Nothing?

[0:01:46.5]

Gonzalez: Nothing. [laughs] Is really not similar, you know, our country, our culture too. The Caribbean culture is really relaxing, you know. All the people all the time is the party all time, you know. We are close to the coast, beach, you know. The heat all time is hot. Maybe is a really big difference is the weather. The other big difference, you know, I need to drive nine hours to the beach. In my country, across the street is the big beach. And the food. The food, yeah, it's different, but some products produce good memories. For example, you know, the corn. The corn, also America eat corn, and the southern culture, you know, they serve a lot of corn, too, the whole corn, the sweet corn. Some place in South is really—we put the corn. The other thing is that all food is fried, you know. Is amazing too. The southern and the South American culture, the most easy and the most popular food is fried. Is deep-fried.

Delerme: You came here because of family? Is that the primary reason you chose Memphis, of all places? What made you choose?

[0:03:38.2]

Gonzalez: No, the primary reason is in my country, is a socialist government, right? Ten years ago, the government [unclear] really problem with my family, with me. I'm free man and thinking different, you know. I can't keep grow my business or my education or my family, my daughter, in my country for the same reason. Is just for the principal reason can move into the United States. Memphis is for my brother-in-law, you know. He offered to me opportunity to work in the art at the graphic—he had a newspaper, Spanish newspaper. Come to work to him in the newspaper. I'm a graphic designer. Is for this reason come to Memphis, okay.

[0:04:42.4]

Delerme: What was the name of the newspaper, do you recall?

[0:04:44.4]

Gonzalez: *El Norte*.

[0:04:45.7]

Delerme: *El Norte*?

[0:04:46.3]

Gonzalez: Yeah, *El Norte* newspaper. Is correct. Is still running, still running.

[0:04:51.4]

Delorme: What was life like back in Venezuela for you? Do you have any memories you could share with us?

[0:04:58.9]

Gonzalez: Yes, absolutely. The best memory having in my family, my mom, my dad. My dad pass away three years ago. My mom still alive. She come every six month to visit me and working with me and the restaurant. [laughs] All my sisters living in Venezuela. My brother living in Panama.

But I remember the most nice memories has with my grandma. The grandma, she is a really cook, you know. My mom is bad cook, really bad cook, you know. [laughs] But my grandma, you know, she had the best steak on the world. I don't know what is the recipe, you know. When studying in the school, my mom living couple blocks from my college. I walked every day at lunchtime to take lunch with my mom, with my grandmom. I don't know why she put the only some garlic salt on the steak on the grill, and that's it. But I can't make it exactly again the same flavor for my grandma. And she making two excellent desserts.

The rice, rice from my grandmom, is amazing too. She put some [Spanish]. The name exactly is black beans with white rice all together. The [Spanish] is that the [Spanish] was [Spanish], Moroccos, and the [Spanish] is the white people, you know, together in the same place. Is in the name. Is so funny, you know. Is exactly name in Cuba and Dominican Republic too. [Spanish] is a plate. And Cuba, and Cuba. In Cuba, it's the same plate. My grandma making the [Spanish]. Okay. Is awesome, awesome.

[0:07:25.6]

Delorme: And you mentioned two desserts. What were those desserts that [unclear]?

[0:07:28.4]

Gonzalez: Dessert, the pineapple with—I don't know exactly name in English. In Spanish, it's [Spanish]. Is a big orange, tangerine. Is really big. But when the dessert, she make it with the peel, no with the fruit, you know. She put the peel low heat with brown sugar for maybe ten hours, you know, and after that, she separate the sugar with the orange and the peel of the orange and mix it with the pineapple all together.

[demonstrates] Is excellent, excellent, yeah. I'm making. I make it.

[0:08:34.3]

Delorme: Do you serve it at the restaurant?

[0:08:35.1]

Gonzalez: Yes, I make it. I make it. I'm learning from her. Yeah, I make it.

[0:08:39.2]

Delorme: So is that how you learned how to cook, from your grandmother?

[0:08:41.4]

Gonzalez: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

[0:08:43.3]

Delorme: How old were you, do you recall?

[0:08:45.1]

Gonzalez: Yes. I pass all the time with her for the reason I'm walk to her house every day, have lunch with her. She pass to me all the flavors, you know. I remember one smell [unclear] exactly cilantro, and it's a sweet pepper. Is [Spanish] Venezuela. Is a sweet pepper, you know. When my grandma take care of me, I remember this melt in her hand, the two, you know, the cilantro and the—you know, I can't forget this exactly [Spanish], smell. I'm grow with this. I'm grow with this. She pass to me. No recipe, just [Spanish]. That's it. Maybe this is the best thing happen in my cooking culture.

[0:10:10.0]

Delorme: And before you came here, what was your occupation? Were you in the food industry at all when you were back in Venezuela? Did you have a restaurant there as well?

[0:10:19.6]

Gonzalez: Yeah, yeah.

[0:10:21.0]

Delorme: Could you tell me a little bit more about what you did in Venezuela?

[0:10:22.9]

Gonzalez: Right, right. I have two spot in Venezuela, yeah, one deli and another bakery. Is two different food, but in the same place, right? We served only lunch for the deli, and the bakery, we make all desserts and cake to the parties. In Venezuela, the people—it's different in here. You know, you come Walmart or the big store, and you take some cake that's ready. In Venezuela, the people like make their own cake. In my bakery, we make exactly what you want. People say to me, "I need a cake to pineapple," "I need a cake with cream," "I need a cake with the chocolate," "I need a cake—," lah, lah, lah, any different cake for the parties or the birthday. We make, too, a lot of different portions, slice. A small portion, the people take a coffee or—this two different word, but another one, the deli, for the lunch, is a couple hours only between twelve and two, we close and open the other one, is for the rest of the day for the bakery store. We don't make bread, only cakes, different cakes and dessert, all different dessert. We have about seven year.

[0:12:15.6]

Delerme: Seven years?

[0:12:15.9]

Gonzalez: Seven years.

[0:12:16.5]

Delerme: The two businesses?

[0:12:16.7]

Gonzalez: Yes. Seven year before came to United States.

[0:12:22.5]

Delerme: And what did you serve at the deli, what type of foods [unclear] in Venezuela?

[0:12:26.8]

Gonzalez: Oh. Is two different plate every day. Two different plate every day. We change every two weeks. I'm working in the complex to the office, and, I don't know, it's like IRS here in Venezuela. Is a big, big building, and we have the store on the ground—*no se como*—on the lobby, okay? All the building come to me, take lunch. For this reason is we open only two hours a day, two hours a day. Is only for lunch, but we make it on Friday, we want to make seafood, all Fridays. You know, fish, clam, shrimp, seafood. The rest of the week, one day pasta, and the other days chicken, beef, and pork, mix it. But two plate every day for two weeks, and change completely the menu, yeah. And the other thing is we serve [unclear], and the people come and say to me, "I want this and that." No having menu. We offer the food on front the people.

[0:13:58.9]

Delerme: And so when you came to Memphis, did you sell those restaurants—

[0:14:06.5]

Gonzalez: Yes.

[0:14:07.2]

Delorme: —or are they still there? You sold the two?

[0:14:08.6]

Gonzalez: I sold. Yeah, yeah, sold. When come to Memphis, I'm try to work in—I'm a graphic designer, you know. Still working for three years on the graphic designer, three years and four years, and I freelance to a couple business card or flyers or whatever the people—Hispanic community come to me between the newspaper. Yeah, I'm still working with the same area, and then the radio and the newspaper and the freelance graphic designer, and that's it. But in my mind, I can open the restaurant, I can open the restaurant. But ten years ago, the population, Hispanic population was really, really low. Right now it's totally different. Yeah, it's totally different, you know.

Three years ago, I'm offer lunch to the office. I'm making the flyers, put in the different office. I'm offer can move it to your office for the lunch. If you want to have five or six friends, call me. I'm going to give to you the lunch. And send menus, emails, flyers. And the people, they start to call me, "You can bring me ten lunch," or twelve lunch. Right there other side, other building, and I start again to cook here.

[0:15:55.4]

Delorme: What was on the menu?

[0:15:57.0]

Gonzalez: You know, is the typical food from Venezuela too. We wouldn't serving lasagna different, different here, with the pasta. We serve it with the pasta, meat, ham, cheese, potatoes inside, all different mixed in together for the pasta. We serve it to the rice with chicken all together, no with the Chinese. No, it's different too. We serving one—do you try here when you come—it's a small bowl inside with chicken and beef. You remember that?

[0:16:43.4]

Delorme: The Venezuelan [unclear]?

[0:16:44.7]

Gonzalez: Venezuelan, right. We serve it, too, for the people, and other portion. Okay. Plantains, arepas. You know, we offer all make that. Is just three years ago. After that—no, before that, I thinking in my mind, okay, maybe I want to building a truck. The people asking me, “Where is your spot? Where is your place? Where is your [unclear]?” I don't having any. And the people say to me, “Why you don't making a food truck?” Yeah. I considered the idea. I see every corner a taco truck, say, “I don't have any Caribbean or Venezuelan or Colombian.” Well, I put some save money, I'm building my own truck. I don't buy; I'm building. Every screw, every [unclear], and every wall in my truck, I'm building, you know.

[0:17:56.0]

Delerme: So what was the process of actually opening a food truck? Can you tell us a little more about that?

[0:17:59.9]

Gonzalez: Yeah. My wife say, “You are crazy.” I don’t stop to thinking about the food truck for a whole year. I saw every day the page in the website, try to find the best truck with thing for my business, and I’m buy every stock for the truck every month, every two weeks, and save money. I’m buy the grill, save money. I’m buy the kitchen, save money. I’m buy the refrigerator, you know, for the whole year. At the end of the year, buy the truck. I have all the equipment for the truck, but I don’t have the truck. I find the truck in Knoxville.

[0:19:04.2]

Delerme: Knoxville?

[0:19:05.7]

Gonzalez: Yeah, four or five hours here, and with my wife and my daughter, say, “I want to go weekend to Nashville.”

“Oh, yeah,” says, “good idea.” Passing the shopping or whatever.

And when go to Nashville, I don’t say anything. When go to the Nashville, in Nashville, I say, “I need to know—the people say me, they say Knoxville is a nice town. Maybe we can move to the—we can go to the Knoxville and know the town and other thing.”

“Okay.”

We are driving on the Knoxville, and go to buy to the truck. She say me, my daughter say, “What is this? Is a town and the cow. Nobody here. What is this?”

“Okay, I need to tell you the truth. I want to buy the truck.” [laughs]

“What?” Say, “Okay.”

Is a long story. Buy the truck, and back to Memphis with driving my truck, driving my truck, and start to building inside. Open the windows by to the doors, the vent hood, put all the equipment inside, the connection, electricity. You know, is a lot of work. Is a whole winter working in the truck, and the next summer to the 2015, start, start the business.

[0:21:05.4]

Delerme: And was that something you did by yourself?

[0:21:07.1]

Gonzalez: Yes.

[0:21:08.0]

Delerme: As the sole owner?

[0:21:08.7]

Gonzalez: Yes, yes.

[0:21:10.9]

Delerme: And how about the menu? What did you serve from the truck?

[0:21:12.6]

Gonzalez: Yeah, on the menu, burger, arepas, tostones, empanadas, pastelitos.

[interruption]

[0:21:26.3]

Wood: Can you just start that answer over again, what you served? I'm sorry.

[0:21:28.6]

Gonzalez: Okay. Arepas, tostones, pastelitos, empanadas, hamburguesas, burgers, the most fast food, most popular fast food in Venezuela. The menu, is not a lot of choice, but the most popular food in Venezuela.

[0:21:53.0]

Delerme: And where was the truck actually located?

[0:21:56.0]

Gonzalez: In Cordova, in Cordova area. Yeah, it's exactly in the Macon Road with [unclear]. This is downtown, Cordova downtown, all downtown. I'm parking in the old

gas station. Right now in the gas station, it's a body shop. Is a no gas station. Is only the building, but no gas station. They have some metal company like this, yeah.

[0:22:31.4]

Delerme: What were some of the challenges with a food truck?

[0:22:34.8]

Gonzalez: Oh, yeah, it's a lot of, a lot of work, but you change your house—your house is converting in a kitchen. Is complicated. You don't stop to work. The food truck, we parking in that spot Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, only three days a week.

[0:23:00.7]

Delerme: Three days?

[0:23:01.4]

Gonzalez: Yeah, but the rest of the week, you make the prep in your house. My garage is a big, big warehouse, you know. [laughs] Two refrigerator, two freezer, all the stock, the papers, the towels. Is complicated. I think is for this reason change my mind to open the restaurant, you know, for my wife and my daughter say, "Dad, you need to stop. You need to stop. We don't have any time for nothing, only work, work, work, work." I'm obsessive with the kitchen too. There's a reason, you know, think is open a real restaurant, and I'm here, you know. [laughs]

[0:24:06.4]

Delorme: And what led to this particular restaurant? How did you—

[0:24:09.6]

Gonzalez: You know, this spot, another family, they run the Colombian and Venezuelan food in this place, Arepa and Salsa. They run it for four years. Margel [phonetic] is the name for the old owner, and Diego is her spouse. They're running the restaurant, and they're a friend of mine for, I don't know, maybe four years. I come to the restaurant eating here, but they decide to close for Diego to get promoted in his work, and they move to another county. I think it's a couple hours here, and they decide to close the restaurant. When they decide to close the restaurant, he calls me and asks me if I know somebody who needs to buy all the equipment inside the restaurant. "I don't know anything, nobody. Let me see what you have."

And we come to here, see the place exactly. I never seen the place inside. Only know for outside, the dining room. See inside, say, "Is a great opportunity to me, but I don't have money, you know." I talk to him, say, "How much do you want for the restaurant?"

"Okay, I need—," you know, that money.

Say, "Wait. Okay, I don't have money right now, but if you give me some time, I can pay you for those things."

Say, "Give me the plan. Okay, give me the plan."

My cousin Alejandro [phonetic] is my partner. He come to Venezuela, and I talk to him and say, “Alejandro, we having this opportunity. What do you think? I don’t have money, but if you have money, we together, you know, we can buy.”

And he come, he watch with me, and we making a plan, and we talk to Diego and say, “Diego, we have in this moment that if you want it, we want to make a deal.” And he accept, and take the location, take all the equipment, and we pay every month for the equipment.

Another challenge is try to keep with the location, with the landlord, talk to him, explain change only a new owner, but the same food or similar food, and we keep with the name, you know. They have a good job right there with another restaurant. And the landlord say me the same thing, “Give me the plan. What is your plan in the whole year?” And the business plan. I make the business plan. He like it, and sign the contract, and sign the contract, and this March, the past March, one year, one year running the restaurant.

[0:28:03.3]

Delorme: So for someone who’s not familiar with Venezuelan food, can you tell me a little bit more about some of the traditional dishes that are on the menu?

[0:28:12.1]

Gonzalez: Yes. Our culture, our culture food, Venezuelan food, is the same culture for all South America. Is similar to the—Venezuela is in the north of South America till Argentina in the south. We eat every time corn, different presentations, you know. We

eat meat, really eat meat, and different presentation too. And the cilantro. You know, I told you, you know, the cilantro, is ingredient, is a spice, is supreme important in all the condiment we make in Venezuelan food and the South American food.

The most typical in the two countries, in Colombia and Venezuela, is arepa. Is like a tortilla made with more thing. We want to make it with cornmeal and water. That's it. The arepa, the arepa flavor is more neutral, but the arepa try—the test of arepa is what do you put inside, okay. Is perfect for combine. You can combine it with whatever you want. Arepa is novel. Arepa, it's really, really—I don't know, [Spanish]. What is it exactly? [Spanish]. You can combine it with every one, you know. Is like, you know, the tacos, Mexico, you put meat, beef, or chicken, or stuff it, or [Spanish], al pastor. Is a lot of option to the tacos. Is the same for the arepa. Is the same core, you know. The only big different is the arepa is like a sandwich. You open and fill it up. The tacos, you put on top, okay. But the arepa, right now it's the best breakfast on all South America. Yeah, it's the breakfast on the all South America. I don't know why, but I eat arepa anytime, breakfast, lunch, or dinner, anywhere, anytime. But right now, the arepa win award with the best breakfast on the Latin American.

[0:31:16.4]

Delorme: And how do you actually make it?

[0:31:18.8]

Gonzalez: We make it here.

[0:31:18.8]

Delorme: How? How is it made? Is it corn?

[0:31:23.1]

Gonzalez: Yeah, it's corn. We buy the flour, you know, the corn, cornmeal. We put in a big bowl, salt, water, and that's it. Is not complicated, you know, and we cook it in two choice: on grill or fried. Let the people decide what prefer. Most people say fry. The people eating the veggie, more healthy, on the grill, on the grill. For me, on the grill is better, for me, you know. The fried, it's more flavor, but for me, is better on the grill.

[0:32:11.0]

Delorme: And what are some of the traditional ways in which it's eaten either for breakfast—what would you put inside?

[0:32:18.2]

Gonzalez: Scrambled egg, scrambled egg with sausage, bacon. We serve it, too, with shredded beef. We serve it, too, with shredded chicken, roasted pork. We serve it with ham and cheese. That's it. We serve it with only cheese, mozzarella or Swiss cheese. We serve it with the egg, boiled egg too. You know, is a lot of choice, but the most popular in the breakfast is scrambled egg, scrambled egg with onions, tomatoes, sausage, cilantro, you know, inside.

[0:33:02.2]

Delorme: And then how about here in the restaurant? How have people responded to the arepa?

[0:33:08.3]

Gonzalez: Okay. You know, is curious. The people eat an arepa and try the arepa, but in my opinion, is most popular on sale, the plantain. We serve the plantain in three different way. Tostone is only plantain, green plantain, cut it and mash and fry. We serve el patacón. Patacón is the same plantain in two layers like a sandwich, and fill it up with different meat. We serve it, too, the sweet plantain. Is a small plantain like a [Spanish], or slices. We serve it with white cheese. The three option, of the three different option, the one on each is two—one in Venezuela is the patacón, is the two layers. The tostone is Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rican, and the layers, sweet plantain on [Spanish], is Colombia and part to the Central America. Honduras and El Salvador, they eating the [Spanish], too, with chicken.

But the people in my restaurant eating a lot patacón. The name in the menu is Crazy Plantain. Get the Crazy Plantain. Is a big sandwich. We put coleslaw, cilantro sauce, the meat, cheese, tomatoes, and another layer. Is a big sandwich. The cilantro sauce is [Spanish]. I make it every day. Is really fresh. The people eating one buy and one squeeze with the cilantro sauce. [laughs] One buy, one squeeze. The people love it, the salsa, but, you know, the top seller, if you want to make the big picture for the seller on the year, the top seller is plantain, and the second one, arepa.

[0:35:47.3]

Delorme: Tell me about this sauce. Is it your own recipe or a recipe that comes from your grandma?

[0:35:54.3]

Gonzalez: No, is my recipe. Yeah, is my recipe. In Venezuela, serving one [Spanish]. Is the most popular salsa, dressing for food, but I modificate the old recipe, the original recipe, and make that for the same reason: the cilantro, in my mind, you know. Is easy. Is only cilantro, garlic, onions. If you want to put in the average, 90 percent cilantro, 5 percent onion, 5 percent garlic, and that's it, all together, and then mixer, in the big mixer, put cream cheese and mayo. [snaps fingers] *Voilà*. That's it. [laughs]

[0:36:46.1]

Delorme: What have been some of the challenges having the restaurant here now as opposed to the food truck?

[0:36:53.5]

Gonzalez: Well, the challenge is I'm work thirteen hours a day, you know. Is a lot of work. The prep is different, totally different. We want to make prep in the rest of the day in between 2:00 and 5:00. The lunchtime and the dinnertime, we don't making any prep. We work three peoples in the kitchen and two people on the dinner room. But the challenge, the really challenge is show the people our culture, for the Hispanic culture, and the people need to know is we don't serve Mexican food. [laughs] Is really, really hard to me when the people ask me, "Where you from?"

“I’m from Venezuela.”

“Oh, what parts in Mexico is it?”

No, Mexico is totally different. Venezuela is South America. Venezuela is different culture, you know. I love Mexican food, but when the people ask me, “Do you have chips with guacamole?” no, I have a cilantro sauce with arepa. Is different.

Is my challenge. My challenge is show the people we having another food, another culture. Is another flavor. Is South America, we shake the hand, we shake the hand with the food.

For example, the empanadas. The empanadas, you can find an empanadas in every country, every country, the north to south, in South America. Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay, they making empanadas. You know, different way, but making empanadas. Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, we’re going to making empanadas different way. For example, in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, they making empanadas with flour; we want to make empanadas with corn. They making empanadas with the oven; we making empanadas on the fry. They making empanadas with olive; we making empanadas with beans, you know. All making empanadas, different stuff. Mexico making empanadas, but it’s sweet. Is dessert, no with the snack, you know. Is sweet. We making empanadas with salt. Is all different.

Another flavor present in our culture is the coconut, you know. We make it to a lot of food with coconut. For example, when you come to the festival, one plate is lamb with coconut, [unclear] with coconut. We cook with the coconut milk. Is present in all flavors. The other thing, we—I’m sorry. We wrap some meat with the palm, you know, and cook it with the palm. Maybe is for influence in the Caribbean, exactly Caribbean.

Another thing is my challenge is the people come in the restaurant and say, “Why are you say this is Caribbean food?” Well, we serve Caribbean food. We have in Venezuela 12,000 kilometers of coast from the Caribbean Sea. We don’t serve jerk. Is different jerk. Jamaica, Curaçao, M\_\_\_\_\_, Aruba, is in the Caribbean, too, but, you know, they serve another food. Is another Caribbean food. Is all my challenge, show the people our food is really tasty, is really good, is really different, is really, really amazing flavors.

[0:41:50.8]

Delorme: And how have you taught people about the Venezuelans’ unique taste and flavors?

[0:41:58.3]

Gonzalez: Is exactly what I tell to you. When people say me, “I need to have the menu—.” Let me tell you a story. Four hundred years ago when Christopher Columbus bring to Venezuela, bring to South America, they bring to us the Spain flavors, you know, the [unclear], the olive oil, the, for example, peppers, the different flavors in Spain to our country. Let me show you something really quick. We serve a tamale in Christmastime. All countries serve a different tamale. The name for us is [Spanish]. Is an expression, origin expression in my country. I don’t know exactly what it say, [Spanish], but is the name for the all tamale. When we serve a tamale in December here in the restaurant, the people eat the tamale, say, “This is no tamale. This is Mexican tamale. This is no Salvador tamale. This is no Guatemalan tamale. Is a Venezuelan tamale.” They eating

the tamale and the [Spanish]. They say, “Oh, my gosh. Is amazing.” You can discovery inside the tamale all the culture, all the culture, you know, grains, olive, pork, or of just chicken inside with carrot, onions. The other thing is parsley inside the tamale. You discovery another flavor totally different with the rest the tamale in the South America.

[0:44:12.5]

Delorme: Earlier this year, you had a Venezuelan food festival. Can you tell us a little bit more about that, how that idea came about and how you put that whole event together?

[0:44:21.1]

Gonzalez: Well, is an idea—I maked the festival with the year anniversary, you know. We pass one year in March, and the festival was in February. Is a friend of mine, they come to me, offer an idea to want to make that show in another place. I told him, “You know, no, you’re wrong. We want to make it in my place.”

Say, “What?”

“I want to create a festival. We want to make it two different menu for two different weekends, and we offer another flavor, and no the regular menu in my restaurant.”

And he say to me, “Pancho.” Is a friend. Is an old friend. Is the old school. He say, “Okay, you making two, I’m making two.”

“Okay, go ahead.”

We put the ideas on the paper. We were working a couple weeks together planning the menu, and that’s it. The idea more in between me and him, and Alejandro,

and say, “Alejandro, we have this plan. I need the numbers.” Alejandro is my number guy. Alejandro is no making egg fry. [laughs] He don’t know nothing on the kitchen, you know. He make the numbers.

I went, talked to him, say, “Alejandro, I need to make the number for this plan.”

He said, “Okay, go ahead. Let me a couple days and put them black and white. If you want to make a deal [snaps fingers], we do it.” And exactly, Alejandro say, “Go ahead. We want to make a deal.”

I’m planning, and we put a whole month in January advertisement for the medias, for the social media, for the house, and the newspaper, too, and radio station, and we have for the two weekends 150 people in the restaurant for the two weekend. You know, on the average, 75 for weekend only for try the plate for the festival. And the presentation, it’s a four-course in four time, four time, different time, to four different areas in my country. Every plate is [unclear], a north, Caribe, and the South, in the same Venezuela, but your different plate for different areas. For example, here, the southern food or the New York food, you know, it’s different incidents in the culture for every state, okay?

[0:47:43.0]

Delerme: And the chef that was here with you, was that just for the festival [unclear]?

[0:47:48.0]

Gonzalez: Yeah, he’s a friend of mine. Only we cooking together for the festival. I can bring to my customer another flavors, you know. Is no just mine. Is a great opportunity,

you know, show you can—I'll tell you, you know, you can try another flavor different. Is so boring to work only alone, you know. When you cook together, the ideas [snaps fingers] fly, you know. [Spanish]. Is so different.

[0:48:31.5]

Delerme: How about your family? Does your family get involved here in the restaurant or spend time [unclear]?

[0:48:36.8]

Gonzalez: Really, my wife is a psychology. She work in the Methodist Hospital. She don't like the cook, but she support to me a lot. She stay always with me in my crazy ideas, and she support me every day, keep going with me every time. She is really important to me in this business. Is different. She don't involving in the process, but she support every day to me. When she work, she work for two time, you know. [Spanish]. She work for her and for me, too, and for my daughter.

[0:49:52.5]

Delerme: You mentioned you have a daughter, and she grew up in the South?

[0:49:56.8]

Gonzalez: Yeah.

[0:49:57.6]

Delerme: How was that experience for her growing up in the South? Was it challenging?  
Does it continue to be challenging for her?

[0:50:04.2]

Gonzalez: Yeah, she like it, she like it, and the experience for her is amazing. She come to stay with us two years. Right now is thirteen. She is Venezuelan lady, you know.

[laughs] She's think in English and talk to English. In my house, we don't speak English; it's only 100 percent Spanish. But she feeling identificated with Venezuela. She eating arepas. She talk to Venezuela. She talk with my mom, and she say, "Abuela." Is really nice. I think she can grow with the both cultures, you know.

[0:51:00.4]

Delerme: So you've been able to help her preserve—

[0:51:01.6]

Gonzalez: Yes.

[0:51:02.3]

Delerme: —her Venezuelan culture.

[0:51:03.3]

Gonzalez: Yes, yes.

[0:51:04.5]

Delorme: How about rituals and traditions, holidays? Have you carried out any of the same traditions here that you did—

[0:51:09.9]

Gonzalez: Yes, absolutely, absolutely.

[0:51:11.7]

Delorme: Could you tell us a little bit about some of your traditions [unclear]?

[0:51:14.2]

Gonzalez: Yeah. You know, the most popular is Christmastime. Christmastime, we making the [Spanish] or tamales all together. Is a big party. We want to make [Spanish] in the whole family. Right now we have a lot of people here, friends, follows the Venezuela. When come, I can counting when my hand right now—I don't know how many people come. And every Christmas, 22 and 21 December, we making a plan to all family. I want to make it a really big party to making tamales or [Spanish]. This is one [unclear].

The other one, we adopted to the Thanksgiving, you know. We adopted Thanksgiving. Is a great opportunity to give thank to all together. Is really nice, is a really nice holiday. We adopted with us the Thanksgiving Day.

[0:52:29.3]

Delerme: And what do you eat and serve on Thanksgiving? Do you do [unclear]?

[0:52:32.8]

Gonzalez: [laughs] Oh, yeah, yeah. The only meat we make is the turkey, you know, but the other [Spanish], or the other sides, is Venezuelan side. We serve beans, rice. We serve, too, tamale. We serve desserts, all desserts. We want to get drinks, different drinks. Is a fun day. Is a fun day. We pass all together the early morning to late night, because we having a lot of party all time.

[0:53:13.2]

Delerme: Okay.

[0:53:14.2]

Gonzalez: The Venezuelan is a people, really party people, you know, friendly people, and all time we don't needing any day to make it a party. Just only a couple calls, okay, we want to making play dominos or just watching the game, football game or baseball game, or just—we finished work Saturday here and go to my house. In my house, when come to my house, you can find ten or twelve people. “What are you doing here?”

“Just waiting for you.” That's it. A couple beers, you know, or making the grill or whatever. We don't need the call to say, “Hey, I can go to your house?” No. Just knock the door. That's it. The Venezuelan people isn't so really—all time is a big party. All time is a big party.

[0:54:18.5]

Delorme: And have you carried that tradition to the restaurant?

[0:54:20.7]

Gonzalez: Yes. Yes, absolutely, absolutely. You know, this is the new place for the family. Every party, every birthday, every whatever, they come to here. All weekends, something different to me and the restaurant.

[0:54:42.0]

Delorme: Can you tell me a little bit about the interior design? There's artwork there, and artwork featured by your daughter. What did it look like when you took over the restaurant, and how have you changed it?

[0:54:55.3]

Gonzalez: Okay. The decoration inside, my daughter is some arts on the wall, but the decoration is fresh, is different. We play with the colors, the South American colors. We put in the dinner room some image, some art reference to the old South America and Venezuela. We put two artists. One is Carlos Cruz-Diez. He's—exactly the name is signetic [phonetic] or *significo* artist. The reason we put Carlos Cruz on my wall is they design all the floor for the airport in Venezuela, the Simón Bolívar Airport. Is the principal airport in my country. He design all the floor and some wall. And this art that right now is—I don't know how to say.

[Spanish to [0:58:53.8]] is the black people in my country. We have a heritage to African people, too, and in Barlovento—is a town, is too close to the beach. Is a music town, you know, the drum town and the beach town. Is the image for the race, the black race in my country, is the typical women, black women, in my country, is the sound, the Caribbean sound, the power, you know. The women is stronger. This reason is that one.

The other one, we have the big picture for the Venezuela in the Salto Ángel. This is the fall, the waterfall. You know, it's the most high waterfall in the world, is in Venezuela. Is the Salto Ángel. You remember the movie *Up*?

[1:00:13.4]

Delerme: Yes.

[1:00:14.9]

Gonzalez: You know? You remember the old guy, he try to fly with the balloons?

[1:00:20.4]

Delerme: Mm-hmm.

[1:00:20.7]

Gonzalez: The place in his mind where he want to travel is Salto Ángel in Venezuela. Is the amazing place. The paradise in her mind is in Venezuela. For that reason, I put the poster for the movie in the wall.

And the other two, the other two is the lady with the, I don't know, flowers in the head, is the image for our cornmeal. Is the logo, you know. Is a brand, you know. Is a really important brand for us, is making arepas.

The last one is the typical beer in Venezuela. The colors, we're going to try to mix Jell-O red and blue, is the flag for us, the Venezuelan flag.

On this wall is an honor to Memphis, all the skyline to Memphis. Try to put combine it, the two cultures.

[1:01:43.0]

Delerme: So a combination of cultures?

[1:01:46.0]

Gonzalez: [laughs] Yes.

[1:01:46.9]

Delerme: Beautiful, beautiful.

[1:01:47.6]

Gonzalez: Yes.

[1:01:48.4]

Delerme: That's all the questions I have for you. Is there anything you'd like to add, anything that we didn't touch on or get to talk about that is important that people know either about the restaurant or about your experiences living here in Memphis?

[1:02:04.2]

Gonzalez: I love Memphis, like it. Some people say me, "No, Memphis is so boring. You comparing Memphis with Florida or New York, you crazy." The big cities is the big problems. I love Memphis. Is a city different. I think we have the [unclear]. Is depend do you talk to or do you express or you [unclear]. That's it. I never had a problem with this. Never.

[1:02:46.6]

Delerme: Okay. I was going to ask you have you ever had experiences with discrimination or—

[1:02:49.0]

Gonzalez: I never. Yeah, some friends say me that or this or what things or whatever. I don't hear talk, but I never had that problem. But I like the city. Can drive easy to another point, don't have long lines. Do you take a couple minutes in the bank? Or do you need to travel? Is [Spanish to [1:03:42.8]. You need to move to another city. You need to know another place, and when back to home, you say, "Ah, okay. Is [unclear]. I can rest. I don't have any problem. My neighbor, I don't know who it is." Is different, is totally different, you know. I like Memphis.

[1:04:05.1]

Delerme: Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.

[1:04:09.5]

Gonzalez: Thank you for take your time and bring to my restaurant, bring to me and propose really nice project, a really nice idea, that we can show all the people what are we doing here to change or to show our culture for the food to the people. Is a great opportunity, excellent opportunity.

[1:04:39.4]

Delerme: Well, thank you.

[1:04:40.9]

Gonzalez: Thank you, thank you. Thank yourself.

[1:04:42.7]

Delerme: Thank you.

[End of interview]