

Karla Ruiz
Karla's Catering – Nashville, TN

Date: February 11, 2016
Location: Casa Azafrán community center
Interviewer: Jennifer Justus
Transcription: Deborah Mitchum
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Interviewee: Karla Ruiz
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Length: Four audio files; 00:58:22

START OF INTERVIEW

[00:00:00]

Jennifer Justus: Okay. This is Jennifer Justus for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's February 11 and we are at Casa Azafrán community center, and I'm with Karla Ruiz. Will you introduce yourself, please?

[00:00:18]

Karla Ruiz: Hi. My name is Karla Ruiz. I am from Mexico City. My date of birth is 08-01-74.

[00:00:28]

JJ: Okay, great. So, August 1, 1974. Okay. So, how long have you lived in Nashville?

[00:00:39]

KR: Sixteen years.

[00:00:40]

JJ: Okay, [and] how did you end up in Nashville and where did you come from?

[00:00:48]

KR: I come from Mexico City and also a small town in Michoacán, [where] my grandmom used to live, and I came to visit friends and I just—. The first time I came to Nashville I decided that's going to be my home forever.

[00:01:07]

JJ: Okay, and what was that trip like? Who was living here that you knew, and what was the occasion, I guess?

[00:01:18]

KR: Just coming to visit family friends. They were family from my brother's side, and we just come to visit with my mom and somebody offered me a job. And instead of staying just for two or three weeks, I stay until today.

[00:01:38]

JJ: Okay, and what was the job?

[00:01:41]

KR: It was serving tables in a Mexican restaurant.

[00:01:45]

JJ: Was it here in this area?

[00:01:48]

KR: It was in Bellevue.

[00:01:51]

JJ: Okay, and then after you worked there a little bit, then what happened next?

[00:01:57]

KR: Then after there I went to an organization, Sodexo. It's not an organization, it's a company, Sodexo, and I was working there for a little while, and then from there I went to work with Martha Stamps at Belle Meade Plantation.

[00:02:16]

JJ: Okay, and I definitely want to hear about that. So did you know about Martha, and how did you come across that job?

[00:02:26]

KR: When I came here I started reading more local magazines and the *Tennessean* [as a way to] learn English and a couple times I saw her. I'm not sure if she used to write in the *Tennessean*, but I remember [reading] something about her, and also I see in the *Tennessean* that she was looking for a prep person in the kitchen, and I apply and I stay there.

[00:02:57]

JJ: Okay, and we'll go back to that in a minute, but I wanted to ask about cooking and how you learned to cook.

[00:03:06]

KR: I learned to cook in Mexico but I don't know that I was good at it, or I don't even know that I enjoy it back then, because I do it as an everyday thing to do. I find out here under Martha Stamps that I can do different recipes, or I can create recipes, and I think when I was here working for her is when I find out that I can do more than just Mexican or home cooking. I can create and identify some of the flavors and then create it again.

[00:03:48]

JJ: What are some of your first memories cooking in Mexico?

[00:03:52]

KR: In Mexico, I remember—. It wasn't me cooking, but I remember watching my grandmom, watching her making Dulce de Leche, and helping her to crack the eggs and to [chop] the pecans and everything that [you] need, and that was a great experience because I never have that recipe, but probably twenty years later here in Nashville I have to do that recipe,

or I offered it to some kind of catering, and I don't have recipe but I was just trying to remember that exactly moment when I was doing the Dulce de Leche with my grandmom, and it just came naturally. I remember every step that she showed me. So, I remember how to do that, and another thing that we used to do, the tamales; I don't specifically cook the tamales, but I remember to pull the corn husk and start getting ready for the tamales, and with the leftover corn husks we make dolls and we play with them, so.

[00:05:05]

JJ: So, your grandmother, can you tell me a little bit about how she—? Did she enjoy cooking, you think, and is she still around?

[00:05:16]

KR: Well, from the both sides of my grandmoms, my father's mom, she loves to cook. She was very bossy woman. She was the one who take control of all the entire family and she cooks but also she direct us, or she direct my aunts, or whatever needs to be around cooking she was like the leader telling us what to do, what is next. She loves to have family over almost every day, so the kitchen was always open. She was from Michoacán, very small town. Her recipes are very rustic and very authentic Mexican recipes. Like, we kill a pig a day before to eat it right there in the farm. It was very rustic.

[00:06:13]

My other grandma from Mexico City, she was very fancy. I will say very Frenchy, like she have this kind of like way to cook very elegant, and she do more like quiches and dishes that are not necessarily Mexican, but that's how I learn about other food that wasn't exactly Mexican. So, I have those both sides.

[00:06:40]

JJ: So the grandmother in Mexico City, did she grow up there?

[00:06:43]

KR: No. She also come from a small town, but most of her life she was in Mexico City and she traveled a lot [to] Europe, so that's how she bring, I guess, those dishes.

[00:06:56]

JJ: Would you say that you learned more from your grandmothers' cooking than any other people in your family, or who did you learn from most, I guess, in your family?

[00:07:07]

KR: Well, my mom, even if she don't enjoy cooking, it's a task that she do every day because in Mexico it's not like we're going to eat out or anything. You eat in your home every day at 2:00 p.m. It doesn't matter. And I learned from her, even if she don't like—. She say she don't enjoy it, but she do it very well, very, very well, and I really enjoy [what she cooks]. When she [comes] here to Nashville every year she help to prep something that I love too. And my aunts also, each one have a—. Like, one of them are very good doing desserts and the other one was very good doing more like pork or other heavy, savory dishes. But, yeah; all from family.

[00:07:57]

JJ: Do you mind to tell me—? I'd love to hear, you know, talking about the pig and that meal, and then the Mexico City meal, can you kind of describe for me what those scenes were like?

[00:08:11]

KR: Yeah. It was—. Back then we also see how they pick—. They're going to pick who's going to die that day, because it's going to be about [which] animal. It was going to be a pig or a chicken or whatever. So we see that whole process. We see they kill the animal, which

today I'm ashamed about it and I will never let my daughter see that. *[Laughs]* We see how they open it, and we get to try everything, everything, [even] the brain of the animal. I mean, I remember my dad opened the head and they cooked the brain, and we are making a line to try the brain in tacos. It's insane. *[Laughs]* It was more like wild, but I enjoy it. I enjoyed also the playing around the tamales husk and the peeling all the corn husks and then at the end my aunt, and I don't remember how, but she make dolls from them, and we played with those dolls. It was very fun. It was more like freedom, very rustic. I have very good memories about it.

[00:09:23]

On the other side, in Mexico City, my grandmom was—and I just loved the way she was. She start with a very nice presentation at the table, it was very elegant, and by then I can *[distinguish.]* One was very wild, it was more, you know, “People is coming tonight,” like twenty, thirty people is coming tonight almost every day at dinner, and we just do it, rushing, and it was very enjoyable. But in Mexico City it was more two or three people, it can be more elegant, more detail. My grandmom used to make quiches, she used to make pies, lemon ice cream, but it was not like the Mexican lemon ice cream. It was just her dishes are very—. Now I compare them with very French cuisine. Gravies, she used to make biscuits, like the best biscuits I ever try, and not all biscuits are Mexican, *[Laughs]* because my grandmom used to make them over there, but I don't see anywhere else where they make biscuits but just her. So, it was different, but I know one it was like a very rustic Mexican food and my grandmom in Mexico City, she tried to be more elegant and more polite and everything: the way we eat, the way we sit at the table, the way we ask for the bread. It was totally different.

[00:10:50]

JJ: So do you think you are influenced more by one grandmother or the other, or equally, or how would that come out?

[00:11:01]

KR: I love that question because I will say equally, because what I think it makes me [able to] get here into big business is because I know the real flavors of food. I know the good flavors, or a Mexican dish, [and I would] learn that from my grandmom in Zimora, Michoacán, the small town. But then I know how to present it pretty so people can enjoy it and it looks a good and nice presentation. It doesn't matter what the dish looks like. So, I think about fifty-fifty, yeah.

[00:11:36]

JJ: Okay. So the grandmother where the pig would be, that would be a big group of people and sort of everybody doing their own thing, kind of, and then the Mexico City grandmother would be a smaller group, correct?

[00:11:51]

KR: A smaller group, yeah.

[00:11:52]

JJ: Okay. Let's go back to [when you were] working with Martha Stamps. So, what were some of the things that you made there and what were some things that you learned while you were there?

[00:12:09]

KR: Well, when I was there the first year it was amazing because that's how I—. I always ask myself where my grandmom from Mexico City learned all these fancy dishes. When I was in Belle Meade Plantation with Martha it was like, okay, "I know where they come from,

so I'm going to start practicing with that." With Martha Stamps, the dishes that I remember to present—and I was a little scared—that was empanadas, because they were very Latin-American dish that not many people in Belle Meade will know what is that or how they eat it. So, I present it with local squash blossom and cheese, and that was a hit. That's what I did that they love it, as well as Enchiladas Verdes, Chile Rellenos, and people, they were very good [at accepting it.]

[00:13:09]

From Martha, wow; I learned—. First, I love Southern food, I love Southern culture, and I learn from her the love of the culture, the importance of cook to keep the family together. A squash casserole is what I have in my mind, or the sweet potato biscuits. That's something that I enjoy doing, and it's from her.

[00:13:35]

JJ: So, what are some observations that you had when you started to work there, and even at the restaurant where you served? Did you notice things that were different about culture here especially in the way people eat?

[00:13:54]

KR: When I was working in a Mexican restaurant, I was thinking to myself, "Wow. Why do they think this is a Mexican food?" because [none] of that was really a Mexican food. I don't even think the rice we prepared that way. *[Laughs]* So, and we don't eat chips and salsa before—. I mean, I don't know. It was just not—. I learned that. And for Martha, [she] really have a big influence on the way that I see United States of America because before, with all the culture, everything is they have no local dishes, they have pizza, they have hotdogs, they have hamburgers. So when I work for Martha Stamps I learn about American culture in general. I fall in love [with] the culture more than I was before, and I learned that they also have their dishes,

and, you know, I think we all have the same kind of [dishes]. Like, I compare the cheese grits with tamales. It's the same ingredient, just prepared different way. I mean, I love that they get together on Christmas, and at Thanksgiving they bring their dishes and always a pecan pie, and all these things that I learned that I didn't know before, that they have these beautiful [cultural] family dinners.

[00:15:27]

JJ: I remember hearing you talk about being with Martha is when you started to bring what you knew how to make from home and what you learned to make here and sort of bring those together. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:15:42]

KR: Well, yeah. When I start with Martha, also sometimes she'd give me the freedom to say, "You know, you can do this," and that [was when I] started doing the empanadas. I remember one time we sell—. For a party they just want Mexican food, and we sell Chiles Rellenos and all the menu was Mexican, and that was a big hit. For me, in order to prepare those dishes in an American restaurant in a Southern culture, to serve the rellenos or the enchiladas, it was like—. Probably by then I don't understand but from others I can see their surprises in the way they like, "Oh, my God! How are you going to serve that?" and people were always very happy. I think Martha also, because Martha, I think she have some—. Sometimes she asks me questions about how we do that, and so we definitely exchanged some recipes and make new and other recipes. But yeah, I bring a lot of my Mexican dishes to Belle Meade Plantation, and it was like a hit.

[00:16:59]

JJ: And what about those combinations of ingredients, because I think you do like a peach empanada, maybe, and talking about the grits and the tamales. Can you talk a little more about how—?

[00:17:10]

KR: Yeah. I love—. I just think, when I'm saying that we have the same dishes but in a different presentation, like the empanadas that I used to make, if I do sweet I use the local peaches – well, from Georgia – or the local berries and I stuff them with them which [is] amazing. Also I use a lot of —. Like, we have a lot of things of the Mexican cuisine grown here, like the poblano peppers or the jalapeños, and I love that because that makes the real flavor of the Mexican food. When you have these fresh ingredients here, that's amazing, like for salsa verde, for poblanos, all these things that we can find here in Nashville. I love to work with locals. I remember one time we serve—. Like in Mexico, we serve pork tamales. What I did was—. And that was, I think, at another event. We did pork in salsa verde with cheese grits, and also we make like jalapeño cheese grits. So we combine all these flavors and they play together very well, and they're just fresh food that play amazing.

[00:18:27]

JJ: Okay. So, to back up a little bit, when you first started working at Belle Meade Plantation, what was your role there?

[00:18:38]

KR: [I started on the] prep line. I was prepping for salads, and then I think I went to the dessert station, and then from there they were a little scared because I want to jump to the line cook, which not many women—. [*Interruption*]

[00:19:00 *Break in recording*]

JJ: So, you were talking about being a line cook, and we'll continue there.

[00:00:07]

KR: Yeah. I was very excited. I wanted to jump to a line cook. It was a little scary for everybody because there is no line cook—there was maybe, by then—not a lot of women line cooks because of the stress, the language; everything is just very stressful and sometimes—. It's just like a man's work, I will say, in the past. So, I was the only woman. [I was a] line cook for a long time, and I enjoy it so much, the stress and all the pressure. I find out that was adrenaline for me and I love it. From there I think then she asked me if I can be her kitchen manager, and I was very scared but very excited about it, and that's how I ended it.

[00:00:55]

JJ: What year did you start at Belle Meade Plantation, and then what year did you leave?

[00:01:00]

KR: I think I start in [*Pauses*] I think 2002, I believe. I left in—. Right when the plantation moves, I mean Martha Stamps moved to another. It was probably 2006.

[00:01:28]

JJ: Were there other influences there, other people who influenced you or had an impact on you that you want to talk about?

[00:01:35]

KR: Well, I mean most—. Well I meet a lot of people from Nashville and really I have the most beautiful experience from people. [They're] just very caring, big heart people from all around that area. For me to be there to go to work, I always remember to think what a nice thing, going to work with this joy. You love to see the places around, you learn every single day because we walk around and we read about it, and sometimes we even get to get a tour for free,

and it was just a joy and it was like a cultural eye open for me and for my kids, because I love to bring them there to walk and read about it. I think it really impact the way that I see American culture.

[00:02:35]

JJ: The time at Belle Meade Plantation?

[00:02:37]

KR: At Belle Meade Plantation.

[00:02:38]

JJ: And then how did you decide to move on from there?

[00:02:42]

KR: In 2005 I start thinking about—. I have a little baby so I want to, instead of work probably twelve, thirteen hours a day I thought it would be easy just to have like a food shop where people can buy something, like to-go food. And then one friend from Belle Meade Plantation, she asked me that a friend have a little event and if I can make a Mexican food, and I say yes, and they love it, and then from there somebody else asked me. Then when I want to jump to a bigger group they ask me for license and insurance, so this is when I jump and I know that I have to have certain papers, that I have to have a license to do that, and then I went to have my license, and that's how I started.

[00:03:36]

JJ: So, was this after Fido, or before?

[00:03:42]

KR: That was before Fido. When I was in Fido I was working part time in Fido but at the same time I have Karla's Catering and the farmers' market on Saturdays. It was like crazy.

[Laughs]

[00:03:57]

JJ: Okay, so can you talk about Fido then?

[00:04:02]

KR: John Stephenson, very good friend of mine, he called me and asked me if I want to work a couple hours. It was very much like part-time. By then I was out of Martha already, so I was just doing the catering thing. I said, "Well, probably two or three days a week it would be great," and I think I learned so much from John but I think he also—. We also have a great combination. We start selling empanadas in Fido and now they were on the special for every day, and we do like pozole soup, which nobody knows what it is, but until I start doing very original Mexican dishes and, I don't know, tostados and tacos, or Torta Cubana. So many dishes were Latin-inspired we did in Fido. And it's funny because when I was there many people know like the special of the day and they say, "I know this is yours. I know this is yours." It's a good thing to have people recognize your food or what you create, and another very good thing is that I have—. When you work with chefs that are very—. They know who they are and very—. I mean, John Stephenson have a very, very good heart and he don't really—. He [has] no ego, like, "This is me, me, me." No. He loves to share knowledge and food and recipes with others and I love that because that [gives] you freedom to create, but also your confidence that your dishes are going to be safe and they're going to be—. So, it's just amazing partnership working with chefs like John.

[00:06:03]

JJ: How did you get to know John?

[00:06:05]

KR: His wife, Katherine, was the pastry chef for Martha, and we were pregnant at the same time and our baby shower from Martha was in Belle Meade Plantation. So as employees, we do the baby shower together. This is how I meet John.

[00:06:27]

JJ: So, let's talk about babies for a second then. *[Laughs]* You came here with one child, right? So, can you talk about that? How did you feel when you came here? Were you nervous with that?

[00:06:44]

KR: I was very nervous. I came with my son; he was six year old by then. I was nervous because I came from a home that was super, super protective. Like, I was a single mother but my parents still treated me like I'm still their baby, and my son was their only grandson by then. No, we have nephews, but we lived with them so it was very protective. Coming here and deciding to stay was very scary because now my son goes to school in a bus, which I was freaking out. *[Laughs]* He suffer because he don't understand anything what the teacher says and it was heartbreaking to go to school every day crying and don't know what to do and ask yourself every day, "Am I doing the right thing? Should I go back?" It was hard. Then he start learning but I don't know until now that he was—. People bullied him because he speak Spanish and looks Latin, and by then in Bellevue, we're talking about probably [thirteen or fifteen years ago], there wasn't a lot of Spanish people in that area, so it was difficult. It was heartbreaking also and every day I asked myself, "Should I go back?" and I just keep trying hard and staying, and now today I know that I did the best decision. I stay. My son now finish college and he's a very successful

teacher, and I'm so proud of him. But back then it was hard to keep thinking: go back or stay here?

[00:08:35]

JJ: So he's finished college?

[00:08:36]

KR: Yes.

[00:08:37]

JJ: And what is his age now?

[00:08:38]

KR: He's twenty-four now and he works in Colorado. He's teaching [at a charter] school in Colorado.

[00:08:48]

JJ: And did you speak English when you came here?

[00:08:52]

KR: Very, very little. [I went to] a bilingual school for a couple years. When I came here I find out that the English that I have, it was nothing, because I learn it from school so it was nothing like really what you hear. So I pretty much learned in Mexico a little bit of [grammar] but I learned to speak here and to understand the English from here, from Tennessee. I learned here.

[00:09:27]

JJ: Okay. So, going back to Fido, you were there for how long, and then how did you decide to stop working there?

[00:09:37]

KR: I was there for about—let's see—probably three years, three or four years. It was not long. The business start getting busier and busier so I can pull a little bit, just work from the catering, but then I had to—. I remember that I left Fido because I thought, “This is my year. I'm going to make it [just with] the catering,” and, no, I have to come back because it wasn't that easy. Then I get married, and it's when I leave Fido, but also I left Karla's Catering too. My husband, we talked and we decide that I probably will take a year off or so, but I was very sad and I don't know why and once I come back to make an event again for Conexion Americas, I know that this is my life. I want to be in the kitchen every day the rest of my life.

[00:10:39]

JJ: So, will you talk about that event a little bit, how did it come to be and why did it make you feel like, “oh, this is where I want to be?”

[00:10:48]

KR: Yes. I was at home doing no more events, just being in charge of home, and one day I had received a call from Renata and she say that a very important organization, La Raza, is coming to Nashville, and we were so proud, and she asked me if I can make their food for them and I say, “Let me see. Let me think about it,” because I'd been like a year or so out of the catering and I was kind of like afraid. I decide to do it and the reason why I decide to do it is because I missed cooking. So, I was sad but I don't really know why, so I decide, “Well, if I do this event I might save a little bit to buy me a horse, and I can just ride horses and don't be that sad,” anyway. *[Laughs]*

[00:11:43]

So, after that event [*Unintelligible*] I find out—and I don't know that before the event coming for me is the most important day. I just want to plan it as a perfection. I want everything

looks great, I want everything taste great. I decide what kind of plates I want, how I want the plates look like, how the dessert; everything is like a—. It's that creation that you have in your mind, and then you have to make it look just the way you imagine. So, I was very excited. I served Chiles en Nogada with coconut flan that night. Everything looked so beautiful. That was like a great success and after that day I probably have five or six calls from my clients who want me to [cater], so I decide, okay, a little more, a couple more, and then I'm just like, "I love it. I'm just going to keep doing it," and now I know that I don't want to stop cooking never. I love it.

[00:12:48]

JJ: Can you talk about that dish that you made and what it means to you?

[00:12:52]

KR: The dish that we made is the Chiles en Nogada. It's a very, very important dish in Mexico. It's a dish that is very important. The nuns in Mexico create that dish because you have the green, white, and red color, like the Mexican flag, and they create it when—. It was like a battle that one of our governments win and they want to celebrate it and they decide to do this dish, which takes days because they peel each walnut and it's a very elaborate dish, and they want to celebrate this battle with the general so they decide to do this dish and it's very, very well known in Mexico. I will say it's one of our most important dishes in Mexico.

[00:13:57]

JJ: So, is there a dish that, if you want to show people where you come from, that you make, and then is there a dish that you make to sort of show where you are now? If there's not just one, that's okay, but if one comes to mind.

[00:14:16]

KR: I think if there is a dish that I want to show where I come from I will do the Cochinita Pibil or the empanadas. This is something that I'm always—that's my presentation for where I come from. Now, if there's a dish that I want to show today, it will be some kind of—. I will do some kind of—. We'll pick local ingredients. I love to use roasted squash and mix it with walnuts. I will do probably—I just tried to think of one that I—. Pork loin stuffed with dried fruits, and some kind of mandarin or pineapple sauce on the top, with roasted fall veggies. That's what I will do.

[00:15:18]

JJ: So, can we go back to Fido for just a second, because I remember you telling me about a tortilla press that you left with John, so can you talk about that a little bit?

[00:15:30]

KR: Yes. Well, I bring a tortilla press that—. By then, I don't know, they were so expensive, and they were like if it's bigger it's better because the tortilla's going to be thinner anyway. So, we bring it there to do the empanadas, that's where we do it, and we use it for a couple years and John learned how to use it, which is so funny because you will never find in Mexico a man using a tortilla press. That would be so—. I mean it will be—. People will make fun of him. I never meet anybody who's a man who use a tortilla press but John Stephenson [*Laughs*] and I'm so proud of him because he knows how to use it. Not many people know how to use it. Once I left Fido I really wanted to leave something that—. It means so much for me, Fido and John Stephenson, but I want to do something that really change like the way he cooks or something, so I decided to leave "Maria" there—we call it "Maria"—and he keep it. I also, still sometimes I call him and ask him if I can borrow it when I want to do—because that is a

very good, very, very rustic, old-fashioned tortilla machine, and he lets me use it but he always asks, "But please give it back." [*Laughs*]

[00:17:02]

JJ: Where did you find it? Did you get it here or did it come from—?

[00:17:06]

KR: My mom bring it from Mexico, yeah.

[00:17:10]

JJ: And you have others that you use, I guess, now.

[00:17:13]

KR: I have others that I use but I never find any one like that, and I cannot ask my mom for another one because she will be heartbreak if she knows that I give it away. So, when she comes I just say, "Oh, yeah. It's there somewhere." [*Laughs*] So, yeah, I miss that.

[00:17:30]

JJ: Okay. Let's take just a quick break.

[00:17:35 *Break in recording*]

JJ: So, talking about catering, how long have you been at the Karla's Catering gig?

[00:00:12]

KR: Four years it's been growing. Is it four? Five years, I'm sorry. It's been growing slowly but very—. I think I learn so many—. Because I was the cook, I was the salesperson, I was the account person, so I was doing everything. When I decide to share these responsibilities with [*Unintelligible*] and I can trust somebody to do my recipes I start pulling out, and to the kitchen a little bit, just checking that everything is the way I want it, but I'm [going to] start

trusting others to help me. Like, I hire an accountant and I hire people that are very talented, and just grow together and, yeah; this is my fifth year.

[00:01:04]

JJ: What about stories of meals that you've prepared. Do you have any crazy catering stories? I'm sure.

[00:01:13]

KR: I do. [*Laughs*] One of the things that I learned, there is always something going to happen, and you have always to have a backup plan all the time. I remember that I had to [deliver] a big cake, like five-floor cake—this happened probably three years ago—and I was already late to the delivering so that makes me nervous and that made me pass a red light and, I don't know, there was a police behind me and he stopped me. So, I was so late already and then with a ticket it was just not—. So, I always have somebody to call. All the time I have somebody to call just to be ready for whatever, because the client cannot wait. The client is relying on you that you're going to be there at the time that you say you're going to be there, so, yeah; I always have a backup plan.

[00:02:18]

I remember also one of the events I was cooking crème brûlée and the party was at 5:00 and the crème brûlée was done like 4:00, so almost right on time, and there was a wasp coming inside my bra and I don't know what to do. I don't want to lose the brûlées because I don't make more than what we need, and they'll fly all over the ceiling, and it was just crazy. But I find out that you can always solve the problem if you just—. You always have to have a Plan B for everything.

[00:03:02]

JJ: So the wasp came in—.

[00:03:03]

KR: Yeah, came in and was inside [my bra] when I was having the brûlées coming out from the oven, so my hands were tied. I just had to save the brûlées or decide to—. I don't know. It was crazy.

[00:03:16]

JJ: What happened?

[00:03:17]

KR: I just throw the brûlées on the floor and everything, you know, and I have to pull my shirt, and it was just a very odd moment. [*Laughs*]

[00:03:27]

Another one was Robert Siegel, who was a great chef, he—. I was about to make gumbo and I was learning how to make gumbo, and he just told me, "You're going to have the product tomorrow," and they delivered the crab for the gumbo and I just called him, very scared, and said, "Robert, you're not going to believe this, but they sent us—. The crabs are live. They are not dead," and he said, "Yeah. That's the way you should cook them." I was like, no way I can do that, and it was just very—. It was one of the techniques that I never thought I can learn, or it was just funny to cook a live crab.

[00:04:10]

JJ: Okay, so another thing I want to ask you is about—. Well, back to the catering. When you started the business, did you work out of this place, Casa Azafrán, and Mesa Komal kitchen?

[00:04:28]

KR: Not always. I have a very, very good friend, the owner of Johnny Haffner Catering. I worked with him, and I also learned from him so much. He's just amazing. In Charlotte Pike he have his kitchen and he let me use—I mean, I pay very, very low rent over there—but he let me use his kitchen, even his equipment. He was always—. One of the experiences that I have here in Nashville is just to meet amazing people that are really willing, even if you're kind of like – well, I cannot say that by them – but it was just competition? He let me use all his equipment and his kitchen and he share so many recipes with me and he help me a lot. So, yeah, that was in Charlotte Pike, Johnny Haffner. He have his kitchen and that's where I start doing it.

[00:05:27]

JJ: And then how did you come here to this place?

[00:05:29]

KR: Well, I know Conexion Americas a long time ago, probably ten, twelve years ago, and I know the project. I know they're going to build the kitchen, and I was here probably the first month the kitchen was done, but I wasn't ready to jump to do just catering. I was very scared. So, yeah, that's how I know the kitchen because, I mean, we were pretty much building it together. I know when it's going to be ready and I was so excited, and then once the kitchen is ready I was a little scared because it was a big responsibility for me. But yeah, that's a great way to know that you cannot be scared to succeed, to have—. The only way to succeed, that's just dare to do it.

[00:06:21]

JJ: And then can you tell me about when President Obama came to this place and how did you end up in that room when he spoke, and—. Just talk about that. *[Laughs]*

[00:06:35]

KR: *[Laughs]* It was amazing. Well, it was just—. It was like a dream. I [never] thought about it in my life that I was going to get to meet Mr. President Obama. We know first. We have the great news that Mr. Obama is coming to Casa Azafrán. It was a big deal. I mean, it was like, wow, and we all understand that we might not be here that day, we're going to need to leave, and then somebody tell me, you know, it's just going to be a small group who's going to be there. I never thought I can be part of that small group. Then Renata came to the kitchen and told me, "Guess what? You are one of the group," and I cried. I cannot even—. I mean, I was like, "Why me?" I didn't understand that I was being part of this new Nashville, of this new business boom, but I don't understand. By then I just not—. Okay, so that's a big thing, first Mr. Obama here, and then I'm going to be one of the people in the small group, and then it took like a lot of secret places where they take us, they have to pick us up in that place, and it was just—. Where we come to Casa Azafrán it was transformed to another place, and that was [on purpose] because they don't want anybody else to remember how it looks like.

[00:08:13]

So, when I get here, I was thinking, "Well, it's a lot of people. I might probably just see him from the back or something." Surprisingly I have the seat number one, just right in front of him, and I just cannot—. It was like so overwhelming, like it was amazing. Yeah, what an honor.

[00:08:36]

JJ: And you were the first person to ask a question when he opened up for questions. Did you know you were going to do that, and what did you ask?

[00:08:45]

KR: No, I don't know—. They ask—. He asked, "Well, we can answer some questions," and I was having a conversation [the night before] with my son about immigration and about

things that had affected us by then and, you know, stuff that it really affect my personal story. So we were just talking about it and then my son tell me, "Well, if you get to speak with him, why you don't ask him what is going to happen," because Mr. Obama just—. I think there was an executive order that he say that the immigrants are here more than [so many] years and they have kids that are born here they will be eligible for a permit to stay here. I thanked him first for that, and then I asked him what is going to happen if the Republican party come and take over the House and the White House and they decline that. That was my question, which sadly that happened. He said it's not going to happen because that's not what America is built from, that's not what American people want to do, and it just sadly happened. After a couple months they decide to stop it for a little while.

[00:10:22]

JJ: Were you nervous when you asked the question, and also does it make you nervous now because of that decision?

[00:10:30]

KR: I was very nervous. Yes, I was, and it makes me nervous, yes. It makes me very nervous every day. I'm still in the same situation. This morning one of my lights on the car wasn't blinking properly so I find out that one of my lights I need to change it, but a policeman come to me and asked me for my driver's license, which I don't have, and I was very scared because I was thinking they might want [to deport] me. [*Tearfully*] I start thinking, "What am I going to do with my daughter today?" I start thinking who I need to call to pick her up. I start thinking about my clients, "Who's going to do these caterings? I need to call them," and, thank God, nothing happened. I have to go to court. But I'm still scared. [*Pauses*] Sorry.

[00:11:36 *Break in recording*]

JJ: So when you were stopped he said that you can't drive from there, but you had things that you needed to do. Can you talk about that hardship and that affected you?

[00:00:18]

KR: Yeah, well, he asked me if somebody is coming to pick me up, and I say, "I will call somebody," and I was thinking, "Who should I call?" But at the same time I was thinking, "But I need to go pick up my daughter. I need to go to work. I have events tomorrow, which I need to do." I just have—. It's not that I can really stop—. I cannot stop driving, and it's one of the things that I think that would be just nice to have a driver's license and just to drive, because to have a ticket for don't have a light, I know that's something small that you can fix it, but in my case it can become a deportation and can become a family separation. I mean, I love here. I feel I'm a Nashvillian and I want to be here. But that's one of the things that I think we can—. It would be nice to have a driver's license. We used to have it before. I think that's something that we can do.

[00:01:23]

Two days ago the mayor, Megan [Barry], was here in Casa Azafrán, and it was nice to talk to her and ask her about that, and she understands, and I love that she understands our situation and she is with us. You can feel that she is with us, but sometimes there is nothing that she can do. But I have the confidence that whatever is in her hands she's going to help us to succeed to have a—. I believe that it's a right to have a driver's license because everything in my—. I mean, I pay my taxes, I'm here, I drive anyway, so I wish we can have a driver's license.

[00:02:08]

JJ: And it's important for your business, I'm sure, to deliver—.

[00:02:11]

KR: [*Unintelligible*] It's important.

[00:02:13]

JJ: Does family come to visit you very often?

[00:02:17]

KR: Yeah. I'm very lucky that my parents can come. So, they come every year, and sometimes, like days like today, I just call and say, "Should I go back, Mom? I need to make plan to go back," and instead of them to say, "Yes! Come back home," they say, "No! What are you going to do here? It's very dangerous right now. It's not the best time." So, my only hope, and I love this hope, is to be here. I just love Nashville. I just want to drive, safely.

[00:02:52]

JJ: When your family comes, what do you cook for them and what do they think of it?

[00:03:00]

KR: Well, my mom cook for me, most of it. [*Laughs*] When I cook for them I—like filet mignon or salmon. They love it. They think it's—and it is fancy, but I like to treat them like kings. I want them to try the dishes they will never, never dream I can do it, and I do it at home and I love to present it very beautiful, and I just love to see the face of my dad just enjoying the food. It's just funny because all my family in Mexico, it's about food, about moments, about talking at the table, and I just love that.

[00:03:42]

JJ: And your daughter you mentioned, what is her age and what does she like to eat?

[00:03:48]

KR: She is eleven years old and, believe it or not, her favorite dish from me is rice, like chicken broth with rice is her favorite dish. [Also] flautas, chicken flautas, and empanadas, is what she likes.

[00:04:07]

JJ: Do your children enjoy—? So do they have a pretty diverse palate?

[00:04:17]

KR: They do, but I just love—. One of the things that I enjoy so much, my son went to Colorado, like less than a year, to live on his own, and I just love—. He texts me probably once a week, “How can I make the rellenos? What do I need to make the empanadas? How do I—? So he’s texting me to tell these recipes that are mine, so he’s doing it and I love that. I love that he’s doing all the dishes that I do pretty much in my business but also I do for them, and the salsa verde, and everything he asks me and I love that, to know that he’s cooking and he’s enjoying himself with what he learn in home.

[00:05:01]

JJ: Do you feel like Nashville is becoming more of a diverse place, and do you see that in the way people eat and cook, or not?

[00:05:12]

KR: Totally. I think Nashville is becoming—. It’s like a boom of diversity, which I love it, because it’s very good to know about other cultures, about other families, other ways to eat, even other flavors. It’s amazing because I think that way—. I know we have a lot of choices but most important you get to know another culture that sometimes you don’t understand their culture or you don’t know even them, but once you talk to them and you sit at the table with them and then you try their food, it’s amazing to know that we are all—. It doesn’t matter where

you are from. We are all people, and we definitely can be together. It doesn't matter where you come from, what is your color, what is your language. We can all get together friendly.

[00:06:11]

JJ: Okay. I only have a couple more. Is there a situation where you can remember offering food to someone and you feel like they understood who you are better because of the food and the conversation that you had, or a time that that happened?

[00:06:33]

KR: Hmm. [*Pauses*] Wow. Ask me again. [*Laughs*] Sorry. [*Unintelligible*]

[00:06:44]

JJ: That's okay. [*Laughs*] Is there a time when you served a dish and met someone and you feel like that they learned more about you because of the dish that you served?

[00:06:55]

KR: Totally, yes. I have a friend who, she was very old, eighty-nine. She was Jewish and she never try Mexican food, and I made her enchiladas and it just—. She cry. When she was crying I said, "Are you okay? Are they too spicy?" and she say, "No, but I can feel the taste of love," and I just—. That really—. Wow. I think she was eating a lot of like frozen foods for the last five years and she never have like a homemade meal. So I think when you cook for somebody, it doesn't matter exactly the dish, I think food can bring you those feelings that you put in it, because that really have a lot of reactions to people. People can cry, people can remember things when they eat. I'm sure even—and I hear that a long time ago—food and flavors for Alzheimer's, it's a great therapy because that brings memories. So, yes, I have that experience with that lady.

[00:08:15]

JJ: How did you get to know her?

[00:08:17]

KR: She was my neighbor. She was very lonely. She was like by herself and I make friends with her, and I took her sometimes to breakfast, or I took her even dinner from my home. That's how I know her.

[00:08:33]

JJ: Okay. Do you feel like Nashville is home to you now?

[00:08:41]

KR: Definitely. Yeah. Yes. I don't—. I think I want to end hopefully the last day of my life here. I never plan to move anywhere else. Nashville have everything that I love. The people are amazing. The weather, [*Laughs*] I love the weather. Sometimes it's different, but I love it. I love horses, love, love horses, and in Tennessee you can see horses everywhere and I love that. I love the small town feeling that is still in Tennessee, in Nashville, even if it's growing. So, yeah; I think this is my home.

[00:09:26]

JJ: Okay, last question. When you came here for the first time was there a certain thing that happened or a certain thing that you saw that made you feel like, this is where I want to be?

[00:09:38]

KR: It was the cleanness of the city. It was the farms. I was driving from a farm. The people, I guess. The people. It was just everything. Nothing in particular but everything. It was so clean, so organized, so beautiful, yeah.

[00:10:04]

JJ: Okay. Well, I just want to thank you for your time today and for sharing your story.

[00:10:09]

KR: Thank you.

[00:00:10:11]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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