
**Gabriel Medina**

**Subo - Houston, TX**

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Evan Stern: Today is Thursday, May 1st, 2025, it's 3:45 p.m., and we are recording in Houston, Texas. Now, to begin, for the record, could you just tell us your name and occupation?

Gabriel Medina: My name is Gabriel Medina, I am a chef, and I have a concept called Subo, which is a Filipino pop-up.

Evan Stern: Excellent. So, traditionally, I begin my interviews by asking if whomever I'm speaking with could describe for me their childhood homes and talk about where they grew up. But I understand that's kind of a challenging question for you. So, before digging into all of that, I guess I should ask if you could tell us about where your parents are from and what brought them to Houston?

Gabriel Medina: Both of my parents are Filipino. I'm 100% Filipino. My father came here to work for oil and gas. He actually worked for-- let's see-- I think it was he worked for Exxon at first, and then eventually worked with a company called Coastal.

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Coastal was a major oil and gas company. Then my mother, she came here as a nurse, which is one of the biggest expat things that you can do as a Filipino, as a nurse.

Evan Stern: While you were born here, as I understand, you spent many of your formative years in Southeast Asia, and I'd love if you could tell us a little bit about that experience and how it shaped you.

Gabriel Medina: So yes, I lived in the Philippines, and I visited-- having access to the other countries around it, like Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, Kuala Lumpur, having those countries

nearby and having access to them was quite eye-opening. Coming from, I guess you could say, a very quiet life here in America, over there, it's just, when the dollar goes far, people are very open, experiencing new things. I think a lot of it is just there's so much-- it's quite overwhelming, but I loved it. I think traveling in general is a rewarding experience.

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You just learn so much from it.

Evan Stern: How would you say that influenced your palate?

Gabriel Medina: So, being privileged-- and I'm gonna say it, I am privileged, I grew up with a pretty well-off family-- I was able to try foods from every type of culture around there. I think I had a good sense of farm-to-table type foods, fish straight from the ocean, rice from a rice field. A lot of things were quite eye-opening to me. In fact, I guess, now that it's like over 20, 30 years later, I think I've adapted and, I mean, I think I've remembered those things, and I value those things, and I still look for that with the food I work with today.

Evan Stern: You've also said, growing up, that you were privileged to eat at high-end, five-star restaurants as early as like 5 years old.

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Can you tell us about how that maybe impacted your perspective a little bit as well?

Gabriel Medina: Oh man, my father has this thing where he would always tell us when we're eating something, eat it exactly the way the chef made it. Don't put any sauces. Don't take extra salt or pepper. Just have it the way they make it, and then, try the different things. I think eating at high-end, when you're a kid, simple things were fine for you. But, after a while, I mean,

what was simple, for example, steaks, when you're a kid, you think chicken fried steak in America or maybe a steak you would get from a local restaurant or rather a restaurant chain. But when you have a really, really good steak, I think it kind of spoils you. I say that, too, even with some of my clients, some of the people I work with too, it's like the moment you eat really good things, I think it's really hard to be okay with the other stuff, unless it's like you're exhausted. You don't want to think, "I'm just gonna eat this."

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You know, it's not one of those things. But having, again, that privilege and good fortune from my parents, having that helped me taste the world and taste really great restaurants.

Evan Stern: Speaking of taste, though, you've said that street food is what captured your imagination, and you liked it way before it was cool. Why, and what can you tell us about that?

Gabriel Medina: Well, the big thing, I remember the hawker stands in Singapore, the chicken places before they got their Michelin, or *ramenyas* before they got really, really famous. Something about a mom and pop shop that's been doing it for a really long time, sometimes the dish isn't pretty, but it's just naturally good. That's why I love it. It's just so much culture, so much flavor. I've been using the word "reps" a lot, like you're working out. These guys have been doing a lot of reps of just making the same thing over and over and over again.

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They're doing it because it's their job, it's their career. They're not trying to be a Michelin star chef. They're not trying to be a James Beard. They're really not trying to do it for accolades. They're just wanting to make a perfect product, obviously, so they can keep working forever [laughter].

Evan Stern: Do you have a favorite street food memory?

Gabriel Medina: Oh man, that one's a hard one. There's a lot. Favorite street food memory? Ooh. I could say, well, that one's not a street food. That one's more of like-- oh, I can tell you that one later. That one's more of like an experience with food. For street food, oh yeah, in my childhood, we have these little vendors. I was in the Philippines at this time. I spent all my summers in the Philippines. In the town, every morning, there's always a person ringing a bell.

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I think Mexican culture has something similar to this too, where they just ring the bell in the street. When you hear this bell, you know it's food. It's either ice cream, it's either corn. But, for me, it was a particular thing called-- they were called fish balls. All it is are these little fish cakes that are in a skewer. They would fry them as balls first, and then you would dip 'em in this sweet sauce or this chili sauce. My mother hated that I would eat from it because, clearly, it was never-- they didn't really wash those sticks, and people were double-dipping in sauces. But I loved it. It was so simple, so cheap, and it was so, yeah, it was just delicious. I love things like that where it's just, you know, it was very nostalgic for me. So, after loving those things as a kid, and also knowing that I have an iron stomach, I can handle a lot of things, I'm happy to eat street food everywhere I go.

Evan Stern: Yeah, you have to have an iron stomach for stuff like that sometimes.

Gabriel Medina: [Laughter]

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Evan Stern: Speaking of childhood, what did you wanna be when you grew up?

Gabriel Medina: Oh man, as a Houston-born kid with NASA-- rest in peace, Challenger-- all those stories, I grew up, I loved physics and I was pretty good at it in school. When I got older, well, actually, when I was younger, I'd always wanted to be either an astronaut, 'cause Houston; maybe a firefighter, 'cause I absolutely respect them and it's such a job of fighting fires and saving people's lives; or probably doing charity work. That's actually my big thing, actually [laughter].

Evan Stern: But then you end up pursuing a career initially in finance and then, as I understand, you make a pretty sharp hard right into cooking [laughter].

Gabriel Medina: Yeah.

Evan Stern: What can you tell us about that?

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Gabriel Medina: So, I was not good in the field of finance or in business school or anything like that. I wasn't in that industry. I wasn't good enough. It was terrible. When I came back to Houston-- a funny story-- when I came back to Houston, I was with my cousin. She was going to the Art Institute, and she wanted to go check out the classes, so I went with her. We looked at the space. I thought about it. She was doing there-- I think she was there for like fashion, but I saw that there was a culinary program. About a week or two later, I was at a bar, and I was drinking with this chef. I didn't know he was a chef. We just got along so well. One day, he just told me, "Hey, why don't you come meet my chef?" Like, "What? Okay." Went over, and it turned out to be a master chef at Houston Country Club. Met him. Interviewed with him.

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He asked me how much I like to cook, and I ended up signing up with him, and immediately, two weeks later, signing up for culinary school. My father hated that [laughter].

Evan Stern: I was gonna ask about that. Your dad hated it, huh [laughter]?

Gabriel Medina: Yeah. Actually, this is the funny part about the story. He did not talk to me for like an entire year. It was pretty bad. So, Tiger parent, you know, tough parent, wanted you to succeed in the business field or whatever, be a doctor or a businessman. It wasn't until Christmas after he had come home, and I was making Christmas dinner. I had made a thing called a Beef Wellington, if you remember Gordon Ramsay. This is early 2000. Beef Wellington was super popular. Beef Wellington is a wrapped dough around a nice tenderloin, with like a mushroom *duxelle*. I made that for him, he cut it open, and he sat there in quiet. He's like, "This is good." [Laughter]

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From then on, like, 'cause he's a steak guy. I guess 'cause he was in oil and gas, and he's a Texan, he's a steak man. But, after that, I just got so much approval from him. He's just boasting to all his friends, being proud of who I am [laughter].

Evan Stern: Well, food is the way into people's hearts and minds, definitely. But you start off at the Houston Country Club. What can you tell us about that experience?

Gabriel Medina: I 100% recommend anyone starting off in the food industry, start off in a hotel or a country club or any of those large format style services where they have massive budgets. You might not get paid well, but you have all the opportunity to work many different stations. You can work in the butcher shop. You can work in pastry. You can work *garde manger*.

The very classic, sometimes French techniques or American techniques, but they're so drilled into you, it's so repetitive.

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There's so many times, like, you know, I can make a massive vat of hollandaise. Back then, I'm talking about, like, maybe not like a giant 100-gallon thing like they do in the machines, but I can make a big vat of hollandaise like I could then, like I can do it now, is what I'm trying to say. There's so many foundational cookings you get from it, aside from culinary school. But I 100% recommend it. I think I've met some really talented people, who've gone through that same process too, and I didn't realize it, and it is like, oh, this makes sense now. I know [laughter] where you come from and why you cook like that.

Evan Stern: But what would you say, you're working there at the country club, and you're getting deeper and deeper into food, I mean, what-- if I were to talk to the guy who was working there in that kitchen, I mean, what was your ultimate dream and vision at that point?

Gabriel Medina: Oh, that's easy.

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When I started cooking, the first and foremost thing that I wanted to do was open up a Filipino restaurant.

[Unrelated conversation]

I've always wanted to open a Filipino restaurant. In order to do so, I wanted to learn the foundations of French cooking and American cooking. I needed structure and organization. After coming from a field of working, of studying of, you know, textbooks and trying to be organized,

especially with learning accounting and finance and all that stuff, I wanted structure to help me get there. So, in order for me to do that, I started a little bit later in my life, I had to hit the ground running, get a job with a renowned chef, and just never look back. So, I'm sorry, I'm kind of--

Evan Stern: No. It's perfectly fine. Do what you gotta do.

Gabriel Medina: Sorry. Ask me that question one more time.

Evan Stern: What was your ultimate dream, and go back there-- yeah.

Gabriel Medina: I'm meandering, sorry.

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Evan Stern: No, that's quite all right. Trust me, you're doing great [laughter].

Gabriel Medina: So, from there, I just learned a whole bunch of foundations because, eventually, ultimately, I wanna open a Filipino restaurant. Then that's what led me into working into Japanese food. Kata Robata, probably one of the best sushi restaurants at the time, a man named Hori was there, Manabu Horiuchi. He's a really tough cat, but I learned a lot of fundamentals of Japanese cooking. Why Japanese cooking? Because, like the French format, you know, the French had the French Brigade, the Japanese also had their very formal way of training, too, for everything from sushi, hot foods. They had books, like, you could just follow, you can learn their system routines, SOPs, they're just like a standard-- sorry, the word is standardization. There are standardized recipes for Japanese cooking, standardized recipes in French cooking.

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By following those things, that academia side of it, that's eventually what I wanna do with Filipino food, is I really want to take kind of some of those practices that I have, and just kind of see what I can do towards-- try to push Filipino food into that kind of light. Now, there are plenty of Filipino restaurants out there that are like that but, at the time, in Houston, Texas, there were no Filipino food. There was no Filipino restaurants. They're just the disciplines that I can get from the best people possible.

Evan Stern: That's interesting to hear, because in a city as diverse as Houston, you would think that there would've been Filipino restaurants, even back then. I will just ask, too, before asking aga…you know, I wanna move on from there, definitely. But I should ask, you have traveled all over the world, I mean, you do end up working as the chef de cuisine at Kata Robata.

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Then, after that, you do study in Tokyo at a Michelin-starred restaurant, to further your education there. Yet you decided very early to build a life and career in Houston. So, what is it that drew you back here, and what is it that keeps you here?

Gabriel Medina: After living in other places, I think it's always been the community here. It is hard to leave home, but I feel like I've built so many relationships here. Between chefs like Chris Shepherd, I mean, you just did that video with him, or Horiuchi, or Seth, it's just there's such a great community here, and I wanna learn from them. I feel like, by building more relationship with them, and also meeting the new people that are starting up here too, it's kind of exciting.

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Part of it's like family, I guess you could say, is also here too. I kinda have a place here already. I'm not super well known or really famous or anything like that, but I'm pretty comfortable with-- not comfortable. I think I'm in a pretty good place, I would say.

Evan Stern: If you were to describe Houston to someone who's never been here before, what would you say?

Gabriel Medina: Be ready to eat. When I mean ready to eat, there's restaurants at every corner. I always tell people, if you're coming to Houston, aside from barbecue, aside from Tex-Mex or, rather, Mexican food-- sorry, Mexican food, then Tex-Mex; Tex-Mex is great too-- we have a really great Vietnamese culture, food scene. I think-- and I say this to other chefs or anyone asking me about why I'm trying to do Filipino food here-- I think it's because we have such a huge Vietnamese community here, we have access to a lot of Southeast Asian ingredients.

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You know, *rau răm*, which is Vietnamese coriander, Vietnamese mint, spices, aromatics, galangal, we have access to almost every kind of spectrum of Southeast Asian spice and aromatic that it's actually pretty easy for me to try to do Filipino food here because of those things. I think those are some of the things that make it fortunate enough. So, when people come to Houston, I want them to just come, be ready to eat, and also be ready for the heat [laughter]. The heat can be bad right now, but it's still a great place to eat.

Evan Stern: Speaking of heat, the heat in the kitchen is intense. On paper, chef de cuisine, that sounds like quite a prestigious, enviable title. But the reality of it is, it's incredibly hard work, ate hours, you know, just incredible stress.

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You're rarely present when people are sitting at the table, experiencing your labor. So, what was it and maybe still is it about that work that fueled you?

Gabriel Medina: Can you repeat the question?

Evan Stern: So, what is it, yeah, what was it that, you know, as I'm saying it, chef de cuisine, that's a hard job. It's a lot of hard work. What was it about that work that fueled you, that gave you inspiration?

Gabriel Medina: Oh, I guess, as a chef de cuisine, you are allowed to create dishes. You help dictate and design the menu. While I was a chef de cuisine there, funny enough, I got to try doing some Filipino food with Hori in a Japanese restaurant. One of the best stories that I remember is I tried to do this dish made from oxtail. It's called *kare-kare*, which is this peanut and oxtail stew.

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I tried to make it there, and I had this broth, and I made the oxtail broth and base, and then I used it-- we tried to do a ramen with it. Then we made this broth. Then this one day-- this is probably one of those, I guess, highlights of your career type thing-- one of the servers-- we had put it on the menu, okay, we'd put it on as one of the specials. One of the servers had called me to come meet this elderly woman. She wanted to ask to meet me. I just walked outside. Beautiful, sweet, elderly woman, silver hair. She was really kind, and she wanted to thank me. She's like, "This oxtail soup was really, really good." She had thanked me because, she said, it was pretty much something her, like, it tasted something like her grandma would make. So, for me, I just got like the goosebumps. For me, it just clicked in my head that, being a chef de cuisine there, making these dishes, I learned a lot that food is very global.

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It's crosses cultures. This is kinda weird to say this, but I always try to cook by association, meaning, this is an oxtail dish; even though it's Filipino, it's very Southern, it's also very African, and it crosses multiple borders and multiple cultures. So, ever since then, while being a chef de cuisine, when I make dishes, I always kinda try to make sure that there's some sort of understanding to it. Like, how do I explain anything, like, any dish I come to, to someone who's never heard about that food? I try to, at least, present in a light that's, I guess you could say, yeah, just by association in the sense of, like, something they can kind of recognize to some degree, but 100% Filipino or 100% Latin American or 100% Japanese.

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That was one of the, I guess, biggest takeaways of being a chef de cuisine, and having that kind of responsibility at probably one of the number one Japanese restaurants in Houston at the time.

Evan Stern: But, I guess, if I were to go back in time to, say, 2011, and tell that chef de cuisine at Kata Robata that 14 years later, you'd be running a food stall at a farmers market, how do you think that guy would've reacted?

Gabriel Medina: I would've been happy with myself, still doing Filipino food. But, between then and now, there was a lot that I learned. There's a lot of loss. There's a lot of sacrifice. I think one of the big things, especially during the pandemic, as we learned, there's some things you just can't sacrifice. I think everyone learned to have a little bit more work-life balance. I think it was like a cultural norm across every single industry that people learn to have, you know, understand like, yes, you can work this much, but you also need to have time for other things, too, your life, your personal life, your family, your friends.

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I think that old self, to me, now, of course, I would've put my money in other places or made investments in certain places but, at the same time, too, tough times make tough people. So, that's the only way I would've become the person I am now.

Evan Stern: Towards that matter, I'd love if you could just tell us a little bit about what led to Subo and what you're doing now.

Gabriel Medina: As I said before, I was trying to focus on-- I've always just wanted to do Filipino food. I had a restaurant right before this. It was Virtual Food Hall. It was super busy during the pandemic 'cause everything was takeout and delivery. I had 10 concepts in there at one time, and we were just nuts. It was just so busy, it was exhausting. My wife wanted to help me, bless her heart, and her and I had a really hard time trying to run it together, which was fine.

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We learned from it. But, in the end, afterwards, I told myself, you know what, I've opened restaurants for other people. I've tried different restaurants for myself. I've tried different things. I think I need to focus on the rest of my life doing what I was really trying to do, and that's focus on Filipino food: teaching it, educating it, getting people to understand it, try it, love it and, as I said before too, get my reps in. So, doing it at the farmers market's been awesome, because I can continuously practice. I can let people try Filipino food. Also, importantly, I get to work with some really great farmers. I can get some of the, like, every Saturday morning before the market opens, I literally walk up to different vendors. Sometimes I text 'em a day before or a few days before or even the week before, and I just grab it. Like, this week, it's squash blossoms. Last week, sorry, these past two weeks have been squash blossoms.

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There's squash blossoms everywhere. So, I'm cooking that down in a stew with tons of greens and vegetables. Again, I can practice doing Filipino dishes using these really great vegetables. I divert, sorry, I mean-- but, sorry, what was the question again?

Evan Stern: No, that's all right. I was asking if you could just talk about what led you to open Subo, which you touched on and you were touching on. For the uninitiated, what does Subo mean?

Gabriel Medina: So, Subo is kind of like the act of feeding someone with your hand, kinda like you're spoon-feeding a child. The example of this is, like, if I'm sitting down on the couch when I was like 5 years old, my grandmother, she would peel an orange for me. She would take the orange, and she would hand it to my mouth. Like, the hand-to-mouth thing is the whole form of Subo. It's very endearing. It's very sweet. It's also something that also happens in a lot of other cultures too.

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Subo means feeding others with your hands or endearingly feeding them with a nurturing way. I chose the name Subo because, one, I want to spoon-feed people about my culture [laughter]. I want to teach people more about Filipino food. I want to let them try the food. But eventually, too, I want to tie the business to something that I told you before. I love doing charity work, and that was something I've always wanted to do, ever since I was a child. My last restaurant, we did charity work, too, with a company called Kids' Meals here in Houston. Basically, they provide nutrient-dense food for underprivileged children who can't get healthy foods. Instead of fast food

or just sandwiches or basic sandwiches, Kids' Meals provides food for thousands of children every single day around Houston.

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That's why I wanna tie Subo to that, because whatever-- when we are, I guess, super profitable or when I have a business that's more up and running, I definitely wanna do anything it takes to help children in need, whether feed them, get them education, maybe get them medical help. If I can find something along the way that could help children, then I'd be very content with my life and very content with what I'm doing.

Evan Stern: Specifically, though, what aspects, I mean, you talk about Filipino cooking, what aspects of Filipino cooking are you showcasing through Subo?

Gabriel Medina: So, right now, at the farmers market, it's only breakfast. However, I still do caterings and events. I actually have an event with Asia Society-- here's my plug-- Asia Society around, I think, August 2nd is the date we're doing this massive *kamayan*. A *kamayan* is this large spread of food, where it's a community of people.

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It could be neighbors, strangers, friends, sitting literally side-by-side down a row, and we just put an entire smorgasbord of different foods that they eat. Now, traditionally, kamayans are types of food that you could have during fiestas, which are parties or events, or if you're on a beach somewhere in the Philippines, and the boatman just drops you off on an island, and makes you a really good meal. That's the story I wanted to tell you, just that fact itself too. By doing these kamayans or doing the farmers market, Subo has given me the opportunity to practice Filipino food, but also on a side note, too, it's also helped me kinda get more in touch with my other

Filipino chefs here in Houston. There are a number of pop-ups, a number of chefs that are coming up here in Houston, and I want to grow with them. I want to help them, just like they wanna help me.

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I think, as I said before, Houston's got a really great community. We are a little big town, I guess you could say, in the food industry. When it comes to Filipino chefs, we're already family. We 100% support each other. We 100% lift each other up. I think that's kind of a thing, a generational thing with Filipinos now, which is a different topic.

Evan Stern: That's okay, believe me, that's okay. Trust me. But I do think, if I'm not mistaken, you do have kind of a specific concept right now with how Subo works, as far as what the guest orders and how the dishes are put together. Could you tell us about that?

Gabriel Medina: Right now, at the farmers market, you can come in at 8 a.m. to noon every Saturday. I use fresh produce to make some of the dishes. Basically, with a Filipino breakfast, you get a choice of rice, white rice, garlic rice, or *pandesal*, which is like a *pan de mie*, milk bread-- not a milk bread, a *pan de mie* bread, and then an egg and a choice of protein with a small salad and some pickles.

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Our breakfast consists of that, either sweet pork, meat, fish, or if you-- we don't do this at Subo, but really, traditionally, Filipino is leftover food from the night before cooked with rice and egg [laughter]. That's our old-school way of having Filipino. But, otherwise, it's usually a protein, egg, and rice.

Evan Stern: What was the first day at the market like when you first opened?

Gabriel Medina: We received a lot of great feedback. A lot of people came out the first day of the market. I think I wasn't anticipating that many people coming out, and how long the lines were. It was very hot. It was like the end of summer.

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The setup, I've always been very particular how to set up things, making sure-- trying to be as efficient as possible. Proper prior planning prevents piss-poor performance [laughter]. So, I had planned with only one Sterno, one little butane stove, one induction stove, and then a griddle, thinking-- oh, sorry, not even a griddle-- thinking that this would be enough, that if I cook slowly at a time, it would be great. It wasn't the case first day. With this little pan and whatever space I had, everything took so long. People were standing in the sun, and I felt so bad. My wife, bless her, wanted to help me or, rather, I got her to help me. She came in, and she was livid [laughter], maybe not at the event, but it was just with me [laughter], as wives should be. It was chaos, but people were very kind and patient.

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Being in the hospitality industry, we had to apologize as much as possible, but we learned from the first day. Now, we're very efficient. We're very considerate. I have quite a bit of stoves and quite a bit of setup. Still busy, but not as busy as I'd like to be right now--

Evan Stern: We'll hopefully get--

Gabriel Medina: --'cause it's hot--

Evan Stern: Hopefully, we'll get there.

Gabriel Medina: --'cause it's hot right now.

Evan Stern: It's hot. Obviously, you came to this project with a vast amount of experience but, in many ways, it's pretty different than a lot of jobs you've previously had. Building from there, are there any challenges you've faced in getting Subo off the ground? Have you ever had any moments where you've asked, "What am I doing?"?

Gabriel Medina: [Laughter] Yeah, because I have a Japanese background in training, formal training, my wife is Japanese, she even tells me, you know, sometimes I think I should just do a *donburi*, like a Japanese rice bowl concept.

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It's very simple, it's recognizable, and it's easy to do but, I mean, it's not easy to do, it's just there's not much of that in Houston, and it's something I really love making and doing. However, this is where your passion kinda conflicts with your logic sometimes, and I still-- just like how I started, I'm very committed to my vision. I still have to and want to do Filipino food. It's been really difficult. It's been really difficult. It's an uphill battle because not a lot of people know about Filipino food, but that's okay. I'm fighting that battle. I said before, too, there's a community of people fighting that battle. I have friends in different cities, who are doing very well, who are fighting that battle, too, and just trying to uplift each other, and teach more people about Filipino food.

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Evan Stern: Towards that matter, it is, you know, although you are the face, it is, Subo was very much a group effort, and it's not a one-man show, and you began working the booth with your niece, Maddie. What can you tell us about her?

Gabriel Medina: [Laughter] My niece Maddie is on the spectrum. I had a conversation with my sister, which is my niece's mother, obviously [laughter]. My sister's gonna hear this, and gonna laugh at me.

Evan Stern: [Laughter] That's fine.

Gabriel Medina: I had a conversation with my sister. My sister has been wanting to do something for my niece for a while. My niece loves *boba*. *Boba* is bubble tea. Maddy, she agreed to do it. So, this market is an opportunity for her to kinda practice being self-sufficient, practice a craft, practice some sort of trade skill.

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So, on our Saturdays-- on Fridays, she makes all her teas. She makes her-- her father helps her make the bubbles, the *boba*, every Saturday morning. It's a good opportunity for her to learn. She doesn't care about money; she's not like that. She likes *boba*, and we're just trying to give her that opportunity to have a future for herself. Luckily, she has a mother who loves her, and a father too that loves her. Her mother had caught her autism early on, so she had early intervention. In fact, she's worked with so many doctors and people on the spectrum. She even opened up a gym, that she ended up selling, called We Rock the Spectrum, which was like a playpen for children on the spectrum.

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"A place that they can never say sorry," was their motto. So, she's very patient. My sister is the most patient person in the world. Back in the day, when Maddy had more melt…well, Maddy still has her meltdowns every once in a while. But if you can imagine a yelling child or a screaming child, my sister is very calm, talking to her, like, just helping, like, a therapist, just

kind of like unraveling every single thread, one at a time, trying to help break it down. She's a saint [laughter], and Maddy is so lucky to have a mother like that. So, that being said, we agreed that this would be an opportunity for Maddy to have a place to practice her craft, maybe find some sort of love for it.

Evan Stern: Well, I think that's wonderful. When you find that craft, the money follows, even if she doesn't care about money. If she loves that *boba* [laughter], the profits will find her.

0:36:00

I would love to talk about some of the dishes that you make. First of all, if I'm not mistaken, every day you prepare a stew. Tell us about that.

Gabriel Medina: So, the dish is called *gising-gising*. It's a coconut chili stew. *Gising-gising* comes from Pampanga, which is like this northern region of the-- central northern region of Luzon, which is the main island. But, also, it's available similar in a region called Bicol, which is known for its coconut. That dish, at first, had a lot of fermented shrimp paste, Thai chilies, and coconut. I just take a whole bunch of vegetables, stew it down, and cook it together, whatever I get in the market. Eventually, I've gotten a number of vegans that I just cook it with the Thai chili instead by itself and some aromatics, and I leave, I omit the shrimp paste. I actually put the shrimp paste on the side if they ask for it. It's this really fun dish, and I could send you pictures about it.

0:37:01

But every Saturday, it's different. Again, right now, it's got squash blossoms in it, and squash, and gourd, and kale, and leafy greens. When we started last year, at the end of the summer last year, it had okra, green beans, eggplants, tomatoes. So, it varies with the season. This next iteration of

my menu that I'm working on, I've learned to embrace that, because I have this good fortune of being at the farmers market, I need to do more vegetables. By doing that, it checks off a couple of things for me. One, I get my reps in for Filipino food. Two, I also get to work with some really great farmers. I think that's the fun thing, too, about being in the farmers market is just getting personal with them, getting personal with nature, understanding what's, you know--

[Unrelated conversation]

0:38:00

Evan Stern: Before we were so rudely interrupted, I think that you were talking about the access to fresh vegetables that you have at the market, and how you've been incorporating it into your dishes. I think that's what you were going to say.

Gabriel Medina: Oh yes, yes. I was talking specifically about the farmers. Going out to their farms, it's not always like you would think it is like in the films or the movies, like big, massive fields. Sometimes it's on a fertile piece of land in between homes, between neighborhoods, between, you know, especially in an urban setting, you can't really get that much big land out here.

0:39:03

But going out to those farms, and just feeling the weather, and knowing how hot it is, and seeing how these vegetables and these produce, what it looks like from its earth. I think I learned this from a friend of mine Justin Yu, and I can quote him from this. Pretty much, when you get a fresh vegetable from the earth, it's still very vibrant. You can still taste its life force. Fresh okra is incredible versus sitting in the grocery store for like three or four weeks. The grocery store might be hard, fibrous. When it's straight plucked from the plant, there is this flavor you can't get from

anywhere else. You can still taste, again, the vibrance, the life force, the juice, the nourishment, the nourishment it was getting from the plant. So, they're very flavorful and not one-sided, I mean, not one-flavored.

0:40:00

What do you say? It's not even like a base flavor; just there's so many layers. They're much more complex, and you can appreciate it. Like, fresh, ripened tomatoes, for those people that grow their own tomatoes at home, I totally get why, because it's so sweet, so perfect, and you just can't beat that, especially if it's on your fingertips. Then there's also that feeling of growing it yourself or seeing it. After working with them, it's just so hard, it's just so hard to try to use other ingredients unless you have to because of certain dishes. If I can use local food, I'll try to, as long as it's within a reasonable price range [laughter]. That's also what matters too.

Evan Stern: But, I wonder, since you got on that topic, I was wondering if you could tell us about some of the relationships you forged with some of the farmers who work at the market, and how that's impacted your work.

0:41:00

Gabriel Medina: I can name a couple. So, when I first went to Urban Harvest Farmers Market, this is more than-- this is back in 2011, I had gone there, and there was this guy named David Cater. He had this one stall called Utility Research Garden. He doesn't do this anymore. I think he grows bamboos now. But I remember being a chef de cuisine at the time, and looking for something new and exotic or exciting. It was between him and this woman named Gita from Animal Farm that always had these really unique items that you normally don't see from the produce calls you call from produce companies like Chef's Produce or Brothers Produce. These

are things that you would see in very high-end restaurants. They didn't have, like, mizuna bef…these guys, David and Gita, they had exotic mushrooms, exotic greens, exotic vegetables. Wasabina is everywhere now, but they didn't have it then before. Mizuna, purple wasabina, green-- they had so many great things that were really exciting to work with and put salads with.

0:42:04

They were great garnishes. They made sense. They weren't just like flowers on a plate. I mean, they did grow flowers, too, way before, like, there was that famous New York one. I forget its name. It's known for their microgreens. But you could get all these things, and it was really exciting. Back then, after I had that experience, I've always tried to come back. Every restaurant I ever worked at afterwards, or when I do pop-ups and dinners, I love going back to the Urban Harvest Farmers Market, particularly because there's always something exciting there. I still feel that's the case now, especially right now. Over time, some of the vendors had to go or they left on their own. But, every once in a while, we have a younger generation kinda starting stuff. There were some mushroom guys that were there recently. They're really cool. But I think one of them ended up going to grad school, so he had to stop his practice.

0:43:02

Another one was Good Time Farm. I think it was Good Time Farm. Really good stuff, really unique things. Sorry, I divert. I go off a little bit.

Evan Stern: That's okay.

Gabriel Medina: But one of the things that I noticed is, over time, when I was going to the farmers market, you know, as farmers, it's great to be selling to chefs, it's kinda cool, but chefs aren't very consistent with them all the time. There are very few people who are consistent.

Again, Justin Yu from Theodore Rex, T-Rex, super solid. I know Seth Siegel-Gardner, when he was at Pass & Provisions, he was super solid back then, too. There are very few people who are very consistent from ordering from them. But that wasn't enough for farmers to keep growing those things, so they had to-- I've noticed that there was this while, a short while, there was quite a long while, where a lot of those farmers had to just grow the most basic things that regular Saturday morning people knew, squash, tomatoes, green beans, okras, the standard things.

0:44:02

But going back to what I was saying before is that, every once in a while, there are a few people from different generations or different age groups or different people, who come back and bring that exciting stuff. Right now, there is this guy, his name is Van. He is a Burmese farmer who also works for Plant it Forward. He's got some really cool stuff. He has some really great greens, some Southeast Asian greens, some giant micro cilantro flowers, and beautiful squash. He's really cool. Those are the type of things that make me really excited, because it's something different out of the norm. As a chef, I wanna support him, and I want those things more around, so I try to buy it every time. Like, the squash blossoms, like, there's one woman named Claudette, she's great. She's also Filipino. She knows that I want the squash blossoms, so I just walk up, and she just gives them to me. She knows I'm there for that and I can use 'em right then and there, and I'm so thankful.

0:45:00

Again, it's those relationships I built with them, and me wanting to try to get them, try to encou…also, it's a symbiotic thing, where we just try to help each other out the same way, too, and I wanna see more of that. I wanna see more exciting things that that market offers. I will say,

Urban Harvest is the best produce market, I think, when it comes to farmers markets here in Houston. I wasn't paid to say that, by the way.

Evan Stern: [Laughter] I believe it. I know another vendor that you have forged a working relationship as well is Constant Ngoula. You recently shared a video of yourself, where you visited the land that he farms out on Fondren Road. You talk about a plot of land that appears just in the middle of the city, I mean, that's pretty much it. What were you doing there? What can you tell us about that and your relationship with Constant?

Gabriel Medina: So, I think, as I said before, my motto towards Filipinos is that we lift each other up.

0:46:01

I think everyone in the Houston community, I think we kinda do that already here, too. We really try to lift each other up. I wanted to showcase him because, one, I wanted to see those awesome vegetables. I wanted people to see those great things that you can get here in Houston. They're not specialty orders. They're not, like, unique things you find in Portland, Oregon, which is amazing produce, or New York, which has all the money in the world to get whatever kind of produce. It's just stuff that you can get, that's accessible, that's here in Houston. I wanted to show him. I wanted to show-- I wanted to talk about Plant it Forward and their mission, how they try to get foreigners, immigrants, who want to be farmers, and get them to grow their own farms kind of like they did back home.

0:47:00

They already have that skill set, they already really get it, and they're growing really great things, and Constant is a perfect example of it. Man, his okra is the best, so when summertime comes

around, please buy his okra. It is perfect. It's great for frying. It's great for stewing. It's great for eating raw. I didn't even know you could eat okra raw. We would just snap it and just start eating it there. It's extra delicious. You could definitely make it a *crudo* if you wanted to. I mean, I've had it raw before, too, but, again, it's usually fibrous, but this is perfect. It's come back to that, you know, you could taste the life force in it.

Evan Stern: Absolutely. I will ask, too, I mean, Constant works with Plant it Forward, and are there any ways that you can tell us about how these growers, refugee growers, maybe not even just with Plant it Forward, but growers from these other backgrounds, like Africa, have influenced, have helped impact Houston menus or the food scene here?

0:48:02

I mean, do you see evidence of them on menus every now and then?

Gabriel Medina: Oh, 100% local farmers. Now, for example, like Van, the Burmese chef, Vietnamese food is huge in Houston, and there are a lot of Vietnamese farmers. Those herbs, those greens, those vegetables, those everything, you find them on every-- in a lot of food cultures. Culantro is very well known, and it's trendy [laughter], but it's definitely part of the food culture that we're so fortunate to have because of these immigrants and these foreigners. That is privilege, to be honest. With terroir-- I can't say it--

Evan Stern: Terroir, yeah.

Gabriel Medina: Terroir, with ter…I'mma get laughed at for that.

Evan Stern: [Laughter]

0:48:58

Gabriel Medina: With terroir, you're only limited to what the Earth can create for you and make for you here in Houston. But when you have a skill set that's capable of farming that specific herb or those vegetables, in a similar climate to where they grew up or what they worked with or what they know, you are able to make something really delicious, unique, magical. It's the kind of food that the Third Coast, as in the Gulf Coast-- we call it Third Coast down here. I call it Third Coast. Actually, some of our chef friends call it Third Coast. It's one of the unique things about working or eating down here is because of those unique things you can get. I know, for a fact, some of that stuff's really expensive. Some of the things, like the greens and vegetables, are hard to-- are expensive in New York. I have friends that talk about how expensive they have to get it, and where it comes from. I think, man, I'm pretty lucky. Just like crawfish. Crawfish is a great example. Much cheaper down here.

0:50:00

Up there, it's like $22 a pound, much smaller. Bless your heart, guys, bless your heart [laughter].

Evan Stern: But, if I'm not mistaken, did I see that you have cooked with Roselle before, or did I make that up? I might be totally mistaken.

Gabriel Medina: Which one is Roselle?.

Evan Stern: It's okay. Obviously, I was-- I confused my mind.

Gabriel Medina: Is Roselle a person or–?

Evan Stern: No. It's like a vegetable. It's some kind of a green, I believe, that grows. I think I'm mistaken about that.

Gabriel Medina: Let me double-check.

Evan Stern: No, no, no, no.

Gabriel Medina: [Laughter]

Evan Stern: Don't worry about this. My mind, I think--

Gabriel Medina: No, no, no, that's okay.

Evan Stern: I think I--

Gabriel Medina: It might be called something else to me.

Evan Stern: But, I think, towards this matter, I mean, I think something that we're hitting on here is I've been to a lot of restaurants where I've opened menus and seen fusion dishes that read as purely experimental. But I feel like that really happens organically here in Houston.

0:51:01

You made a dish recently that featured corned beef brisket. What can you tell us about that, its history, and then the usage of brisket in that dish?

Gabriel Medina: So, corned beef is very Filipino, like, we grew up eating it. This is a result that we were once a naval colony for America, technically a colony. We had Douglas MacArthur there, and they had all their naval bases. With them, they brought Spam-- we love Spam-- corned beef, Vienna sausage, all the American classics. They just grew on us, and we loved it. Corned beef is, like, it's not a big, well-known thing with other people about foreigners or anyone that doesn't know about our food. But, again, that was an example of that association.

0:52:00

The day I launched that corned beef thing was also the same time St. Paddy's Day was around. We were celebrating St. Paddy's. People are celebrating St. Paddy's Day. I didn't know this was a tradition, but it was coincident. People were ordering the corned beef because on St. Paddy's Day, you're supposed to eat corned beef. I didn't know that. So, corned beef is such a big staple in our heart. The *kare-kare* is this peanut dish that I grew up eating. I wanted to present a dish. Again, normally it's oxtails or some sort of beef or fermented shrimp paste. But if you see corn…as someone who doesn't know Filipino food, and sees corned beef on a menu, like, actual corned beef, you know, I think people in the Northeast definitely know corned beef, like, pastrami and corned beef. Like, it's part of your life, sandwiches and breakfasts and everything. But in the South, only-- actually, yeah, it's still pretty part of the Southern culture too. But, anyway, by putting that on a menu, and then also kind of sliding in what Filipino food is, too, they're excited to try it.

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In that way, it's exciting. I'm happy because, one, I know that the dish is good, which no big ego there [laughter]. But, two, it's just comforting, and it makes me happy that someone enjoys it as much as I do, or as much as my people or Filipinos enjoy it. Then when a Filipino comes along and eats it, they're just like, "This is so good," because, again, there's that nostalgia, that association, that childhood memory, kind of like the lady. There's something about it that, again, crosses borders and mixes into cultures. That dish was just something fun. I think every Filipino chef likes to make-- every Filipino chef tries to make a version of *kare-kare* that's kind of a little more modern, kind of presentable. A friend did one with octopus and *kare-kare*, which was really good.

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A place in Chicago did theirs with peanut, too, which was really good too. Again, it was just something I wanted to do. I don't think I quite solved it yet, how to make the perfect *kare-kare* in that kind of mindset, but I'm still learning and I'm still, again, getting those reps in.

Evan Stern: But, I guess, back to the reps and everything, I would love if you could just briefly take us through your day from start to finish on Saturdays, whenever the booth is open.

Gabriel Medina: So, if you ever work a farmers market or interested in doing a farmers market, be ready to be up by like 5 or 5.30 a.m. You spend the day before kinda prepping and *mise en place*-ing everything, making sure everything's okay. Then 5, 5:30 in the morning, you'd be ready to load up. Luckily, they have power there so I can start cooking my rice there. Load up, get there before the crack of dawn, which is really nice.

0:55:00

I love mornings because it's so peaceful, it's quiet, it's calm, and it's not hot here in Houston in the morning. It takes me about probably like 20 minutes, 15, 20 minutes to get there, then about probably a good solid hour of me setting up, setting up tents, cutting vegetables, then make my tour around the market to meet up with the farmers, kind of chit-chat with some people. We've all become like a community there, too, because we definitely chat with each other. I'm going to drop his name. His name is Antonio from Kanto [laughter]. I love him. He's one of our neighbors. I love chatting it up with them. So, my morning is setting up, chatting with my community, getting to know everyone, catching up with everyone, checking in on everyone, everyone's mental health, and then being ready to open up. We open up at 8, but people show up at 7. If they want something, we're gonna give it to 'em.

0:56:01

There are some diehard farmers market people who are on cue, like, 7 o'clock, ready to go, because they get the fir…they usually get the first pick, which is, I don't blame them, like, really good pick. If not me [laughter], 'cause I steal all the really good stuff first, like flowers or certain greens, there's usually enough for them to get some good pickings, too.

Evan Stern: So, then when does it end, you know, when does your day end there?

Gabriel Medina: Well, although it's just a four-hour shift, there's quite a lot going on, a lot of talking, cooking, communicating, getting to know people. Just like in a restaurant setting, it's still hospitality. I think I spend a good-- my wife and I, especially my wife, she's really great at this. We spend a good deal of time talking to them, just getting-- "them" as in the customers, learning about them, learning their walks of life.

0:57:00

I think the farmers market's like a good town center. It's like a good town center, where we can all just chat, catch up, get to know people, some really beautiful people that go to that market, and it really absolutely makes my day going there. When we finish around noon, 12 o'clock, by that time, the sun's already out, and we're ready to go. People still trickle in. We still try to serve them. It's still a cool experience. Then, afterwards, it's the cleanup, and there's a lot of cleanup there. Usually, at the market, I'm constantly washing my pans. I have soap and water, constantly washing my plans, for hygienic purposes [laughter]. Once I get home, that's where the deep cleaning starts. It just so happens, too, when I start doing the deep cleaning at home, also the commissary where I take some of my stuff to, once I get that going, it's for a good few hours.

0:58:01

Evan Stern: But why are places like Urban Harvest important?

Gabriel Medina: So, I think Urban Harvest is very important, not just for the food scene for Houston but just the general culture of Houston. I think every city should have a place kind of like Pike's Place in Seattle or Borough Market in London. I think places like that are very important because we need to be more connected to our farmers, the land, also the community. Everyone in a farmers market is local. There are no major names, major businesses. Because we're local, the money we make there stays in the community, stays with us.

0:59:01

I think because people are so used to major corporations, and easily shopping at Walmart or major grocery stores, the convenience has grown. The need for convenience has been more powerful than our need to kind of support each other or the need to build a community together. I feel like that kind of gets separated. Grocery stores like H-E-P, they always talk about community, community, community. I think that's what the farmers market itself is, is community, yeah, it's community [laughter].

Evan Stern: What are your hopes for the future?

Gabriel Medina: For which one?

Evan Stern: Well, I guess we could start off with, what are the hopes for Subo, and where would you like to be in 10 years?

1:00:01

Gabriel Medina: For Subo, I would love to have a restaurant again someday; just not right now. Finances are so weird these days. I think everyone knows what's going on. Markets are real crazy. But, again, my passion, my heart's desire, my vision will always be towards Filipino food.

I would eventually love to just be able to take these recipes that I learned from my different friends from around the world, and come together with them, like, Japanese and French food, and I would like to standardize it someday, hopefully, 10 years, hopefully, 20, 30 years, maybe a lifetime thing, but standardize it in such a way that anyone can pick it up and learn Filipino food, and to understand that there's more to it. There's a lot to it. I think that's the first, most important thing about educating people about anything is having a standardized cookbook [laughter].

1:01:02

Evan Stern: Then what are your broader hopes for the future of our world?

[Unrelated conversation]

Gabriel Medina: Oh, broader hopes for our world? Man, I just want world peace. I think people in the industry, restaurant industry, we're so stuck and focused on what's going on with what's going on in the industry or, rather, what's going on inside the restaurant that we, as a cook, well, as a cook specifically, you're kinda just thrown into it. You're so narrow-minded and you're focused in it. Me, 20 plus years of doing this, and working in this industry, and sacrificing too much, now that I've had more time and have, you know, had-- sorry, I'm gonna lose my thought.

1:02:03

Evan Stern: That's all right. That's okay.

Gabriel Medina: Ask that question one more time.

Evan Stern: What are your just broader hopes for the future of our world? World peace sums it up, I think [laughter].

Gabriel Medina: World peace would be great. I think I'm fried.

Evan Stern: That's okay, my friend.

Gabriel Medina: [Laughter]

Evan Stern: That's all right. We're coming to the end here, I promise. We're coming to the end here, I promise.

Gabriel Medina: I would want world peace. Broader hopes, I would want world peace. I would want people to listen to science. I would want people-- I wish people would be more empathetic to each other. I wish people would understand that the person next to you is probably going through the same thing as you, or knows people going through the same thing as you. I think, I wish, yeah, war would end.

1:02:59

I wish no more bombings over [laughter] I don't know if i can say–

Evan Stern: I'm right there with you. I'm right there with you.

Gabriel Medina: Yeah, you know.

Evan Stern: But in regard to the future, too, looking decades ahead, after you've left this Earth, say someone out there learns about this guy Gabriel Medina, and they wanna go someplace where they can feel and commune with your spirit. Where should they go? Where should they look?

Gabriel Medina: Hopefully it'll be a cookbook. I want to Julia Child it. Again, just a cookbook that talks about Filipino food and culture, that educates, that's standardized, that shows my love for food, our people's love for food, our form of sharing our food with the world. I really

hope it'd be in a book, not necessarily a place. I think you asked me, like, how did it feel traveling the world, and so forth, and what home looks like.

1:04:00

Home's always where-- was always about people, for me. Memories and places are cool and all, but people. Maybe my grandchildren or maybe my legacy or maybe my restaurant will survive 300 years [laughter] or something like that, and become like a national monument. But, other than that, I really think by putting-- having a book is the ultimate form of legacy. I really don't care too much about legacy, about putting my name or an imprint out there. I just wanna promote my people, Filipino food, and especially the chefs who are promoting it now.

Evan Stern: Is there just anything else that you'd care to share?

Gabriel Medina: I love my wife. I'm very thankful for her.

1:04:54

I think it's important that whatever successes you have in life, whatever visions you are focused on getting, you know, the term like manifest your own destiny, I always felt that, like, yeah, you can bust your ass off and-- am I allowed to curse?

Evan Stern: Of course.

Gabriel Medina: You can bust your ass off and work really hard at something. You can achieve those goals. But it's really important, and people, when they tell these stories, they never really talk about the people that are involved with it. Because of my wife, I'm able to pursue my own dreams. Because of my father, I was so privileged to have such a great life. Because of my family and friends who support me, I can have the confidence of opening up a pop-up stall after

opening million-dollar restaurants in a farmers market, city of Houston, doing exactly what I love.

1:05:58

Evan Stern: Well, Gabriel, I thank you so much for sharing with us today.

[End]