

2024 Hispanic Heritage Month Interview Series

Interviewee: Adriana Cortes, Delicious at the Dunbar

Donald Jones: Adriana, it is a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for participating in our celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. This month, we wanted to talk to Hispanic business owners and entrepreneurs to showcase and uplift their stories in their entrepreneurial journey towards success.

The theme of the conversation is identity as an asset. We talk a lot about being a person of color and the challenges that we face. But, we don't spend enough time talking about how we leverage our racial identity, but also all of the other identities that we have as, as assets.

So, that's really what I want to dive into today. First, introduce yourself and share a little bit about your business and what led you to becoming an entrepreneur.

Adriana Cortes: Thank you for the interview. My name is Adriana. I started the business, Delicious Southern Cuisine and Delicious at the Dunbar with my father, Vidal Cortes. We started the business back in 2011, so we've been now in business going on 13 years this month. We're very, very excited about that.

My father has been cooking soul food for 34 years, roughly, in known soul food restaurants in the LA community. We're talking about Boulevard Cafe, which has a lot of historical ties with a lot of prominent political figures. We're talking Gerry's Flying Fox, where everyone knew that was the best gumbo in town. And he's worked with many, many other, restaurants since. That's where he got his knowledge of soul food, and where he realized that soul food is similar to Mexican food because it's highly rich, seasoned food, rich palate food. He just fell in love with the cuisine.

But some 30-odd years ago it wasn't, like, the culture for men to be in the kitchen, so he really didn't expect to get into the kitchen. He was more of a server, busser, and helped in the back, things like that.

But as with any restaurant business, people are always calling off, and he just happened to step up. He did prep work, and he ended up learning a little bit more of the kitchen and little by little he really he just fell in love with the food.

That's how he really became a cook, and then started developing his own recipes. I don't think he ever really saw himself as a business owner. And then the 2008/2009 crash happened.

That was the first time in his life that he'd had trouble with jobs, that his employers had issues paying him what he was worth. Both my mom and father were in the restaurant industry, and they were both suffering. At the time, I was finishing school at UCLA. And, we struggled to finish paying those last quarters because at the same time, tuition was going up. So my father is taking on, you know, three jobs just to help cover those school expenses.

And so when one of the locations he previously worked at closed down, he asked me "Mija, would you open this up with me? Everyone keeps telling me I should open up my own business for years, and I've never really considered it until now." I had just finished school and was working at a nonprofit, but I said "yeah." I didn't really think much about it, honestly. It was a no brainer for me. It was, for one, to find financial security for my family, but also a way to give back to my parents who have given up so much for me, and to help my father with his own dreams.

I was beyond grateful to have been the first one in my family to go to college, and now I had all these tools that I had learned in school, this knowledge. So I did whatever I could to learn how to open up a business. It is hard at the time. It's not something you can just Google and find out. I just questioned as many people as I could, went to Norwalk, trying to figure out how to get a DBA, learning the steps, how to get a bank account, how to get an EIN, all of that we navigated it together. It was hard at times. We put in every savings we could, we borrowed money from every family member. Any vendor my father had ever had, he asked for credit so that we could pay back whenever we could.

That's the way that we started a business, and it was, thankfully, within a year and a half that we paid everyone off. So, it was really tough, but I'm just so happy for us to be able to have done that.

Now we have two locations. The first location is fast casual takeout, focused on soul food. Our second location is dine-in, and it has a little bit of Mexican cuisine, a little fusion. There we have a full liquor license and live jazz.

DJ: That's remarkable. Congratulations. I mean, it just an incredible story. You mentioned your father not identifying as an entrepreneur or a business owner, but having this idea and then pulling you in to take action. I think that's such a common story, particularly in communities of color where people often, out of necessity, start something entrepreneurial. There are entrepreneurial things that folks are doing all the time that they just identify as that.

I'm curious to hear how your identity, or the various identities that you have, influence the way you run your business.

AC: For one, having been an employee for so many years, it gives us a perspective on what our employees want and need – job security, a livable wage. We don't run like a McDonald's that offers 2- or 3-hour shifts. Our employees are looking to not have three jobs, so we try to offer them full-time if that's what they seek, even if that means us rattling our brains to work out schedules. My mother, you know, she worked while having two children, so we understand female employees wanting morning shifts because they need to pick their children up from school and take care of them while the husband possibly takes a night shifts. Things like that are things that I, as a business owner, understand because I've lived them.

I also really hone in on the things that my parents have taught me in terms of hard work. You will see my father, to this day, running around every day. My vendors and employees see how hard he still works, even with recent health issues that left him almost immobilized for a few months. Despite that, he wants to get out there to work. And that work ethic is something that's influenced me a lot, to really push, because restaurant work is not easy, it's not an easy industry.

It's a really tough industry with typically high turnover rates of employees. Thankfully, I'm happy to say that I have employees that have been here for 11 years. In general, people leave us because they're going back to school, they're going to graduate school, they're going into careers of better fulfillment, which I understand. Restaurant work is not meant to be for everyone their whole life, and that's perfectly fine. And of course we have the young ones, where this is their first job ever, and we have to teach them how to use a broom! Which is fine, that comes with the territory.

DJ: Well, we were all there at some point, right? So, as you think about what's next for your business, what does that look like and how does identity show up in that?

AC: We now have experience with a takeout restaurant, we've experienced catering, and now we have a sit-down, dine-in restaurant. We have found ways that we are able to connect to our community through all of these, but catering is one that we want to expand more, because through catering, we follow our customers through many stages of their lives, whether it's birthdays, retirement parties, weddings, different things. That's something we really want to expand on. We'll also still have our flagship locations, and maybe down the line expand to another takeout location, because it is so much better in terms of profit per square footage.

My father not only wants to focus on soul food, but still have soul food and Mexican food within our catering. Because people ask "how are you guys Mexican and don't cook Mexican food?" We started with soul food, and at first we didn't think of mixing the two, honestly. But then we did our dining location, and we are more on the east side of LA on Central Avenue, which has a lot of rich history within the black community, but

now it's like 90% Latino. So, when we opened up, we wanted to have a little bit of both. I explain to my Latinos that come in here: jambalaya is like a soul food pallela! Sometimes we'll have, like, fried chicken tacos. They're different items, but they're similar in many regards.

So, my goal is that in the future when we go into more catering, we're able to do a little bit more fusion on dishes and really highlight both cultures.

DJ: That's great. Is there anything that you didn't get to share that you wanted to in this conversation?

AC: Another thing is that there aren't many female restaurant owners out there. That is something that I really have been proud of because it's a tough industry, but I'm very, very lucky that, as a family, we're able to support each other.

My father is able to back me up by saying "no, she's the boss." Many times employees and vendors will assume my father is the boss because he's the man. And he will tell them "no, you have to address that to her. She's the one that's running the show now." That's something I'm glad that I have, because people think I'm so kind and quiet at times. But I believe I don't need to be loud. I don't need to be bossy to show that this is the way that things have to get run, so I'm glad that I have that from my family.

Not everyone is used to a female telling them what to do, especially when you come from Latino culture which is sometimes (it has to be said) a little bit 'machista.' And we have to get rid of that a little bit, but it's hard for some, particularly some of older men, to really get that.

DJ: Well, it's great that we have you as a leader breaking down those barriers. And, thank you so much for this conversation