

Alicia Arias interviewed by Bryanna Gabriel
October 4, 2019
Bronx, NY

Bryanna Gabriel: My name is Bryanna and I'm interviewing Alicia in Bronx High School of Business on October 4th, 2019. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Alicia Arias: I do, ma'am

BG: Where did you grow up?

AA: I grew up in Harlem.

BG: Describe your favorite meal growing up.

AA: My favorite meal was breakfast. I am Salvadorian. My mom used to make refried black beans, with scrambled eggs, sweet fried plantains, hard Salvadoran cheese, Salvadoran sour cream and tortillas.

BG: Why was this significant to you?

AA: Food was a big part of my culture and my mom was a first-generation immigrant so that's all she had to pass down to us as far as our culture.

BG: Does a certain food remind you of loved ones?

AA: Refried beans with tortillas.

BG: Which meals and why?

AA: Well, refried beans with tortillas because if you were hungry in Salvadoran household and you had that, there's no reason for you to be starving.

BG: Do you have any memories in regard to preparing meals with an elder?

AA: Yes, so in my family and in my culture, during the holidays, from Thanksgiving all through the three Kings Day. We would prepare, this dish of my culture called Puposas, and it's basically flour tortillas with any ingredients you would like inside and we would also make tamales. During the holidays, in my culture all the women would help make tamales.

BG: What is your current meal to eat or to make and why?

AA: This is hard. My favorite meal to make is baked salmon with green, red peppers, onions, and garlic with some olive oil and some seasoning with white rice and broccoli.

Growing up all I had was beans and tortillas and when we would eat any kind of meat it would be steak or chicken or turkey or whatever and so now that I'm an adult, I can enjoy salmon and I enjoy it, it's good.

BG: If you could pick anyone in the world to eat your favorite meal with, who would you pick, why and what would you eat?

AA: So, I would eat with Michelle Obama, and we would eat some snow crab legs with shrimp, because it's hilarious and I've watched too many ASMR videos. So, I can just picture Michelle Obama and me doing that, and also, it's a good way to break the ice.

BG: Is there any food that you will not eat?

AA: I will not eat octopus. I will not eat calamari. I'm a texture person, so anything with a weird texture I will not eat.

BG: Do you abide by any dietary restrictions because of culture or religion?

AA: No. I don't. I do what I want. It is my body, it's my life.

BG: Are there certain foods you only eat on certain occasions?

AA: Well yea, like I mentioned earlier, tamales are like reserved for holidays, so like for the wintertime. So like November, Thanksgiving, up until January. We do tamales.

BG: Who in your life cooks the best meal?

AA: Who in my life? That's a lot of pressure. You know what. Myself.

BG: What do you cook?

AA: I can cook a lot different things. So recently, I've been making tacos with Lettuce as the flower, so like replacing a flower, with a Lettuce Leaf. Sometimes I do shrimp tacos, chicken tacos, turkey or beef tacos. It's the best because one, I'm making and two I know my tastebuds. So, when you go to a restaurant, nobody knows your tastebuds better than you. So they'll probably add something that you don't like.

BG: What does eating well mean to you?

AA: I think eating well for me is just about balance. I feel like you are entitled to eat whatever and are allowed to eat what you want but too much of a good or bad thing is not beneficial. So, I definitely think it's about balance.

BG: Do you have a favorite restaurant?

AA: Yes, I do. So, my godfather's brother owns a Salvadoran Restaurant in the Heights and I believe it's called "La Cabana Salvadorian" and every special occasion my family has we go there to eat and celebrate.

BG: How does the food make or eat make you who are?

AA: I view my body as my temple. So, eating is a part of taking care of myself. So, when I'm eating right it makes me feel good and it contributes to my energy and it contributes to how I carry myself during the day. But when I'm eating bad or not eating at all. I feel not like myself. I feel really different.

BG: Is there a food that reminds you of home?

AA: Is there a food that reminds me of home? Hmm, rice and beans

BG: Do you observe certain rules or traditions in regard to drinking?

AA: Umm, No. No. That wasn't a thing in my family or my culture growing up.

BG: If you could go anywhere in the world to try a new food, where would you go and why?

AA: I would go to Japan; I've always wanted to go to Japan. I've really intrigued by the culture. Just their dietary restrictions and what they do and don't do. So, I would love to try their food.

BG: What is a meal or a snack that you can eat all the time and not get tired of?

AA: OH, white cheddar popcorn. Oh my god I love white cheddar popcorn. It's so good. Or pretzels with roasted red pepper hummus.

BG: That's weird, I've never heard anyone say that.

BG: What is the most important meal of the day to you and what do you look forward to?

AA: I think breakfast is the most important meal of the day and I always look forward to lunch. It happens in the middle of the day and it reminds you that the day is almost over.

BG: Would be able to never eat any of your cultural food ever again?

AA: Hell no, I mean no. I would not be able to not eat it.

BG: What are your thoughts on food diversity in New York City?

AA: New York City is super diverse when it comes to different cultures and different foods and stuff. But I do think that a lot of cultures food are altered to be less of what they are intended to be. So, for example, if you wanted halal food, the best place to go to is a halal truck because the people that own the trucks are usually from that culture, so they know what spices to use. Whereas if you go to a restaurant, you wouldn't go through the same experience because they will alter the recipe to be less spicy to accommodate somebody else's dietary restrictions or whatever their body can or can't handle.

BG: Do you believe that food is one of the main things that distinguishes or identifies a culture from another?

AA: Not necessarily, I know that a lot of different cultures have very similar dishes where the food is prepared the same or different. But I wouldn't say that it's what makes cultures different from the other. I think there's way more to what makes a culture different.

BG: Can you notice by the presentation of your food if it was made by someone outside of your culture?

AA: Yes, absolutely. Tortillas for example, they got to be burnt a certain amount, they got to be a certain size and thickness. There's a science to it.

BG: Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would like me to ask you?

AA: No.

BG: Thank you.

AA: You're welcome.