

ANAMARIS COUSINS PRICE

Chef - Houston, TX

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Amy Evans [00:00:02]: Okay. I am here on August 13th, 2020, on Zoom recording an interview with Anamaris Cousins Price, who is a chef here in Houston. And if I could get you to please say your name and tell us what it is that you do.

Anamaris Cousins Price [00:00:20]: Sure. So again, my name is Anamaris Cousins Price. It's really Anamaris [**spoken with a Spanish accent**]. I'm from Panama, originally. I am a chef focusing on Latin flavors. I started a series of popup dinners. Actually, I started as a blogger about nine years ago and then pushed that to the next thing, which was a series of underground dinners where I serve people meals from across Latin America. And I serve it like restaurant style, and they come in my home, and they have a meal and then meet new people. Sometimes they're just a couple of people that know each other. But, for the most part, it's been strangers coming together, and it's been a lot of fun to do it. So that's a little bit about me and what I do.

AE [00:01:14]: Yes. That was perfect. May I ask you to please also share your date of birth for the record.

ACP [00:01:19]: December 30th, 1966.

AE [00:01:25]: So I first experienced who you are and what you do at one of your popup dinners with my friend—and now yours—Jessie Joseph. And I actually found my notes from that dinner; I took notes on my phone during that dinner and—

ACP [00:01:38]: Did you really?

AE [00:01:40]: —I found them. It was June 9th, 2018.

ACP [00:01:43]: Oh, wow.

AE [00:01:45]: Because—there are not many notes. I can read them to you. But I was so enthralled by what you do—that you welcome strangers into your home, that your food was amazing, that you told stories with each course, that we interacted with such a crazy mishmash of people. Just everything about it just blew me away. And I think I mentioned to you that I wanted to write about what you're doing after that. [00:02:17] And then there's so many other—like Alabama Song, in your neighborhood, that have these popup events. And the artist Charles Washington has his Pop Up Place that's in Third Ward. And so there's so many things like this going on, and I just love how you're so creative with how you were sharing your passion. But anyway, the notes I took that night were that you told stories about each dish, that you served a shrimp sauce, that the recipe you developed was tweaked after you served leftover Indian takeout.

ACP [00:02:54]: [*Laughs*] I don't remember. What recipe was that?

AE [00:02:54]: It was a shrimp sauce recipe. I mean, we may not have had it that night, but maybe we did.

ACP [00:02:59]: Was it shrimp and grits?

AE [00:03:00]: I don't know if we had shrimp. You know what I know we had—okay, also, you mentioned Panamanian molé—or, we had that. The conversation before dinner and at the table

about Hurricane Harvey. Everybody was talking about Hurricane Harvey. And your appetizer—I'm doing all the talking I'm supposed to be asking—

ACP [00:03:19]: It's okay!

AE [00:03:22]: The appetizer you served—you served a watermelon cocktail and you served this appetizer that was guava paste with manchego cheese and bacon around it.

ACP [00:03:31]: Bacon. Yeah.

AE [00:03:32]: I want you to know that I went and I got a twenty-ounce thing of Goya guava paste after that. And I tried to recreate it and I had [my friend] Jessie [Joseph] over, and we could eat 800 of those things. It was so good. And so all of that to say, I'm a huge fan of what you're doing and how you're doing it. And I'm so glad to reconnect with you over this project. And now I would like for you to tell me just start with—so you're from Panama. Tell me the short version of how you came to Houston, if you would.

ACP [00:04:10]: Okay. So I grew up in Panama, half my life. I mean, I was in my twenties when I moved here. We had a family that, I mean, I consider myself part of their family and they moved to Houston and I came to visit them for the wedding of one of the daughters and stay here for a couple of months with them. And then that later would become my husband and now ex-husband. So I went back home, came back, got married. And that's the short version of how I got here.

AE [00:04:53]: So what city in Panama are you from?

ACP [00:04:56]: Panama City. I'm a city girl, 100 percent.

AE [00:05:00]: So what did you think about Houston when you first visited?

ACP [00:05:04]: It's really interesting because Panama is unique in that it's not what people probably think of when they think of Central America; it's very modern. It has a lot of American influence. So in terms of the way things look, it's not that different. We have a beautiful skyline. I think it's even bigger than the Houston skyline, to be quite honest. Everything is bigger in Texas, of course. So then we don't have the same infrastructure in terms of roads and things like that. That's improved a lot since I moved, but back then the freeway, so I was like, "Oh my God," they were building Beltway 8 when I moved up to here. That was a giant real life rollercoaster for me. So those things were different.

ACP [00:05:52]: The weather, unfortunately, it's not that different from Panama for the most part. I mean, it seems like we're getting less and less of the cold weather here in Houston, which I hate. But then you don't have the beautiful beaches either. So in Panama you have access to a beach within—where I lived in the city I could be in a decent beach within an hour and a half, barring traffic. And I'm talking nice, clear, blue water. So that was different too. And we don't—I miss hills. So I love going to the hill country just to get a little bit of that.

ACP [00:06:28]: The terrain here in Houston is just desolate. It's just flat. So that's very different, but overall, because I already knew the language, it wasn't a huge change in environment, which is not to say that I ever saw myself living in the U.S. when I was growing up, which is different. For my brother [Almet Cousins], he's always wanted to move to the U.S.

and I know other people who wanted to live here. I always love living in Panama. I never thought I was going to live anywhere else, but I mean, Houston has been really good to me. I've met some really great people, made some new friends and family. So yeah, I mean, same kind of different world. [00:07:13] It was a little weird at first because being Hispanic but being black, people thirty years ago didn't know what to make with that. So we used to have a little bit of fun with that too. But I think a lot has changed in Houston in the last thirty years.

AE [00:07:33]: When you came to Houston, was it like the late [19]80s that you first came here?

ACP [00:07:37]: I came here in December of [nineteen] eighty-nine, right before they [the United States] went in to get [Panamanian dictator Manuel] Noriega. I don't know if you remember about that. And I got married in January of 2019. So yeah, exactly thirty years now.

AE [00:07:54]: Wow. Yeah. Well, eighty-nine was the year I graduated from high school, so we had our thirtieth high school reunion in the fall. I remember eighty-nine very well. Anyway, so what I was going to ask, though, was when you got here, could you find Panamanian food in Houston and ingredients?

ACP [00:08:12]: With food, you really can't—I mean, you can find some of the ingredients and it's getting better now. Now, I can buy yucca and plantains and things like that at H.E.B. [grocery store], which is big. Back then, I had to go to Fiesta [grocery store], it was the only place that you would really find anything. And even then it was limited. So you really had to adapt. And that's how my blog got started. I was missing my food and needing to find ways to have it because I didn't have access to it at the store or buy at a restaurant. You see restaurants that are Cuban or they're Mexican, or even have Puerto Rican restaurants in Houston—or did—but

nobody's opened a Panamanian restaurant. And not that our food is that different, but it's still our food.

AE [00:08:58]: Yeah. Well, your story is reminding me of, I don't know if you're familiar with the Homesick Texan blog [by Lisa Fain]?

ACP [00:09:05]: Yes.

AE [00:09:06]: She's a friend of mine. And so she started her blog when she was a displaced Texan in New York City and couldn't find picante sauce and couldn't find—

ACP [00:09:14]: Yeah. I love her blog. It's a beautiful blog.

AE [00:09:17]: Yeah. I love that that's a similar story from a different place. So your blog, is it called Chef It Yourself?

ACP [00:09:25]: Chef it Yourself was the blog, yeah. I still have it. I haven't added to it probably in five years because I started doing the dinners and got distracted. And I actually stopped because, **[clears throat]** even though I was getting followers and there was some interaction, the thing that I loved the most—and I'll tell you a funny story about it. My best friend, Dorothy [Martinez], her husband is Puerto Rican. And so it's common for Latin culture in the— I grew up in a very religious home, and I practiced the religion through my first marriage. So that's how I know Dorothy and Danny; they are my best friends. So we would have them over for dinner after church or whatever, and Danny would eat and he would be just, ooh and ahh all over the meal. And so Dorothy would say, "He never makes those sounds when he eats my food." **[Laughs]**

[00:10:20] So I was missing that. I was missing the instant gratification of watching somebody

eat my food and just love it—and hearing either the silence when they started eating and later the eat comments about how good it was. So that's how I got started. That's why I stopped the blogs. Plus, it was taking me too much time. I've always had a full time job. And so blogging is not just writing. Besides just making the food and taking a picture, you have to make the food, you have to take the picture, you have to edit the picture. You have to write an interesting post. You have to come up with the recipe. So I was getting burned out. I had more food that I could document, and it just wasn't filling that hole for me somehow.

AE [00:11:18]: Where did you come up with the name, Chef it Yourself?

ACP [00:11:23]: My idea was how I was going to teach people how to make these meals. So in my blog, I say that I Latinized American recipes or recipes from different cultures. So I want to take, let's say lasagna, and make it in a way that it would use Latin ingredients. My thought was I would teach people. I would walk people through the process of doing it, but my way of cooking, it's not shortcut cooking. So it means that if you're going to commit to it, you're going to be in the kitchen for a couple of hours, which is not necessarily practical for the U.S. market, I think, for the most part. Maybe people are starting to change a little bit in that area. My idea was you can have—I'm trying to think of what my tagline was. It was something like, you can cook like a [Le] Cordon Bleu chef, but you can chef it yourself. So that's where that came up.

AE [00:12:26]: Yeah. So are you formally trained as a chef?

ACP [00:12:29]: I am not formally trained. I'm trained at the skirt of my mother and my grandmother and all my aunts—and the cooking network. *[Laughs]* If there's a cooking show, I'm watching it.

AE [00:12:34] That family training—

ACP [00:12: 36] I'm sorry?

AE [00:12:39]: I said that family training is formal training, if you ask me. So you've always cooked. You've always enjoyed it.

ACP [00:12:49]: I can't remember not cooking. I think I cooked my first dinner at [age] seven. So I had one day of the week assigned, and I had to make a full dinner, including dessert, for my parents [Earl and Patricia Cousins] and my sister [Magali Rogers]. I think I was seven. My mom was an amazing cook. She later decided she was going to focus more on cake decorating, but she was a big cook and she liked to host parties. And she always came up with really creative ideas for her parties. So I get that from her. I call her the Martha Stewart of Panama. My—she would—we—in Panama we have a saying that's *tirar la casa por la ventana*, which means you throw your house through the window so—I guess it's like the kitchen sink thing. What is that saying?

AE [00:13:41]: Everything, but the kitchen sink?

ACP [00:13:43]: Yeah, that kind of concept. So everything was to the top with my mom. She did this party one time. It was an anniversary for a friend and all the children of the guests were the waiters and waitresses. So we all had our black tie and white shirts. We served the food to our parents. She came up with progressive dinners in Panama, something that was never heard of. She was amazing. And I get a lot of that from her, but then she discovered cake decorating, and

she went full on. She did that and became a very well known baker in Panama. So somebody had to cook. So that was me.

AE [00:14:25]: Wow. What was your mother's name?

ACP [00:14:28]: Patricia.

AE [00:14:30]: And so when you first started cooking when you were seven, did you get to where there was a meal that everybody had as their favorite that you would make or a dish, that it became your signature dish as a child?

ACP [00:14:46]: I don't know if I can think. I used to make a lot of cookies, so that was one thing. My dad has a sweet tooth, but I think my mom always had—and this is funny: she always had trouble making rice. So that friend of ours, [Dorothy], that I've told you that they moved to Houston, she makes the best rice. So I learned to make rice from her. And so every time there was rice needed, Anamaris had to do it. So I call myself the rice Nazi now, and my husband laughs. But I think for my dad, he likes stuff stewed. He always has to have some kind of a sauce. So I learned to combine flavors to make sauces for different things at a very early age. And I think that's probably my secret weapon is, I'm really good putting flavors together to sauce food.

AE [00:15:40]: Well, and that inspires me to ask the question, do you consider yourself an artist?

ACP [00:15:49]: Yes. Not in a traditional way, right? I think it takes a little bit of everything, so you have to have a little bit of knowledge—not chemistry, necessarily, but how things come together for one thing. So you have to understand your ingredients. And you have to be able to—

it's like, I can think of something in my head and I know it sounds good together, and then I'll put it together and it's exactly what I thought it was going to be. Or sometimes I'm like, I don't know if those two flavors will go together and then I do a search and yeah, there's a million things for that combination. I'm like, yeah, I knew that. I knew that. **[Laughs]** So I think there's some artistry in that. And then I've been working really hard on my plating. And it's not as pretty as I would like it to be, probably would need some real training in that area. But I think that food always looks good when I put it on the plate, especially for people. **[00:16:55]** I mean, I don't take that time for myself, probably, but when I do it for my guests, I do. I do think there's some artistry in that and it's very much me, and it's not repetitive. So even though I may serve the same dish, you may come to my—my husband tells me that I need to write my recipes down, and I've started to do a better job of keeping track of what I put in stuff. But if I'm having some wine and I'm dancing or if I'm cooking and I'm tasting, whatever's happening that day, it's going to taste a little bit different every time. It's always going to be good. It's just maybe not going to always taste the same. So I think that was hard, too. There's some artistry in that, too.

AE [00:17:40]: Absolutely. I mean, I asked you that question coming from a place where I personally consider you an artist, and your conversation about sauces made me think of that because it's like mixing paints: you're putting things together, and you're using your intuition and your own—all of your senses to make it what you want it to be.

ACP [00:18:00]: What you want it. Yeah.

AE [00:18:02]: Yeah. I get the sense that you're a real intuitive cook, and so you're figuring it out as you go or making choices as you go. And that is—that is, to me, that's the process of making

art. So I love your answer. Now, moving on, I want you to write down all of your recipes.

[Laughter] Now the first meal that I got from you, recently, had that side dish, that was the Navy beans and sweet potatoes and greens and pancetta. And I think on Instagram, you were like, I just threw this together.

ACP [00:18:40]: I did. And it's because—I do like collard greens, but I don't like mushy vegetables. So I'm always trying to trick myself into eating my veggies and I hate sweet potatoes. I can't eat them by themselves. So I have to make them savory. It's the only way I can eat them. So I've made a sweet potato hash before, and then I thought—I was making—I don't know what I was cooking. I made the collard greens for another meal a couple of weeks ago. And then I thought, this would be a really good side. Because I don't think most people, unless they're Black or probably from the South, really understand collard greens. And whenever I've seen them, they're super mushy and—mushy. So when I made them for that Brazilian dish, they barely cook them and so you just get all the flavor of it and a nice tooth feel to it. **[00:19:48]** So I thought, what else can I mix in there? And I thought that would go really well with black beans because they do soups like that. And then I thought, I need something to bulk it up. And then I thought, sweet potatoes. Potatoes would be good, but people are trying to be healthier, so sweet potatoes might be a better option. So that's kind of how that came to be. And then bacon because everything is better with bacon. So actually that *pancetta* but, still. **[Laughs]** Porky goodness.

[Laughs]

AE [00:20:16]: No, it was so good. And also so beautiful. I mean, all the colors in there.

ACP [00:20:19]: It did, it did turn out really pretty, didn't it? I don't know what's happened but—so here's my thing with the meals. I love that I'm being able to do it because I feel like I'm helping people still have a good meal that they don't have to worry about making, but I hate that you're not getting it at its best, to me, fresh off the stove. So those little things I have to push myself and say, it could be better, but it is what it is. But when I made it and I was putting it all together, because when I tried it the first time, I cut the sweet potatoes— not the sweet potato, but the collards, I cut them too thick. So it wasn't as pleasant to eat. And then I cooked them too long. So it didn't look as vibrant. So those are notes that I made for the second go. And then I took everything separate and then put it all together at the end, and it looks pretty when I just piled everything up. I was like, oh, I want that picture. It was perfect.

AE [00:21:29]: Yeah. And what I loved about the dinners, too, is that you're posting everything on your website and Instagram, so you can see how you intended the plate to look, and you can come home and assemble everything.

ACP [00:21:43]: Mm-hmm [**affirmative**]. I hope people are doing that. Yeah.

AE [00:21:46]: I—I tried to do that.

ACP [00:21:47]: [**Laughs**] Good. I'm glad. But you're an artist. So that may also come naturally to you.

AE [00:21:53]: Well, maybe, I mean, I don't like plate food normally when I cook for myself. I don't do that. But there's something about honoring what you're doing that just was intuitive to me to do that.

ACP [00:22:05]: Oh, thank you.

AE [00:22:08]: Literally, it may have come from seeing the pictures and seeing how you intended it to be. I don't know. But I made that connection—consciously or unconsciously—and it was like, well, let me make this—.

ACP [00:22:20]: I love that.

AE [00:22:23]: Well, I want to back up a little bit because I want to talk about your day job that is no more.

ACP [00:22:30]: No longer.

AE [00:22:32]: Tell me what you did and for how long.

ACP [00:22:36]: Okay. I was an ombudsman, which is somewhere between a mediator and HR[human resources] and therapist, honestly. It's conflict resolution as a professional. And I did that for fourteen years at the same company that I worked at for sixteen years. And this was at oil and gas services, one of the major players here in Houston. And then the market went down at the end of last year for oil and gas. So things started to look dire and then when COVID hit most of my department was eliminated. And I mean, it's a position that is good for companies to have, but it really isn't necessary. We're not generating any kind of revenue; we're helping productivity. But we cost. We don't produce for them. **[00:23:50]** So I understand that. It's just we have four in our group, and there's only one person left now. So what that involved—talking to people, trying to understand what their concerns are, what it is that they're dealing with, getting to the root

cause of the issue and helping them find whatever that solution looks like for them. Sometimes it's through internal resources, and I could facilitate a conversation between a few people.

Sometimes it was just finding the answers to their questions. A lot of times it was just listening to them vent. So it—I used to tell my manager I don't like people, but I'm interested in understanding what makes people tick. So it was really an interesting job for me, and I was naturally suited for it. It's not something that—my background is in business and marketing.

[00:24:48] And when I started that position, I went in as a marketing assistant. And then learned about this role that I had never heard about before, but the manager I had at that time just noticed that I have certain intangible skills that are natural for a comm[unications] person and encouraged me to pursue it. And I'm glad I did. I mean, I made great friendships, colleagues all over the world, became the president of the association, led a lot of committees and initiatives, spoke at the State Capitol on behalf of ombuds. I mean, pretty big deal stuff, but the work of dealing with people can be very draining. So cooking was always my escape. And then it became a push for me wanting to do more of the cooking, and that kept me happy and less of the other.

[00:25:58] So I did a lot of—part of my job also involved continuing to do some of the marketing. I requested that I be allowed to continue to do some of that so that I didn't have to spend 100 percent of my time talking to people. And again, I think people are great. I can be impatient. So sometimes if somebody is not willing to help themselves, then I'm like, dude, I can't help you. At some point you have to take ownership of your own stuff and move forward. So it was really interesting walking away from it. And for years now, the oil and gas industry has been on the bumps for the last two, three years. And so we've had layoffs off and on, and I would tell my manager, “If you need to lay off somebody, you can always lay me off. I'm ready to go.” Because I kept saying I needed something to pursue my passion, but it's easy to get comfortable

when you have a good salary. [00:27:06] You know how your bills are getting paid. You don't have to hustle as hard. And what you're doing is, I mean, it's not an easy job, but I'm not working out in the sun or anything like that, right? I'm pretty cushy. But then everything that happened so suddenly, so it was a little disconcerting. I got laid off on Cinco de Mayo, so I'll never think of Cinco de Mayo the same way again. And it took me a couple of weeks to just take that in, and probably a month into it I realized that I was okay, I was healthy. I have a vision. I have something I want to pursue. And right now I'm standing at that precipice, and all I have to do is take that leap and so I will. And it's been pretty fantastic. [00:28:11] It hasn't been easy. My back hurts and all of that, because I'm not a young chicken anymore but through the pain, you know, I deliver the meals Tuesday, or people can pick up on Tuesday. If anybody wants delivery, I do those on Wednesday. And then I'm immediately thinking, what am I serving next week? So I'm still tired. I haven't slept, all of that, but I'm ready for the next one. It's the same with the dinners. It was the same way. All the effort of putting everything together, setting up, cleaning up, and setting the table and all of that, having people here and then sitting with people after the meal and getting to know them, and then cleaning the kitchen until two, three in the morning. And then I wake up Sunday morning and I'm like, "What's next?" So that's always fun.

AE [00:29:11]: Well, let's go back to the dinners. And when you started those, were they monthly that you were hosting them, the popup dinner?

ACP [00:29:18]: I start—yeah, I think I was doing them once a month at the very beginning. So I did a couple of them with just friends because I wanted to have feedback. I wanted to know if that was something they would pay to do. First of all, I mean, people, they like my food. I know that, but it's different when you're telling people, okay, here, I'll charge you, if you come and sit

at my table and I'll feed you. So I did a couple of those and those went really well. [00:29:47]

And then I decided, okay, I'm going to do it. And so I remember telling my husband about it and he's like, "You're going to have strangers in your house?" And I said, "Yeah, people are not strangers." I mean, somebody would have to go through a lot of trouble to sign up for one of my dinners if they want to rob me. I mean, honestly, because that doesn't make any sense. [00:30:10]

So I started out posting them on Eventbrite and just word of mouth. So a few friends, tell other friends and it kind of went that way. Then I started getting a few people that were regulars. Then I started posting on Meetup.com and picked up a few people from there. And then a company started the same thing on their own platform, and it was called Feastly. And I signed up with them, but I had already been doing it for about six—six or eight months by that time. And there was only one other chef in Houston doing it that signed up through Feastly. [00:30:56] We did a couple of events together, but I'm really picky about my events and my food. So if it's not to my standards, I'm not going to do that. If I cook something and I could have used all the ingredients I had and I've tasted it and I don't like it, I'm going to do it again. I'm going to start over. I'm just not going to serve anything that I'm not okay with. So I prefer to do things on my own for the most part, especially where the food is involved. [00:31:27] So I did that for a while and then people just kept telling other friends about it. So I found myself doing it a couple of times a month. So then I started doing brunches. So I would have two or three events every month. And then I was almost having them every other week. And that was harder because I still had a job [Laughs], and I got burned out. So I stopped cooking for like six months. I didn't do anything at all. [00:32:02] And then this time around, I decided I'm going to take it slow. I'm not going to overcommit. It's not in my nature to be that way, but I'm trying. So when I restarted before

madness [the COVID-19 pandemic] happened, I was sticking to once a month or at least every three weeks. And then I was rotating between dinners and brunches. And then because with the dinners and the brunches, I'm in the kitchen, most of the time until the end of the event, I don't get to spend that much time with people at the table. So then I started something I called The Chef Table. So they would come in and then I would cook something more simple, like a meal that my husband and I would have, with six to eight people and then we just all sit together at the table. So those were always fun. [00:32:55] So it's that interaction that I missed, because that takes me home. It's what I think about when I think of growing up with my family and my friends, it was those gatherings, spending time together, people laughing, eating, dancing. That's what I want to recreate.

AE [00:33:14]: I'm on the verge of tears as you're talking because I'm just thinking about all we're missing right now—

ACP [00:33:30] Yeah.

AE [00:33:32] —and how you—I mean, you said when you were talking about your day job, that—I think you said, “I don't even really like people.” [*Laughter*] And then you're inviting, like just the trust to have strangers come to your home and then nurture them from your heart, with your food, it's—

ACP [00:33:40]: I love good people, though. [*Laughs*]

AE [00:33:43]: Yeah. And then just the art of gathering—to bring people together. And it's interesting, too, in the context of this project, because I have spoken to an actor and a deejay as part of the project and their livelihoods. And their satisfaction in what they do, they get from their audience. There has to be that energy from your audience to a deejay or an actor on the stage in a theater, like you draw from the people who were there to appreciate who you are and what you do. And it's the same with your dinners.

ACP [00:34:25]: It really is.

AE [00:34:26]: And imagine what you're missing as a host to not have that kind of interaction.

ACP [00:34:34]: And that's why I'm really excited about what I'm thinking about next, which is the virtual aspect of it. I'm working with a business coach and she told me she thinks of COVID, but not as an obstacle, but a circumstance. And so I decided I would work with it. I don't know how it was going to pan out. The first one is next week, but I'm really looking forward to it. And I have high hopes that it will be great. It won't be the same but—nothing will be the same—but it doesn't mean that it can't be great. People are spending time virtually anyway right now, so why not make it time and have some good food to boot.

AE [00:35:12]: Yeah. And I think that the challenge that is trying to survive during this pandemic has given people room to take chances that they wouldn't take otherwise and solve problems. I mean, that's like this project, I'm like, creative people always have the most creative solutions. So I want to talk to this person, this person, this person. And so you're making it work.

And I think that some— I mean, I hope so. And I'm going to ask you, have some positive surprises cropped up as a result of having to pivot your whole business vision?

ACP [00:35:49]: Yeah. I mean, I think it's made me more—what's the word I want to use? I'm having to look at the other possibilities. So things that probably I would have never considered before, I'm considering now because circumstances are different. And if I want to make something viable, I have to adapt to those circumstances. So it's been really great. One of the things that I think is really interesting is there seems to be—for everything that's happening in the world right now, COVID included, people, I think, have realized how important other people are to them and how important it is to support each other. So, one thing that I have noticed is more of that, right? People saying, "Hey, this local business is in trouble, maybe support that business instead of throwing your money through Postmates or Grubhub [food delivery services] or whatever." Because those businesses are not really getting it. So pick up directly from them. So there's a little bit more sense of community, which really makes me feel great. And I think people are a lot more grateful right now. I think we're living more in the moment, which is part of what I wanted to do all along. So one of the things with my job, I was lucky that I got to travel a lot and my focus was Latin America, of course. So I got to go to countries that I hadn't been to before, through South America, and really spend time in those countries, those people with the culture and even the food and all of that goodness. But the thing that I noticed, I was sitting one day in Buenos Aires, and I was having lunch at a little café outside, gorgeous weather.

[00:37:44] And I looked across and there's this plaza, which they have them everywhere in Latin America. And it's filled with people walking around in an ice cream, kids playing, all kinds of things. And the people who are sitting in the little benches, they're talking to each other, they're

looking at each other. They're not looking at their phone, people in the restaurants, they're having conversations with the table, including the little children. Nobody's on their phone. And it made me remember that that's what time together is supposed to be. While I'm so busy with what's the FOMO [fear of missing out], it's just horrible. Don't worry about it. Don't worry about what's happening later. Just worry about what's happening right now. You know a car could come crashing through, and that's the end of it. **[00:38:30]** So I'm really encouraged to see some of that coming back. I know it's a struggle. I don't have kids, so I can't imagine, but let me tell you, I'm looking at my husband and my dogs twenty-four, seven. Sometimes I just need a walk. So I can only imagine how difficult it is for parents. If I can, in any way, make it easier for them to spend quality time together, to have good food done well, sit at your table and just have a few minutes. That's what I want to be able to do. And so I'm hoping that by doing the dinners virtual, even though it won't be ideal, I hope people will get dressed up and they'll light some candles, and they'll put their china out and have a good meal and share with other people around the city.

AE [00:39:27]: Yeah, that's so great. And I just, it's been so nice to bring your food home and sit down and enjoy it, like, be in my house, enjoying somebody else's food. That feels so special.

ACP [00:39:41]: Yeah. And that's exactly what I want you would feel: special. Taken care of. Yeah.

AE [00:39:47]: Yeah. So great. So this is a little bit of a jump in the conversation, but one of the things we have lost during COVID summer in Houston in 2020 is the Fiesta [grocery store] that was right there on Wheeler. Was that your store? Did you shop there?

ACP [00:40:05]: I actually didn't go to that one too much because, well, it wasn't really well stocked and there's a lot of homeless happening around there. So it's dicey. My husband used to go there because it was easier for him to get in and out. I used to go to the Fiesta on Kirby; it's the one I got to still.

AE [00:40:28]: That's the one on the South Loop [610]?

ACP [00:40:32]: Yeah. That's where I get most of my Latin wares. But like I said, H.E.B. is getting really good about bringing some of that stuff in now, so that helps. And then I did discover H.E.B. has their version of Fiesta, did you know that? It's called Mi Tienda.

AE [00:40:48]: No.

ACP [00:40:52]: It's an H.E.B. store. They have two of them. Yeah. I think you froze [on Zoom video conferencing]. Are you frozen?

AE [00:41:00]: You froze a little bit too for—

ACP [00:41:02]: Okay, my internet is unreliable. Yeah, so they have, and it's called Mi Tienda, and it's awesome. It's like a Mexican market. So I go there a lot too. It's a drive, but it's—

AE [00:41:12]: Where is it?

ACP [00:41:14]: The one I go to is off of Jensen. So it used to be between me and work. So that was just convenient that I would just go right after work. Now, if I really need something

from there, then I just drive. It's like, a ten-minute drive, I guess, going seventy [miles per hour] on [Highway] 59.

AE [00:41:32]: I love it. So yeah, I was going to ask you too about—there was a big boycott of Goya products, and the Goya products are the products that I see in the Montrose [neighborhood] H.E.B. And that's the giant tin of guava paste that I got. I think I gave the rest of Jessie because I'm like, what am I going to do with this? But did you have a reaction or did that affect your buying at all?

ACP [00:42:00]: No, because I mean, I need the products I need, and Goya has really good products. I'm not buying stuff from people because of their politics. And I hope people are not buying from me because of mine. I think it's a personal matter or it's like I'm not going to tell you what religion to be. So it'd be what you want to be as long as you're a decent person, it doesn't really matter. So I just, I mean, because I made *pastelitos* and I needed guava, so yeah. I have to have Goya in my pantry. And my freezer. **[Laughs]**

AE [00:42:28]: Is that a big brand in Panama City? I mean, is that what you would buy in Panama?

ACP [00:42:33]: Yeah. It is well known in Panama. We have a lot of our local brands too, but Goya is one of the brands that you'll see in Panama, Oh, and Maggi is the other one.

AE [00:42:47]: Okay. And so you were just talking about your *pastelitos*, is that like your signature dessert the—?

ACP [00:42:53]: No. So my signature dessert is a Napoleon.

AE [00:42:59]: Oh, the passion fruit.

ACP [00:43:00]: Yeah. If you come to the dinner, you'll get it. But I do have phyllo layers and I do some kind of curd, usually passion fruit or lemon. I did it with mango one time, but I think you need the tart a little bit for that. And then I put pastry cream, and it's like two layers of phyllo, and it's just deliciousness.

AE [00:43:27]: That was the dessert that I had at your popup two years ago.

ACP [00:43:31]: Yeah. It's just everything you want in your mouth.

AE [00:43:36]: So back to your dinners and things, what are some experiences you've had with the people who have like—became your regulars or memorable nights when it was just an unusual group of people or something that has stood out?

ACP [00:43:53]: I've had some really great ones. So it's interesting because there was an— I don't know if this was one of the dinners that you came to because I never know who people are, right? I opened the door, and it was a group of four. They bought their tickets together. I swear, they were like in their eighties—older, older, older, older white people and the sweetest people. And they were just such a fun addition to my table. I need to check in on them to make sure that they're okay. But these are like travelers, you know, one of the husbands we sat and talked because he served in Panama for a while and they were about to take a trip through the canal. There was just a really interesting mix of people. And then I have on the other end, millennials that are—and everybody's just hanging out, having a good time. One of them got the email at the other because something about his son was going somewhere with—and this other person could

connect him. And so just making connections with people, I think it's always interesting how that happens. I've had a couple of people that I've taken off my list because they're a little disruptive when they come to the dinners. So I want to keep it nice. So if you're not going to be a good conversationalist, or if you're going to get drunk at the table and then don't know how to behave, we're not going to have that. So it's—managing all of that has been, at times, kind of tricky. I don't really want to turn anyone away, but I also want my dinners to go the way I want my dinners to go. I don't really have control over what the conversation is when I'm not in the room, but I try to keep it polite. [00:45:54] I usually tell people, “Now let's try to stay away from politics.” But I know that they've come to some political discussions at some point, and everybody was able to have a decent conversation, and I'm perfectly okay with that. But I've also made some really amazing friends. You know, Jessie, I've become really close with Jessie. And then there's Blanca and Jorge from Puerto Rico; they come to everything I do. I've met a couple from, I think she's from Sao Paulo, [Brazil,]and she just picked up the meal that I did that was Brazilian a couple of weeks ago, and she sends me a text later and she's like, "Oh my God, you've mastered Brazilian flavors. Try these recipes." So it's—it's been fun. It's really been fun, but I miss getting together with people like that. So I'm hoping that we can get a little bit of that back through other modes of communication, if that's necessary, until something happens that changes and I can open my doors again and people can come in. Maybe by then I'll have my act together, and we'll be in—somewhere. I don't know where, but somewhere.

AE [00:47:09]: What do you mean somewhere? Like another space?

ACP [00:47:11]: No—yeah. Like a different life. Yeah. I don't know. So this has been really interesting working with a business coach because she's really helped me hone in on what it is

that I want to do. And I've always known that I wanted to keep it intimate. That's a big part. That's why it's called Secreto. So it's a secret; it's kind of underground. It's exclusive and I want to bring people together, but I want it to be manageable and I still want it to feel very customized to the people that are there. [00:47:46] So probably we'll never have more than twenty people at any given event. And twenty would be a stretch. I think my perfect number is sixteen. But sometimes you have to wiggle it because a regular we'll say, "Oh no, I didn't get in." So then we add a little bit more. But I would like to be able—I can fit sixteen people here [at my house]. So I would have to figure out what's next on how I make it sustainable for me as well as a business, not a hobby. So that's my project right now is transitioning from a hobby to full-fledged business now.

AE [00:48:28]: Well, and I wonder, too, how you're kind of wrestling with the idea of—now you're full time figuring out your passion and working on your passion, but then also having now the need to separate work from home. Because the beauty of it is doing with the popup is that it's at your home, and now you're at home all the time. And then to have some division where you can compartmentalize those two things then have—

ACP [00:48:57]: Yeah, it's funny because I've had to put myself on a schedule, which it's not unusual for me because it's how I managed the dinners before. So I knew I had the ability to choose my schedule, so I used to go in very early in the morning and leave mid afternoon. And then that would leave me a good chunk of the evenings to do prep and things like that. But I used to sit down and write down my hit list of what needed to get done for each dish, so that I could kind of stay on track. So now I started doing the same thing for the meals. So I have like, I know on Sundays I'm shopping and I'm doing some pre-work. If I'm making breads or anything like

that, those probably get started because I need to let that yeast proof. So those probably start on Sundays. And then I get up early on Monday and I hit it. And I cook from like 6:30, after I finish my coffee, until my body can't take it anymore that evening so that I can deliver starting early—starting around two on Tuesday. [00:50:06] So usually on Tuesday morning I have a little bit of cooking to finish, maybe side dishes and things like that and then packaging. But I realized that I was pushing myself so hard, and I was not taking breaks, which happens to people. Even when I was working from home because I did do a short stint while I still had my job working from home and I'd have to tell myself, so this is your start time. This is your cut time. And this is your lunchtime and whether you want it or not, you're going to take that out or are you going to walk away. [00:50:38] So I started doing that too with the cooking. It's like, you get to have an hour or an hour and a half. You put your feet up, you watch a little TV, you eat something before you go at it again. So it's a process, but I think I'm learning a little bit every week as I'm doing it. And I've increased the number of meals that I'm offering or the orders that I'm accepting because I started only with ten, and I'm close to twenty now. But if I do the virtual dinners, then that's something that I'm already looking at next week and I'm like, I'm going to be so tired next week.

AE [00:51:18]: Do you have any help?

ACP [00:51:22]: Sorry?

AE [00:51:23]: Do you have any help, or is it just all you?

ACP [00:51:26]: It's just me right now. My husband helps me if I yell loud, and if I really don't think I can do it, he'll come down and help me. But for the most part, it's just me, and I liked it that way because I'm in control. I'm a control freak. I shouldn't be, but I am. [*Laughs*]

AE [00:51:49]: No. I mean, it's your ship, you have the right to steer it and how you want it. So what—past COVID, as soon as we're given the green light to live life how we are meant to be living it and not be all locked in our houses, what is that going to be like for you?

ACP [00:52:13]: I'm going to dance down the street. I'm going to go hug everybody I know that I haven't seen in forever. I'm going to have a big old dinner right here. I'm just going to, I don't know. It almost seems like it's not good to dream that it's ever going to go back to normalcy, but at some point, we'll adjust this, and we'll just have to keep going. I'll be happy when I don't have to worry about finding ingredients and things like that because everything is such—in such demand right now, or things are not coming through the borders or whatever it is that's holding things up. But it'll be interesting to see what happens when it's all said and done. So for right now, I'm really focused on being ready for it—you know, when it happens so that I can jump and that gate goes up.

AE [00:53:18]: Yes. Well, we've been talking for a long time. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want to make sure to mention or share?

ACP [00:53:32]: No, I think that really covers it. I mean, I hope that people understand that the reason I do this, it's twofold, right? I like the bragging rights. I definitely do. But more than anything, I love bringing people together. I love—cooking for people is how I say I love you. When my husband and I first got married, he was like—I'm not a super touchy-feely kind of person, and I'm like, “I cook for you every day, and I cook for you well. That's how I tell you I love you.” So that's just it, I give a little bit of me every time. And it breaks my heart when people don't like something. I eat, too. So I don't know. It's very personal and I'm just happy to

have a gift that nurtures other people because some people don't have that. They may be really smart or, I don't know, but when you have something tangible that you can give of yourself and people get to know you through it, I think that's pretty cool.

AE [00:54:58]: Most definitely. So and everybody I've talked to, when we talk about Houston, so far, everybody seems to really believe that it's this place where anything can happen and everybody has an opportunity. There's a lot of grit and determination here. Do you—and those are people who are native Houstonians. I wonder if you, coming from Panama, if you get that same feeling about your adopted home.

ACP [00:55:27]: I mean, yeah. I guess I have. I came here, no job, no nothing. I left a marriage that wasn't good for me, broke me down in many ways. But with the help of friends from Houston, they helped build me up and helped me see further ahead than I could see at that time. Believed in me and reminded me of my skills. And I used those skills to get jobs that—some I loved, some I didn't, but I was good at them. I've never been fired from a job. So people usually try to keep me at work. *[Laughs]* And I made a name for myself. It was really humbling actually when I was released—when I was laid off—and I sent a goodbye note to colleagues in the field and the messages I got back were so touching and I thought, what a blessing to be able to know what people think about you before it's too late. Because some—you make some connections and many of those are very meaningful, but there were messages from people that I can't really remember who they were, and they were like, “You inspired me. I remember seeing you up there and I'm thinking I need to meet her.” So, I think if you work hard and you put your mind to it, only you can stop yourself. I'm not saying it's easy, right? There's always going to be a struggle, but all you have to do is take a step back and reassess and then find another way. I think it's

possible if you commit to it. So I think Houston is a good place to do it. I mean, and it's such a melting pot. It's one of the things I love about it. It makes me feel closer to home because it looks like the people in my home—you know, in my homeland. You have some blue-eyed people and some redhead people and some Black and all shades in between. And we're all the same people. So I think of any place, you can do it—except for the heat. I just wish there wasn't the heat. But other than that—**[Laughs]**

AE [00:57:59]: And I think the heat is getting worse. Because I was gone for a long time and I moved back in 2014, got here in March when it's beautiful. And by the time August came around, I was like—and I grew up here, but by the time August came around and I was like, I made the wrong decision. I can't live here. **[Laughs]**

ACP [00:58:15]: I say that every year. Because for a long time I thought I was going to leave Houston. I mean, my dream was always to live in New York. And I was always employed in Houston, so I never really had a reason to pack up and go. And now it's like, yeah. I started watching that decorating show called Hometown. I was addicted to Joanna and Chip [Gaines] on Fixer Upper, but now I've moved down to Hometown and they're in some little town in Mississippi called—what's the name of the town? Some L-something town.

AE [00:58:57]: Laurel. They're in Laurel, Mississippi. Yes.

ACP [00:59:00]: Yes, and I'm like, look at those beautiful little homes for \$50,000. Let's move!
[Laughs]

AE [00:59:07]: But you have to live in Laurel. **[Laughter]**.

ACP [00:59:11]: But what?

AE [00:59: 12] I said that they're beautiful and inexpensive, but you have to live in Laurel. That's the drawback.

ACP [00:59:18]: Yeah. [**Laughs**] Just yesterday I was doing some searches and Lindsay [Price, my husband] goes, "Yeah, I don't want to move somewhere else where it's hot." I'm like, "Well, we're still here. It's hot here. It might as well be hot somewhere where our money goes further." [**Laughs**] But I mean, all in all, Houston has been good because it's easy to travel in and out, it's a straight three-hour flight for me to go home.

AE [00:59:42]: Do you go home very often?

ACP [00:59:44]: Yeah. Now that I've made roots here, my family—my friends are here, I don't know where I would go now.

AE [00:59:50]: Do you go back home to Panama very often?

ACP [00:59:53]: It's been a while. Last time I was there—I was planning on going this year. I was there three years ago, four years, maybe. So my sister and my dad, they'll come here. So my dad came the last couple of years. My sister came the year before, and I was going to go down and then now this. But I don't go as often as I should. [**Short pause**] It's life. Sometimes it's also—I want to see other parts of the world too. So it's like when you have limited vacation time, although now I know that I did, I had a nice amount of vacation. It's just by the time you pinch

your pennies together, it's like, I don't want to go to this place. So yeah, I need to go home. It's probably the first thing I'll do once we're able to travel is just go there.

AE [01:00:58]: All right. Well, Anamaris, I can't thank you enough for this amazing conversation. I'm so—

ACP [01:01:03]: Thank you, this was fun.

AE [01:01:04]: Yeah. And yes. So I will end the recording. Thank you for your time. And then we'll chat a little bit.

ACP [01:01:12]: Okay.

[END]