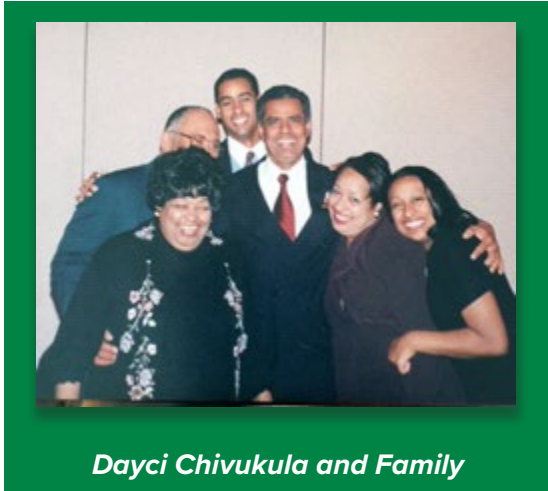


Chef Stories

Chef: Dayci Chivukula

Recipe: Black Bean Soup, Cuban Rice & Beans



Dayci Chivukula and Family

Hola! My name is Dayci Chivukula. I was born in Havana, Cuba. I came to U.S.A. in 1974 after living in Spain for two years. During my stay in Madrid, I had the opportunity of exploring the authentic Spanish gastronomy. It is an incredible way to prepare amazing dishes influenced by Mediterranean cultures.

While in Spain, I used to compare these traditional dishes with the ones I used to enjoy in my motherland. My relationship with the

typical Cuban food comes from over half a century ago. It all started at my maternal grandmother's ancestral house. It was located in the heart of Havana, Centro Havana or Cayo Hueso (they used to call it that when I lived there). As I remember, it was the cradle of Cuban music and epicenter of cultural life. Across the street used to live the Portuondo sisters: Haidee and Omara (still an internationally known singer). I also remember a young and affectionate Celia Cruz who used to visit her good friend, Juana, my great aunt. Above all, I remember the great feasts for celebrations and the well-planned menus to honor the guests. I never met my great-grandmother, Dulce Maria. However, from my early childhood I have heard that the nine daughters and the three sons she brought up learnt cooking by stepping on a stool near the coal fire first and the kerosene stove later. All of them were a testimonial of their mother's dexterity and passion when she prepared delicacies worthy of the Caribbean royalty.

One of the daughters was my unforgettable grandmother, Africa Maria. I remember how beautifully she sang while she was spreading her magic in the kitchen. I never saw her measure any ingredient or even glancing at a recipe. Everything was engraved in the great cookbook she kept printed in her brain and in her heart. I still believe that she

used to cook as she sang: she did it with all her soul. She consistently made more food than needed for our family even when there was a food shortage. She justified it by using her favorite quote: "Nobody leaves my home without eating because anywhere two people can eat, so can do three!" In my opinion, we had many people dropping by around lunch time because they couldn't resist the aroma coming out of our apartment's humble kitchen. The fragrance of the spices engulfed the whole building. It was a stimulus to the senses and an open invitation to a memorable dish. I used to help her to prepare everything, but she never allowed me to cut anything or to be near the stove. Everything was so fast that I was never able to learn to prepare her emblematic dishes as well as she did. Frijoles, carnes, chorizos, morcillas, tocinos, platanos, malangas, yucas, names, and boniato always used to find a place in her creations. This was an amazing combination of her African and European roots

My mother, Virgilia Sira, learned more from her than I did. However, she created her very personal cooking style combining ingredients and methods she learned during the time we lived in Madrid. In addition, she incorporates special techniques that she has been learning watching cooking shows with international chefs. Her love and passion for cooking took a while to get to me. Every time she comes to visit with my stepfather, a culinary festival begins. My stepfather is originally from Palma Soriano, Oriente, located in the east of the island. Since we are from the west, we can appreciate some difference in the preparation of many dishes. I have never eaten a better roasted pork than the one he prepares! He is an expert in seasoning, cooking and even cutting meats. His signature dishes are always present in our celebration tables. My mother also prepares delicious meat and seafood dishes. She is an expert cook and prepares yuca con mojo, tostones, maduros, frituras, and the always present frijoles negros. I learned how to prepare them from her. Bon Appetit!