



Elisa Irvolino, of Patchogue, gets ready to demonstrate how to make gluten- and grain-free yuca tortillas at the Suffolk County Farm and Education Center in Yaphank.

Cooking as a love language

Blogger explores the importance of food in Hispanic cultures and makes a few tweaks along the way

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

On an afternoon earlier this month, Elisa Irvolino found herself in the kitchen of Ruta Oaxaca, an authentic Mexican restaurant in Patchogue. Chef and co-owner Carlos Areallano, 40, expertly tossed chorizo, steak and chicken on the grill, while teaching Irvolino the ingredients for enchiladas and tacos, including queso Chihuahua cheese, morito

salsa, chilies and mole.

As the two spoke, Irvolino's son, Anthony, 17, filmed the cooking lesson on his cell phone. It will later be posted to her Instagram account — all part of an effort to celebrate Hispanic heritage year-round, rather than just during one month.

The project, said Irvolino, is “important to me because there are so many countries, it's hard to celebrate them all in [National] Hispanic Heritage Month. That's why I chose to



dedicate a month to every country this year.”

National Hispanic Heritage Month is celebrated from Sept. 15 through Oct. 15.

Since January, Irvolino, 53, has been posting videos and blogs to her website, elisairvolino.com, and Instagram

highlighting different countries and territories to help Long Island Latinos connect to their roots through food. To date she has recognized Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Mexico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Spain, with Colombia and Chile coming up over the next two months. Her project, Sazón y Corazón — which she said translates to “seasoning and love” — was born of a feeling of disconnect to her Dominican Republic heritage and the realization that

her own and other families' recipes were being lost.

“A lot of people don't know how to cook Latino. Maybe they're second-generation and their mom didn't give them the recipes because in our cultures we don't write things down,” the Patchogue resident said.

Her goal is to visit Long Island restaurants from different Latin cultures to learn how they cook, she said. “Every culture cooks food completely

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Connecting through food

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different, so I've just been learning myself and then sharing that with other people."

RICE, BEANS AND THE BEACH

Irvolino grew up in Astoria, the oldest child of immigrants. She remembers that her mother always cooked Dominican food and that every weekend was spent with her mother's family in Woodside, during which food was a big part of the gathering.

"If we went anywhere, like the beach, we'd take rice with beans together — a big pot of moro — and hot chocolate, some bread and a pot of spaghetti with salami, onions, peppers," Irvolino said. "We'd arrive at the beach at 6 in the morning with our pot and some paper plates and we'd spend the entire day there with our food. We never had sandwiches or anything American. It was always Dominican stuff."

In 1995, her family moved to Bay Shore, making that connection to her relatives — and her food heritage — logistically challenging. It was the beginning, she said, of her feelings of isolation as a Latina.

"Living here was completely different than Queens, where you could walk around the corner and buy fresh cilantro, lemons, limes, everything you need to cook," she said. "Here you had to drive to the supermarket, where maybe they had a little section with some Spanish groceries."

Meanwhile, Irvolino said that at work and in her community she was the only Latina. "I was completely surrounded by Americans, and little by little every year I was getting more and more disconnected. Then I got married to an Italian man, so I wasn't living with my mom, where every day I was guaranteed Dominican food. And he likes to cook, so a lot of our meals were Italian and American."

'SOFRITO SUNDAY'

Eventually she and her husband, Arthur, moved to Patchogue, and she said she started experimenting with cooking Dominican food for their four children. But it wasn't until 2019 that she truly reconnected with that heritage.



ELIZABETH SAGARIN

Irvolino at home, where she creates content for her Instagram account. She calls her pan-Hispanic project Sazón y Corazón.

Every culture cooks food completely different, so I've just been learning myself and then sharing that with other people."

— Elisa Irvolino, who is focusing on a different Hispanic cuisine every month

Irvolino said that after decades of feeling isolated, she met Dorothy Santana after responding to a Facebook post about a "Sofrito Sunday" Santana was hosting through her organization, Latina Moms Connect. Santana, 54, of North Babylon, describes it as a group that brings together mothers and families who are looking to connect to their culture and explore ways they can nurture cultural pride in their kids. During the quarterly Sofrito Sunday, participants bring an ingredient to make a cooking base called sofrito to take home to use in their cooking.

"When I got there they were all Latinas. They were all talking about how they felt isolated and the challenges of

raising bicultural children on Long Island," Irvolino recalled. "I left there practically in tears that there were a lot of other women I can hang out with."

She said the experience made her more aware that as relatives were getting older and moving away, it was even harder to maintain the food heritage that had been so important to her growing up.

"It happens in every family where moms don't write down recipes," Irvolino said. "My mother would never be able to tell you how much salt to put in a recipe, because that's just not a thing. So a lot of people my age who are first- or second-generation don't have their parents' or their grandma's recipes."

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC TRIP

A trip to the Dominican Republic last November was the last ingredient that jump-started her current project. They stayed in a private villa where their meals were prepared for them.

"It was like a chain reaction, because we met women who were cooking in the kitchen and we'd go grocery shopping with them and we asked to cook with them," said her husband Arthur, 66. "Elisa came back and got inspired to go to all of these other Latino places."

For Irvolino, it was a reminder that "food is our love language, especially for Latinos." Pointing to the table for 12 that has a prominent position near her front door, she

added, "My daughters, my sons and grandkids come over all the time and we gather around this table and we're not ordering takeout. When Latino families gather you are eating rice, beans, plantains, chicken, all fresh food. So I'm kind of making a move back toward that."

USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Irvolino, who said she had a 30-year career as an ultrasound technician, has had to learn how to create social media content and videos. Her main goal has been to emphasize the variety of Latino restaurants on Long Island. She also vowed to learn how to cook something new from each culture she's highlighting. For instance, she said she's learned to make pupusas, which



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Irvolino visited Ruta Oaxaca Mexican restaurant in Patchogue to talk with co-owners Carlos Areallano, left, and Jose Castillo for her project.

Irvolino co-hosted an event for women in Yaphank this month, left, that included a healthy-cooking demonstration.

are El Salvadorean tortillas; Puerto Rican rice, beans and plantains; and Costa Rican empanadas with rice and red kidney beans, as well as chorizo.

She said the most enjoyable part is hearing the stories that chefs share about their families. "It's not just about cooking. For me, it's more like your love story. How did you fall in love with cooking? How'd you fall in love with food? Tell me about what your childhood was like and what your grandma cooked like," Irvolino said.

She recalled a recent visit to Tiesto's Restaurant in Patchogue, which serves Ecuadorean food. The chef's daughter talked about growing up in her grandmother's restaurant "and she just lit up. So

that's been a highlight for me, seeing the family connections. Most Latino restaurants here are serving food passed down from generation to generation, and that's them keeping their culture alive. So I feel like that's so important."

When she's not visiting restaurants, Irvolino has been traveling and blogging about it. In April she went to Little Havana in Miami to explore Cuban food.

"I didn't start posting videos because I thought I was going to make money or anything like that," Irvolino said. "It was more about writing down my mom's recipes, a way to document recipes from my own family, to pass that down to my children. I hope that all these cultures are doing the same

thing and keeping their heritage alive for their future generations."

FOCUS ON HEALTHY EATING

When this year is over, Irvolino said she would like to write cookbooks — starting with Dominican food — and have a cooking show. In the meantime, she's become more conscious of the need to incorporate healthy eating into her quest to celebrate Latinos' food heritage.

"I've been trying some recipes and diet plans where I can still keep my culture, because I think a lot of Latinos don't do diets that doctors tell them because they have to give up everything they love," Irvolino said. "You're telling a Latino they

can't have carbs and they're not going to eat plantains ever in their life? It's just not going to happen."

She has partnered with another Latina Moms Connect member, Yari DeLeon, 51, of Holbrook. Earlier this month, they hosted a group retreat with a focus on empowering other women through cultural and holistic means. The event was held at the Suffolk County Farm and Education Center in Yaphank. Irvolino did a cooking demonstration using the yuca, the root of the cassava plant, to make grain-free tortillas from scratch.

"Her passion is so real. This is something that she knows that she was meant to do," DeLeon said. "She's an excellent cook and she makes it look easy and makes people say I want to try that."

FINDING INGREDIENTS — AND EACH OTHER

Santana, who facilitates professional development for educators on Long Island and attended the retreat, said, "What Elisa is doing is important — not only offering these opportunities for people to connect to culture through food, but she also gives people resources of where they could find special ingredients, which is hard to find on such a segregated Long Island. We connect to culture through various means, like storytelling, through art and music, traditions and through food. And so the fact that she's bringing people together to give them that opportunity I think is wonderful."

Irvolino said what's most important for her is to teach men and women to cook healthy options. "They can

Pollo Guisado

Elisa Irvolino's family recipe for the stewed chicken dish:

INGREDIENTS

1 tablespoon sazón*
Vegetable oil
Family pack of bone-in chicken thighs
Large red onion, sliced
Large red bell pepper, sliced
Large yellow bell pepper, sliced
A few olives and capers to taste
1 teaspoon tomato paste or 1 tablespoon tomato sauce
Juice of three large limes
Salt, pepper and hot sauce to taste
Sugar
Optional: A few cilantro leaves with stems

DIRECTIONS

Add enough oil to coat the pan.
Add enough sugar to lightly coat the pan.
Cook on medium heat until sugar is dark brown.
Add the chicken.
Brown on both sides.
Add the sazón and lime juice.
Add water and cover.
Cook for 20 minutes or until the chicken is tender.
Add the remaining ingredients and cook on low until the vegetables are tender and you have a nice sauce.
Add cilantro if using.
Serve over rice and enjoy!

*Recipe here: bit.ly/3zyLC

keep their heritage alive while taking care of their health. If I can make a little impact for the future generations of Latinos, that's enough for me."



Irvolino, right, and her mother, Meryda Aybar, who helped inspire her to learn more about cooking the foods she grew up with.