

Marion: Is it called House of Spice or House of Spices?

Carlos: It's called House of Spice. House of spices too many spices get people, they'll get confused. So it's Carlos' House of Spice.

Marion: You specialize in spice?

Carlos: I hope I do. I've been doing this for a long time.

Introduction

Marion: This podcast is dear to my heart. It's about my Toronto home, Kensington Market. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth, and welcome to Sittin' in the Kitchen. As a podcaster, I notice what I call good talkers in my daily life. Carlos Perreira is a good talker. I've known him for about 40 years since I moved into my beloved downtown neighborhood. But things are changing. I talked with Carlos at the famous and popular store he now owns, Carlos' House of Spice. Please listen to the end of the podcast when he says nice things about life and about me.

Marion: Carlos, you know me for a long time and I know you. How long?

Carlos: We probably go back close to 40 years. Yes. I think I was 15 when I started in the market. 15 years old.

Marion: You started working here in the same store?

Carlos: In the same store here at the age of 15 in grade 7, going into grade 8 before high school.

Marion: What year did you start working here?

Carlos: 1977. It was a Wednesday!

Marion: Your store couldn't exist in another place. It cries out Kensington. It's higgledy-piggledy. It's rickety and it's crowded and smells nice. You have an array of ethnic foods from all around the world. It makes me happy.

Carlos: Yes, that's what I want people to make them happy. When they come in here, they're wanting all different smells. They're happy to buy the fill their baskets - better for me, you know? I mean, people come from all over and when they come for spices. She goes, Carlos, how come your spices the best in Toronto? I said, well, I have the reputation. I've been doing this for the past 40 years, so I have to make sure that my blends and my spices are the best.

Marion: Every ethnic group purchase ingredients from your store. What is the most common ethnic group?

Carlos: We get English people, West Indian people, Chinese people. They, we have middle Eastern people. We have, it's all a blend. There's not one more than the other.

Marion: English people buy something I love. The bottles of Marmite are here.

Carlos: Yes, Marmite is a very staple item in this store here.

Marion: You have preserved lemons and an array honey and an array of teas, dried beans, nuts...what else?

Carlos: Well, there's dry fruits, tons of hot sauce.

Marion: Yes! Is hot sauce popular?

Carlos: Hot sauce is very popular in our place. Especially Mado's hot sauce, which has been our number one seller for many, many years and it's, I think one of the best sauce in Toronto.

Marion: You have Patak's line of ingredients for Indian curries.

Carlos: Yes. We had the whole line of Patak and the people just love that from the UK.

Marion: We'll go downstairs now and face the stairs. The stairs are narrow and steep.

Carlos: It's called the Kensington Market stairs.

Marion: They're dicey and narrow and steep and rickety. It's full of bags of rice, big bags, and boxes. And Carlos has an office in here. A small, crowded, cozy office. Can you close the door?

Carlos: Yes my dear.

Marion: Oh, it's soundproof, like a studio.

Carlos: Yeah, it's beautiful. It's comfortable here. Sometimes you don't want to get away from it all. Just chill for a second, have a bite to eat and do my paperwork. This is the place, you know.

Marion: What was Kensington Market like in the late '70s?

Carlos: Kensington Market in the late '70s was very different. Even though we had a lot of ethnic groups but a lot of fish stores. Meat stores, amazing. You know, and that's changing, you know?

Marion: Was it called the Jewish market?

Carlos: Yeah, they used to call it the Kensington Jewish Market back in the day.

Marion: Were there chickens, live chickens on the sidewalk in cages?

Carlos: Yes. The chickens were in cages in the sidewalks. And once in a while chickens will escape and they'll fly down, going down Augusta and he'll be chasing my chickens - catch my chickens! That's the Kensington Market, man, you know?

Marion: How has it changed Kensington Market in 2020?

Carlos: Quite a bit, you know. It's a lot of fancy restaurants and bars, which is probably good for the market, but you know, this is Kensington Market man. It's like family, you know, and when you start bringing all these different things in here, it kind of disturbs a little bit.

Marion: There are a lot more restaurants and bars now than 40 years ago.

Carlos: Oh, much more, much more restaurants and bars. It's also getting costly. People tell me Carlos, Kensington Market is changing. I say because if you don't own the building or the property, someone's got to pay for the expense. You know, landlord raises, you have a raise, products raise, you got to raise, you buy stuff that's more expensive, you got to also charge according to you what you can could afford. So that's the reason that it has changed, you know, but I think it's a good thing for the Kensington Market to have all these restaurants and bars. But I feel people that are living in the Market, some staying open 4 in the morning or 5 in the morning. But majority of them, this is the Kensington Market, man. And I feel, you know, from all different markets like St. Lawrence Market and Cabbagetown, this is still considered number one.

Marion: Many greengrocers and fresh produce have gone.

Carlos: Yes, they have gone. Because again, rent and tax is very hard for them to keep going.

Marion: Old ladies, grandmothers used to buy a bushel of apples to can. That has ended.

Carlos: Yeah. I think that has more or less ended. It used to be different, you know, Polish people, Hungarian, all kinds of Europeans buying bushels of peppers. I don't see that any more in Kensington Market. And it's sad because I used to be the good old days, tons of displays of fruit and vegetables. You still see some of them, you know, like the one on Kensington and St. Andrews, the Portuguese, supermarket, which has a very great display, their fruit and vegetables and also up on Nassau and Augusta. That's basically it.

Marion: Families used to run the stores. Casa was run by several brothers. Now it's an Istanbul restaurant.

Carlos: Yes. Uh, Casa was running for 50 years by the brothers. We go back all those years ago. Now all these new restaurants opened up like the Istanbul paying through the roof rent.

Marion: How much is rent?

Carlos: I think he's paying \$13,000 a month.

Marion: Sanagan's, the butcher is taken over European meats. It's a good butcher.

Carlos: Sanagan's is a good butcher because it's the only one in the Market that people need to go. It's organic lot of stuff. People tell me, Oh, this place is great, is some say it's a bit pricey, but that's what you get when you come to the Market and you only have one place to shop. You cannot, there's no competitive place any other place, I'm happy for Sanagan's, you know.

Marion: Walmart wanted to open in the Market and residents and merchants were up in arms and stopped it.

Carlos: I was not against having a Walmart there because I feel for business being a specialty store, like mine, I don't worry about it other places.

Marion: You have your niche.

Carlos: Yes, I do have my own thing. I don't worry about because people do support me for what I sell all these years. I wasn't bothered about Walmart whatsoever opening up because, well, the Loblaws opened up at Spadina and College and didn't affect the Market and that that place opened up at Nassau and College, I don't think effected the Market.

Marion: Kensington market has survived for more than 100 years. It's gone through crises and adversity. Why has Kensington Market survived? Why is it special?

Carlos: Well, Kensington Market is still very special because people from all different groups and nationalities come here to shop. You know, my nieces came here, my god-daughter came here last week, she couldn't believe it. It's like eye-opening because all the little stores and everyone going to their place to picking up the what they want. This is what's Kensington. It doesn't matter how old's going to be, how it changes. It's still the Kensington Market.

Marion: What do you think, Carlos, of Kensington being heritage site?

Carlos: I think Kensington Market should be a heritage site. It's been over 100 years that people have, families have come to the Kensington Market. Sure it's changed. Like everything that you have to change with times, you know, and the money has to come from somewhere for people to spend. It does not grow on trees!

Marion: It's my home. I tried to leave it, Kensington, in the mid 2000s. I came back, tail between my legs. I've got a home. It's Kensington Market.

Carlos: Well yes Marion, you came back because it's your love. You know your kids grew up. You patrol the Kensington Market, everybody knows Marion Kane. I go back for 40 years for Pete's sakes. People still ask me that. No, that woman Marion Kane from the Toronto Star you still see her? Yeah, she comes to the store once in a while, you know, beautiful woman, smart woman. You know, and this is what, when people tell me I love the Kensington Market, so do I man, this is where I live. That's where I made friends. You know, everybody knows Carlos. It's something special, whoever puts their foot in here.

Marion: I've been to London, I grew up there and to New York and other big cities. There's no place like Kensington Market. It's colorful. It's feisty. It's a family.

Carlos: I agree 100% when you come unite together, I mean, it's hard to, for me to explain. When you come on what they call that Pedestrian Sunday, you cannot believe how many people come in this Market. It's unbelievable, you know? And I hope they don't ever change.

Marion: I always ask a last question. What gives you hope?

Carlos: What gives me hope, Marion, is that I'm able to keep going strong still my health and keep this hustle, spice in the Kensington Market. Carlos' Houses Spice because the Market still going strong because you know, people say Carlos, you better never leave this Market because I'll kill you. I said, hey, as long as I'm, you know, have my health and I have the motivation as I'm getting older, you know, pains here and there. But I love coming here and meeting the people that all these years that I've known and it makes my day a good one and a happy one because it's important to smile. People don't smile. A lot of the businesses are struggling and they forget the learn how to smile because once we smile, then everything becomes a little bit easier. Doesn't matter if it's a business anywhere you work, people are so sad, too much things, too many problems on the mind. And when you can't enjoy your job, you have to come here and enjoy anyone that steps in this place here, they're happy to be here.

Marion: I'm happy to be here.

Carlos: I'm very happy that you came here and did this with me because you know what? You're a very special woman. You know all the years that I know you. And I've always said you're a very intelligent woman and you get to doing other things for the

kids in the market. You always stepped up and still you're happy to come around and help us all.

Marion: Thank you.

Carlos: That was my conversation with Carlos Pereira of Carlos' House of Spice. Find the store's page on Facebook to learn more or just drop by the next time you're in Kensington Market. You won't regret it. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth. You can find most stories like this one at marionkane.com and in Apple podcasts. Thank you for listening.