

Theme Music

Marion Kane: Miami is a hotbed of Cuban cuisine. Armed with tips from an insider I discovered the most delicious authentic Cuban food in that fabulous city. We're not just talking sandwiches, beans and rice. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth, and welcome to "Sittin' in the Kitchen". Carlos Frias was born in America to Cuban exiles but growing up in South Florida he was never far from the food and culture of his family. He's an award-winning journalist and is currently food editor for the *Miami Herald*. Carlos and I sat down to chat in an office adjacent to the *Herald* newsroom.

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Marion Kane: I'm with Carlos Frias. Your father was in a labour camp in Cuba. How did that happen?

Carlos Frias: My dad was one of 11 brothers and sisters who grew up farming kids in the Alabama of Cuba. They made their way from that far western province to the city of Havana and became business owners so they owned little cafés. They started off by literally asking for space at a big plaza just to sell Cuban coffee at 5 cents a cup. When the Cuban Revolution came, it was Communist and they nationalized all personal businesses. So they lost everything quite literally overnight. Soldiers showed up at their place of business and asked them for the keys, told them to leave everything in the cash register. They marched them out the door, locked it behind them and that was the last time they were employed.

Marion Kane: Was that in the late 1950s?

Carlos Frias: It was more like early 1960s. The Revolution had been in place a couple years. My father and a couple of his brothers they weren't given visas to leave the country so they tried to sneak out of the country on a speedboat and they were caught. For that they had to spend two years in prison and two years in a forced labour camp. Folks who were in opposition to the government and wanted to leave had to first work two years to leave Cuba. They had to earn their right to be considered traitors to the Revolution. They were later called exiles. It's different from being an immigrant in the sense that their passports were nullified so when they left they could never come back. That's the story of many of that first wave of Cuban Americans in south Florida today.

Marion Kane: Your dad cooked in the labour camp and you have a story about his dessert *Dulce de Palma Frias*. What is that?

Carlos Frias: While he was in the labour camp they were looking for ways to get out of that hard labour - digging latrines, basically digging ditches out in the fields, and the previous chef of the labour camp had worked two years and he got his visa and they asked, "Is there a chef? Is there anybody who knows how to cook?", and my dad raised his hand and said, "I know how to cook but I need my brother as my assistant because we've only ever worked together." So he got himself and his brother out of the hard labour into working in the kitchen. Now he didn't know anything about cooking in the sense that they'd owned restaurants so he had watched the chefs cook, he had cooked at home, but never was he himself the chef of a restaurant or anything like that.

Marion Kane: How old was he at that time?

Carlos Frias: He must have been about 40 years old because he got his visa to leave at 42 so he must've been right around 40 to 41. These men who had been working these extremely laborious jobs were basically fed a very steady diet of just beans and rice, like split pea and rice. They were craving anything that was different and my dad one day while he's getting ready in the kitchen he realizes that somebody had chopped down these four huge Cuban palms. He just remembered a story his father had told him about the days of the original Cuban Independence in the 1800s. How men had sustained themselves in the hills while fighting by eating nothing but the hearts of palms, of Cuban palms. He gets this idea and he tells the guys working the fields, "Hey, will you guys clean the hearts of palm from those trees?" So they cut down the hearts of palm from these huge Cuban palms and they're about a foot tall

and they're glistening white and he takes them and he chunks them up and cooks them with plenty of sugar. They had some spices available like star anise, cinnamon and he just cooks it down until it's this syrupy mass of sweetened heart of palms. Men come in from the work camp that day and he's written on a sandwich board, on a chalk board, "Today's Menu: Split Pea and Rice, and *Dulce de Palma Frias*". Palma Frias dessert.

Marion Kane: He added his name to it?

Carlos Frias: He certainly did. Like any chef, he immediately takes credit for it and trademarks it. The men sit down, men who had not had anything sweet in months and they just fall in love with the dish. They fall in love with it so much that the next day my father wakes up to find these men had cut down another 12 palms.

Marion Kane: Very popular.

Carlos Frias: Exactly. It just became a story with them so that even years later when he was here in Miami he was crossing the street and a guy who had been in prison with him recognized him and called to him, "Frias! Frias!". Turns out he owned a restaurant and said, "As long as I'm alive and own this restaurant you'll never pay for a meal here." And my dad, during some very lean years in Miami, he was able to eat for free at this man's restaurant.

Marion Kane: Have you laid claim to this recipe he invented?

Carlos Frias: I don't know if he invented it or if he had a great idea. We don't even know. My dad never made this for us because the Cuban palm is really hard to get ahold of and any fresh palm they're very difficult to get ahold of. As a matter of fact the Cuban palm is protected in Florida so you can't even cut it down because obviously to get the hearts you have to kill the tree so we never had it. He has never given me any proof as to whether it's any good but it does make for a heck of a story.

Marion Kane: Yeah! It's a beautiful story. I'm immersed in Cuban food since researching you and I am indebted to you for introducing me to a place called *Palacio de los Jugos*. Could you pronounce that correctly?

Carlos Frias: Okay. In Spanish it's *Palacio de los Jugos*. It's the Juice Palace.

Marion Kane: It's a palace, a cornucopia of Cuban food. I went to the one on 1545 Southwest 27th Avenue. Do you know that one?

Carlos Frias: Yeah, that's one of my favourite ones. It's the cleanest and it's busy and it's well-lit. What's really neat about it is it's one building as you saw but there are several stations so you might pay three or four times depending on whether you're having dessert or a *frita* which is a shredded fried way of preparing beef.

Marion Kane: So people can get an idea of what it is it's huge. Counters of mostly hot food. I don't know how many dishes on steam tables produced and served by different vendors.

Carlos Frias: It can be a lot. It can be overwhelming.

Marion Kane: I went over to the pork area. You say Cuban food is pork and coffee.

Carlos Frias: That's it. Miami is powered on pork and coffee.

Marion Kane: I took your column that you list several items that you ate at *Palacio*: shredded chicken and rice, fried pork belly, fried shredded beef, sweet plantain mash, roasted calabasa. I noticed there was a lot of meat and seafood, shrimp in various sauces and lobster, fried fish and steamed fish and my

favourite vegetable. There were mostly carbs in the vegetable department and my favourite vegetable is yucca.

Carlos Frias: The yucca with the kind of Latin *mojo* on it with the garlic and the onions. You know it's great because when they fry the yucca in the garlic actually turns almost green, it goes through a chemical reaction where you know it's changed and it gives this really rich flavour to the yucca. The yucca cooks in its own starches so it becomes almost goopy. That's like, "Oh, my God." What a perfect pairing to something that has a little more texture in it. The flavour's amazing.

Marion Kane: Yes. I discovered yucca a few years ago in Florida and my daughter, then young - about nine or 10 - loved it. It has a quality that's more delicious than a potato and creamy.

Carlos Frias: What's funny is yucca you can grow down here and it grows like a weed. My dad right now in his yard probably has a half dozen yucca plants. It's a root vegetable. It's just like a big tuber and my dad can usually tell by looking at the leaves when the root is ready and you pull it up, wash them off, scrape them off and just chunk them up and boil them in salted water. You can later add a separate *mojo* like there's a *mojo* that we love to make...

Marion Kane: What's a *mojo*?

Carlos Frias: A *mojo* is a kind of a marinade you can apply almost like a *chimichurri*. It's like a marinade that's great to marinade in but also to apply afterwards. It's really a combination of good Spanish olive oil, garlic cloves, yellow or white onion, salt and pepper and a little dried oregano. And plenty of either sour orange - sour orange is the preferred - but you can also do sour orange and Persian limes are very popular in Cuban cooking. You heat the oil. You mix the other ingredients so they almost start to cook the way a ceviche does and then you quickly pour the oil into the liquid and cover it so it kind of flash-fries it. That fluid you just let it sit for a minute and pour that over the freshly boiled tender yucca and it's magic. It's so simple and it's magic.

Marion Kane: I'm going to start a yucca stand in Toronto. You talk about the same thing I harp on often, that food is the best way to connect with people.

Carlos Frias: Yeah. I think the best way to tell about a culture is to tell about how it developed its food. You can look at something called *la papa rellena*. It's a ball of mashed potatoes where there is a seasoned ground beef at the center. Imagine the Earth's core, there's a meat at the core and it's surrounded by mashed potatoes and it's covered in a flash-fried breading. So you get a thin crisp on the outside, the mashed potato on the inside and the meat on the inside. That tells you a lot about a culture - a culture where starches and potatoes and things had to go a long way and eat is scarce. It's poor people food. Massimo Bottura when he was in town - he was in Miami a couple weeks ago - I brought him a little box of the kind of pastries, the welcome gift that you find at any Latin party in Miami. It has these phyllo dough pastries that in Cuban culture are called *pastelitos*. Puerto Ricans have a different version and in Latin America they have different doughier thicker versions but these are very light. They're filled with things like sweet guava paste. Others are like a creamy cheese. Some are filled with meat. I took him a package of those and some of the potatoes - the *papa renellas* - and these other things which are at the center of Miami food culture which is *croquetas*. It's a croquette. It's a creamy ham-based little meat stick. It looks like a fish stick. Crispy on the outside. Very thin crisp on the outside and creamy and ham on the inside, although they do make chicken and cod. I just took him a box of that and I just asked him, "What does this say about this culture?" We had a nice discussion over a box of sweets and it was nice.

Marion Kane: I like that. I know chef Massimo Bottura. He's the king of recycling food. He's got a war on food waste and I believe in that totally. Leftovers actually, and simple foods, make the best meals.

Carlos Frias: It's funny. I was just having this conversation. I'm in the middle of writing a story in defense of brown food.

Marion Kane: You champion the underdog.

Carlos Frias: Absolutely. We live in an age now where everything has to be Instagrammable and beautiful and it has to invite you on your 4-inch screen. The truth is some of the most delicious food across cultures are brown and unattractive. Lentils in Ethiopian and Middle Eastern culture. A good *bolognese* sauce cooked over a long time is brown, it's not red. *Picadillo* which is a cooked ground beef in Cuban culture...

Marion Kane: You put capers and raisins in it. That is brilliant.

Carlos Frias: Yeah. It's a little pop of at the end just to give a little bit of sweetness and that little bit of vinegarness. A *picadillo* is different in every household. Everybody adds different things because it's kind of like a leftover-style of food. It's one of those things that few people order out because everybody makes it at home.

Marion Kane: I did order it out last night at Puerto Sagua in South Beach. I love that restaurant. They had peas in their *picadillo* and they didn't have raisins or capers but it was good. A neighbouring guy who heard me talking about food - he was a Latina, Cuban - he said to put my black beans in the middle of my rice. That's the proper way to eat it. He showed me his sandwich - half moon on sweet-ish bread with ham - he gave me a piece actually - pickles and cheese. Do you know that sandwich?

Carlos Frias: Yeah, absolutely. There are two sandwiches that you are going to see that are typical sandwiches from the Cuban tradition. The one you're talking about is called *la Medianoche* which is called the Midnight Sandwich. It's on a sweet egg bread and it's always got ham, marinated roasted pork, mustard, dill pickles and, in some cases, mayonnaise. It's very divisive. Mayonnaise can be divisive I guess. The secret to that sandwich is then the bun is buttered on both sides and then it's pressed so that it's flattened and cooked to a light crisp on the top. The only difference between that and the Cuban sandwich is the Cuban sandwich is made on Cuban bread and it's a little bit bigger and both are just typical Miami sandwiches.

Marion Kane: I like sandwiches well done and this was well done. Your two daughters were on Food Network on *Chopped Junior* and one of them won.

Carlos Frias: Yeah. It was pretty exciting there. A year ago in late 2016, they decided they wanted to fill out an application and be on *Chopped*. Working with their mom they filled out the paperwork. We were really not sure what to expect and within 10 days they got a call and shortly thereafter they gave them some instructions about practicing for a week and they were on *Chopped*. It was a siblings episode of *Chopped* where they competed individually but also alongside two other siblings from New York. They were judged by Marcus Samuelsson and the Voltaggio brothers, Brian and Michael. Really, what a great experience it turned out to be for them. As you mentioned, my youngest is a *Chopped Junior* champion.

Marion Kane: I'm addicted to that show - *Chopped*. I want to say that I'm indebted to you for one other thing - that my hotel room fridge is full of *empanadas*.

Carlos Frias: Yeah, because you made your way out to Empanada Harry's.

Marion Kane: I did.

Carlos Frias: Yeah. That's one of those stories that I think that I try to look for in our jobs which is finding folks that are creating something with a real skill and also from the heart. This young man, Harry Coleman, which is the most American name, but he actually has lineage going back to Chile so they're Chilean. He started baking in Chile and then later in Venezuela and now the young man and his wife who is Puerto Rican have this little *empanada* shop on the very western reaches of our suburbs here. It's become a hit with people out there because they make *empanadas* from all over Latin America. Every country has its own version of *empanada* and they try to faithfully create versions from each of those countries and you can get it all under one roof.

Marion Kane: I've got several examples in my fridge. I've been eating them for breakfast. One has ground beef and dates in it. It's delicious.

Carlos Frias: It's delicious. That one with the dates is really special. That's the thing - some represent countries and some are just him being creative and doing something different.

Marion Kane: He's a chef.

Carlos Frias: He is. Absolutely. He may not have studied at culinary school. As a matter of fact, he and his wife are both journalism grads who could not find work after graduating in 2008 and started working with his father who now owns literally one of the best-known Venezuelan bakeries in Miami Beach and they decided to give it a shot as bakers themselves and have had great success.

Marion Kane: That gives me hope as a journalist for my yucca stand.

Carlos Frias: That's right, our Plan B. Let's get started on that Plan B.

Marion Kane: Thank you Carlos, very much.

Carlos Frias: A pleasure Marion.

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Marion Kane: That was my conversation with *Miami Herald* food editor Carlos Frias. Find him on twitter at carlos_frias. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth. You can find more stories like this one at marionkane.com and in Apple Podcasts. Thank you for listening.

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