

Of food and community: Bernal Heights Latina shares life stories over a cooking lesson

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When Angelina De Anda makes chicken soup, her first step is to dice ginger and garlic into coins, to flavor the water. When her mom made chicken soup, the first steps were to â??kill and pluck the chicken!â?• she recounts with a rueful grin.



Angelina De Anda in her Bernal Heights kitchen. (All photos by Colin Campbell.)

â??Though we lived in the border city of Cuidad Juarez, we had no electricity, no running water, and my mother cooked on a grill over a wood fire to feed us.â?•

Today at 95, Angelina â?? blithe, agile and funny, with soft grey curlsâ?? is a beloved figure in her Bernal Heights neighborhood. Sheâ??s a fixture at her parish church, St. Kevin, where she has several roles.

â??Some weekends, I make 100 to 200 tamales in the church basement kitchen,â?• she said. â??We feed the parishioners after Mass, and we also feed the homeless. Also, I regularly help out counting the money (donations) because the Padre trusts me, I think.â?•

The couple received a Certificate of Honor from Supervisor Hillary Ronen in April for their years of service to the community, going back to their involvement in activities and fundraisers at their childrenâ??s school.



Jose and Angelina De Anda with a Certificate of Honor from San Francisco Supervisor Hillary Ronen.

â??The De Andas presence was so reassuring to my Latino identity in a predominantly Irish and German faculty and neighborhood at that time,â?• said Mauricio Rivera, a student at St. Charles Elementary from 1966 to 1971. â??I remember the respect they garnered whenever present.â?•

Most mornings these days, they can be found at their corner table at their neighborhood cafe, Martha & Brothers, in Bernal Heights. A constant stream of friends, fellow parishioners and neighbors stop to visit, reminisce, get an Angelina hug, ask advice â?? or for a recipe.

Feeding nine kids

Sharing her story recently while offering a lesson in making Caldo de Pollo a la Angelina, she recalled her motherâ??s soup, which in the 1930s stretched to feed nine kids in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.



Making Caldo de Pollo a la Angelina.

â??We had to eat at noon sharp because that was dadâ??s lunch break from his tire repair shop. We came from school then too. Mom had already been up since five to soak the corn kernels in a gigantic cooking pot, and then boil them for hours, and my job was to take the kernels to the mill, before school, for the *masa* (maize dough) for the tortillas she made by hand â?? all day long on the *metate* (stone block). We ate together, then back to school and dad back to the tire shopâ?•

Angelina was born a Garcia in 1927 in Bramin, Okla., where her father had migrated to work on the railroad. She was the last of four kids born in the United States but raised in Juarez when the family moved to be with her grandmother.

â??My dad took me out of school after the fifth grade. The plan was for me to learn English by attending El Paso schools across the border because I was a U.S. citizen,â?• she said, but that didnâ??t work out. â??So, I just helped mom with the chores and my siblings, you know; we were obedient to our parents, that was how it was. I didnâ??t have a choice.â?•

Making shirts and pants all day

At 15, she began crossing the bridge into El Paso, Texas, every day to work in a sewing factory. â??I learned all the machines: the industrial ones, the button-hole machines. I made shirts and pants all day. I made suspenders; I made the straps.

â??I clocked in at eight and left at five. I was quick and accurate. I got paid $16 a week, can you imagine? My dad was a good provider, but he needed our help with so many of us.â?•

She moves around her small kitchen with ease as Jose, seated at the dining table, watches. â??I wish he would play the guitar while I cook,â?? she sighs. â??He used to play.â?•

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Angelina sings to Joseâ??s guitar playing.

â??But my fingers ache now,â?• Jose replies, holding up his hands. Heâ??s 94.

The two have been married nearly 70 years. The secret, she said: â??Perdon, Perdon, *Perdon, forgive.â?*•

â??And I always apologize,â?• adds Jose.

We dice chayotes, zucchini and carrots. We pull apart cilantro leaves for garnish. Angelina cuts up corn into several chunks, puts chicken pieces â?? â??take off all the skin,â?• she instructs â?? into the ginger-scented water. She turns the flame low under the soup; the chicken has to boil gently for an hour. She adds a little kosher salt and a teaspoon of canola oil.

Cheap rent and ballroom dancing

Then she turns her attention to the tortillas. She pulls apart a chunk of masa from the bag, deftly patting it into a ball, her hands swift and sure. She shapes it into a disc with rhythmic slaps. â??Now I buy prepared masa from La Palma bakery,â?• she takes the bag to show me. â??Itâ??s convenient, sure, but it doesnâ??t taste the same.â?•

She segues: â??You know what? It wasnâ??t until I came to San Francisco that I finally went to night school and began to learn English.â?•



Jose and Angelina De Anda at St. Kevin Catholic Church in Bernal Heights.

In 1952, while visiting her brothers whoâ??d settled in Fresno and San Francisco, the 25-year-old found a job sewing curtains and drapes at a factory at Second and Mission streets. â??My rent was $10 a week for a room in the Ojeda familyâ??s house, and Senora Ojeda fed me, too. I had enough money for everything, including going dancing at Swetts Ballroom in Oakland, where visiting orchestras came from Mexico. Las tardeadas! I had soooo many dance partners.â?•

Jose De Anda was born in Kermit, Texas, where his dad, also from Mexico, had come to work in the fields. His parents returned to Mexico when he was still a baby, but at 15 he came back to work with an

uncle in Sacramento. â??In 1945, there werenâ??t enough men. It was wartime, so I worked in the sugar beets and the carrots. I picked lettuce in Salinas and grapes in Napa. Then I came to San Francisco and worked for Levi Strauss as a bundle boy on the sewing floor.â?•

There, he gathered up pieces of fabric and ran them from table to table. â??I made 85 cents an hour, and then I got a raise to 90 cents.â?•

Angelina and Jose met at a dance in Oakland. â??He was wearing a dazzling aquamarine blue suit and a sharp tie. He was driving a brand-new Chevrolet, and I looked and I looked at him and I said to myself, â??Ah, hello, here is my destiny!â?? â?•

From the fields to a union job

Because he was a U.S. citizen, heâ??d been drafted and served two years in Alaska, during the Korean war. â??They told us we were guarding the borders over there,â?• he said.

They married in 1955 and lived in a flat on San Carlos Street between 20th and 21st Streets for $35 a month. They had a daughter, Alicia, and a son, Gilberto.

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With his wife pregnant with Alicia, Jose found stable work at the Hostess Wonder Bread Bakery at 16th and Bryant streets. â??It was a union job, great benefits. And we bought our house here on Folsom Street in 1979,â?• he says. He retired in 1993 after 40 years at the bakery.

â??I really wanted to be a firefighter; it was my dream. So, I went down to apply, but they told me I was too short,â?• Jose recalled. You had to be five-feet-eight inches. He was five-foot-seven.

â??Now I am even shorter,â?• he laughs, â??what can you do?â?•

Angelina also worked while their kids were growing up, as a file clerk in a law office in the financial district. â??I made so many friends there. One of the lawyers even took us on vacation to Oaxaca with his family.â?•

She loved volunteering at her kidsâ?? school, which has since closed.

â??I sewed costumes. I was a room mother. I answered phones in the office, and I represented St. Charles at the meetings of all the Catholic schools,â?• she says while skimming fat off the bubbling soup.

Now, we add the vegetables

Fragrant smells fill the tiny in-law unit below the house. They have given the main house over to their grandson and his child. â??This is the right size for us,â?? Angelina gestures. â??Everything is easy to reach.â?• Looking at the clock, she said, â??Now, we add the vegetables â?? and we donâ??t overboil them.â?•



Angelina with her great grandson, Carlitos.

Angelina often cooks for Gilberto and his sons, who live upstairs in the main house and are around all the time.

But they are no rocking chair grandparents.

They regularly travelled to Mexico, to take the waters at El Bosque de la Primavera, a hot springs outside of Guadalajara. In May, they flew to El Paso to see Angelinaâ??s younger brother, who is not well.

In retirement, before the pandemic, they travelled every other year to Talavera, Spain, where their daughter Alicia, who married a Spaniard, lived. Though she died of cancer in 2013, the De Andasâ??

connection to Spain remains deep; they have five adult grandkids and four great grandchildren there.

Back home, Jose was the one who got them around; Angelina never drove. But at 90, when their car was totaled, he gave it up. It had been hit in the middle of the night while parked on their block.

â??That was it for me. Now I use the BMW â?? Bart, Muni, Walk,â?• Jose grinned, â??and thatâ??s fine.â?•

â??We used to dance all the timeâ??

The soup is almost ready. Angelina prepares side garnishes of cilantro, jalapenos, slices of avocado and lime. She glances at her husband, â??You know, we used to dance all the time. He dances really well, Jose.â?•

â??Ah, but my knees are not so good,â?• he counters.

â??You only need to go two steps right and two steps left, â??she answers back, demonstrating at the stove, her apron swaying. â??All dances are really the same two steps forward or backward, or a little side to side.â?•

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And, the soup is done.

She fires up the *comal* (cast iron griddle) to cook the tortillas. The enticing fragrance of corn and charcoal and chicken all mingle in the air, with a hint of jalapeno. Jose opens a bottle of wine, â??just a little drink, to celebrate our guests.â?•

Angelina shoots him a look â?? one of 70 years of exasperations and tenderness.

â??You know when we were first married, he used to go to this bar after work with his coworkers. Sometimes he stayed so late, Iâ??d get so mad I locked the door.â?•

â??And then I slept in the Chevy,â?• Jose laughs. â??But that was a long time ago.â?•

Angelina ladles out her rich and colorful soup, passes the hot tortillas in a cloth napkin, then she raises her glass to her husband with a radiant smile.

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