

**[Begin Sylvia Casares-1 Sylvia's Enchiladas Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans for Foodways Texas. I'm in Houston, Texas on Friday, May 1, 2015 at Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen with Sylvia herself and Sylvia if I could get you to introduce yourself and state your occupation for the record, please.

**00:00:19**

**Sylvia Casares:** Well I'm Sylvia Casares and my occupation is I'm chef/owner of Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen.

**00:00:28**

**AE:** And could I ask for your birth date also please?

**00:00:30**

**SC:** I was born February 3, 1953.

**00:00:33**

**AE:** Okay; and we are here at the Woodway location of Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen and we just had--or I just had a great little sampling of food here. Can we talk a little bit about what was laid before me?

**00:00:47**

**SC:** Well you had the Corpus Christi which is a plate that I created that is sort of a build your own for people that want to try different things and so you had a tostado and a--a tostado with chili con queso, crispy beef taco; what was the third one?

**00:01:11**

**AE:** The cheese enchilada of course. *[Laughs]*

**00:01:14**

**SC:** And the cheese enchilada with the gravy. We were talking so *[Laughs]* I missed--I wasn't sure what the third one was. Every Corpus Christi plate is unique because people have a choice of three entrees to go with it, three different meat choices or--. And so those were her--her pick today. And so it's a real favorite because you know everybody has their way of eating or their choice of--of what they want to select.

**00:01:43**

**AE:** Why did you call it the Corpus Christi?

**00:01:44**

**SC:** Well my food, well I'm from South Texas; I grew up in Brownsville. And the food is--the flavors of the food is very much like the area of the country I grew up in, which is South Texas of course. I'm from the border but my experiences that people that are from South--San Antonio, Victoria South, and all along the border area really identify with the flavors of the food I serve here, so--. A lot of my plates are named after little towns all up and down 77 and to an extent maybe 59 and certainly all along the--the border area of Texas.

**00:02:33**

**AE:** Okay; and then tell us about the taco al carbon that was a surprise that I loved so much.

**00:02:38**

**SC:** The taco al carbon of course is--is beef fajita and it came in a--in a special homemade flour tortilla or home-flavored flour tortilla made with the same flour my grandmother used. My grandmother lived in Donna. And so she used Pioneer Flour and that is the flour that we use here in this restaurant. The beef fajitas are made from outside skirt and we do grill them with mesquite wood. We burn mesquite wood 12 hours a day in our--in my restaurants and it does really truly give them the flavor of South Texas 'cause that's how they were originally cooked on the--in the ranches of South Texas.

**00:03:28**

**AE:** Okay and I don't know if I should confess this since I'm working now but I had a margarita and you're having straight tequila. Tell me about the drinks here.

**00:03:39**

**SC:** Margaritas, well we get lots of compliments on them. We use 100-percent agave to make even the house margarita. And it's got--it doesn't have as much of a lime base but it's got a little more lemon than lime, so I think it's just a little smoother and you know a lot of our customers absolutely love our margaritas, but of course occasionally there's somebody that says that they prefer a margarita from--X-margarita from someone else. And so you know food is subjective. So that's how we make them.

**00:04:18**

**AE:** Tell me was that your decision to do more lemon than lime?

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**SC:** Yes 'cause I felt like I'm not a big fanatic about things that are extremely acidic and I feel like lime, the lime flavor is taking it--taking the lemon to a little higher level of acidity. And I believe--I believe that using the lemon kind of knocks it down a half a notch or something.

**00:04:43**

**AE:** Well then let's--we'll go back to the restaurant once we get there in your timeline, but if we could start out by learning a little bit about your childhood in Brownsville?

**00:04:53**

**SC:** I grew up in Brownsville, born in Brownsville, grew up there, went to every--went to one elementary school, one junior high, and one high school. And at that time high school, there was only one high school. Learned English and Spanish like everybody else; I think I learned them simultaneously. And you know grew up mostly eating my mother and grandmother's food and took a big interest in cooking when I was about 10 or 11 years old. And I wanted to help my parents and help my mother specifically. She worked outside the home. And so I guess I was just sort of industrious 'cause I also taught myself to cook--I mean to sew but so I watched how she did her recipes and I tried to duplicate them. However, my mother did not have recipes and neither did my grandmother so I just kind of watched and saw about the approximate amounts that they used for the recipes, and kind of picked it up like that.

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**AE:** Would you share their names for the record, your mother and grandmother?

00:05:53

**SC:** My mother's name was Severa--S-e-v-e-r-a--Casares and my grandmother was Sara--S-a-r-a--**[Esossi]** Casares. **[Esossi]** was her maiden name.

00:06:11

**AE:** And how far does your family go back in the Brownsville area?

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**SC:** Well my parents were the first to move to Brownsville; they moved there during the War. My dad had been drafted but they hadn't called him, so they ended up moving to Brownsville while they were on hold for him to get drafted. And eventually he did--he was drafted even though they were married and had two children. He ended up having to leave to serve in the Army, so that's how they ended up in Brownsville. But they were--they're both from Donna kind of; that's where they met. Donna is about halfway between Brownsville and McAllen, so--.

00:06:44

**AE:** Okay and your grandmother, where is she originally from?

00:06:48

**SC:** My grandmother [Sarita] was actually born in Reynosa and she married my grandfather when she was about 15 and they settled in--in the Rio Grande Valley across you know the other side of Reynosa in Donna, in the Donna--well actually probably more in the McAllen area. They ended up settling and building a home in Donna.

**00:07:08**

My grandfather was born in the McAllen area, so--.

**00:07:12**

**AE:** What did your grandfather do for a living?

**00:07:13**

**SC:** My grandfather was a farmer, uh-hm; yeah--cotton, vegetables, just yeah.

**00:07:22**

**AE:** Did he own his own land?

**00:07:23**

**SC:** No, no; he did not own his own land. He sharecropped, so--.

**00:07:29**

**AE:** Do you know--did you ever hear any stories about that growing up, about their experience?

**00:07:33**

**SC:** Very hard. You know of course I mean they--they did fine until I guess the--you know the Depression and it go so, so bad, so I think for a period of time they did actually live in Mexico

for a few years on the other side of the border because his family owned land over there. But it just got--it was no better, so they ended up coming back.

**00:07:53**

I mean they struggled. They had 14 children. My grandmother worked all the time, you know of course in the home feeding, caring for her 14 children, and so you know it was a lot of cooking that took place, a lot of love; she was so sweet.

**00:08:08**

**AE:** What do you remember from your grandmother's kitchen?

**00:08:10**

**SC:** Oh that there were always flour tortillas, rice, beans; she loved to cook and she was so sweet.

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**AE:** And do you have a favorite dish that she used to make?

**00:08:21**

**SC:** Her rice and her flour tortillas, yeah, and her beans, yeah, just the staples of the Mexican diet.

**00:08:31**

**AE:** And so tell me about how that knowledge got passed on to the women in your family.

**00:08:37**

**SC:** Well my mother's mother died when she was little. She was about 10 so when she married dad I think her--my father's mother, [Sarita], Sara, kind of became her--her mother, her role model mother. And so a lot of what my grandmother did my mother picked up from her, you know including cooking. So she picked up her mother style to an extent, her way of parenting the children; both women were very loving, sweet, affectionate women, and so a lot of what my grandmother did my mother also did. And so there were no recipes but you know I watched how they put recipes together and then eventually as I grew up I--for some reason or another I just thought that there should be recipes. So as I--as a young woman after I left home I started actually having recipes because I wanted to be able to duplicate these flavors and do them every time and not--not fail. And so I started focusing on creating recipes for--for these wonderful dishes that you know there were no recipes for.

**00:09:45**

**AE:** Now you mentioned earlier you have three brothers.

**00:09:48**

**SC:** Yes; I have three brothers. My parents started very young and ended up very old as far as having children. My mother was I think 16 or 17 when my oldest brother was born and 42 when my youngest brother was born, so there are four of us; so--so yeah, so--.

**00:10:06**

**AE:** So was there an implied kind of responsibility for the only daughter to learn the cooking, the family's cooking?



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**SC:** I--perhaps it was implied. I mean I felt like I wanted to help them. It was--especially around that time I think it was my brother had been born, my youngest brother, and mom eventually went back to work and I just wanted to help however I could, whatever I could do. And--and then I guess when I was about 13, a little over 13 years old my brother got--my second brother got drafted to go to Vietnam. And it was just a tough year, and so I wanted to help however I could.

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And so--and I liked to eat, too, so--.

**00:10:47**

**AE:** Well do you remember when you first started kind of getting the hang of cooking when you were 10, 11, 12; do you remember the first thing that you made?

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**SC:** Rice; yeah, rice and then beans and then I launched into a--it's [inaudible] which is like a pasta and you know taco meat, and of course flour tortillas. I loved that--and so just the basics, just the very basics; yeah.

**00:11:18**

**AE:** Do you recall any hard and fast rules about how either your mother or grandmother transferred that information to you about making any of those dishes?

**00:11:26**

**SC:** No other than--the only hard and fast rules that I observed was just the ingredients that they used, you know which were all fresh and you know going back to my flour again, so--. And that flour that we use today in these restaurants and certainly in my home, you know really does kind of impart--I mean it is very much my grandmother's flour tortillas. In fact, I had a cousin here that I hadn't seen in a long time. She lives in California. And she had one of my flour tortillas and she says oh my gosh; this is--this is what I remember, and she remembered.

**00:11:57**

**AE:** Well let's talk about tortillas a little bit more because they really kind of run the gamut as far as style and texture and pillow-i-ness or the thin--I love the thinness of your tortillas--it's so great, so does that have mostly to do with the flour or the ratio of ingredients or--? Can you share something about that, some insight?

**00:12:16**

**SC:** The--the--it has a lot to do with the ratio of ingredients, very--the amount of handling that people do, like if you need a whole lot more rather than a whole lot less, which less is better than more 'cause as you're kneading and kneading you're developing the gluten which makes them kind of rubbery. So but the ratio of ingredients is very important versus you know shortening or lard versus you know for example we use milk to make our flour tortillas. You can make them with water but milk does kind of make them--it kind of gives them a nicer texture and they're softer.

**00:12:57**

As far as the thinness goes for a taco al carbon, they should be a little thinner so that the tortilla doesn't overwhelm the dish, or I mean you know the flavors. But a lot of--my mother

would make them a little--a little thicker for just eating it like bread and she would make them and so did my grandmother. So they were a little thicker; they weren't rolled out as thin. That's all that is--is just rolling it out a little thinner and so that you're tasting it but it's not--it's sort of secondary.

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**AE:** So different thicknesses for different foods?

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**SC:** Yes; for the different functions, so if it's going to be eaten like a biscuit or like a slice of bread it's a little thicker. If it's going to be wrapped in a taco then it's going to be a little thinner.

**00:13:51**

**AE:** Well I don't mind sopping chili gravy with a thin tortilla I'm here to say.

**00:13:55**

**SC:** Thin or thick. *[Laughs]* Chili gravy is great--thin or thick; I was telling you I fall in love with my chili gravy every time I have it. I fall in love with it all over again every time I have it, so--.

**00:14:06**

**AE:** So tell me about it and--and how you learned to make it and what sets it apart.

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**SC:** What sets it apart is that it just--it's--it's just really balanced. I mean you can taste the cumin. It's got the--the beef notes are there. The chili flavors are vibrant. It's got a little bit of thickness, you know a little bit of viscosity, not much. And it's just--it's just got--it's just got a symphony of flavors working, you know the beef, the chili, and--the beef and the chili I would say.

**00:14:45**

**AE:** Now is it a strict family recipe or have you messed with it over the years?

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**SC:** It's something--it's not--it's not really a family recipe. It is from memory, from the memory of what I've had in the past is how I developed it because what I found at least for me, but I think it is for most people, we--our palates, we memorize flavors so that when you eat something that you've had, that you used to have that you really enjoyed and you put it in your mouth and it's you know very close to what you once had I mean you know it. The palate knows it immediately. So I'm a big believer which is another reason why my recipes you know are--are closely followed by the kitchen because I believe that people come in and they--they're going to know if anything was changed in the recipe because we--you know we just have palates that memorize flavors, flavor profiles of food. Does that make sense?

**00:15:45**

**AE:** Yeah; absolutely. So can you talk about the significance of the chili gravy and Tex-Mex cooking? We were talking a little bit about that before.

**00:15:53**

**SC:** Chili gravy is very much of a Texas recipe. If you go into Mexico you're not going to find chili gravy over there. That is like--they don't even like it. They don't understand it; they don't get it. I--my belief is that you know it--it has its--it has its roots in chili con carne. It's beef-based because of course Texas is a cattle, you know cattle state and we eat a lot of beef in this state. And so it's--it's a gravy so it's got some--a little bit of viscosity and so it's not--it is not so rich in the amount of beef. It's there but it's very, I would say very light, the amount of beef you know in this--in this recipe, but just enough to give it the nice beef flavor.

**00:16:48**

I do actually have a--a gravy that is very heavy beef. We call it the Lubbock. It's a West Texas style enchilada and the reason for that is that is kind of how they eat their enchiladas in that part of the state. It's more like a chili than a chili gravy, so lots and lots of ground beef in it, so--.

**00:17:11**

**AE:** And what is your--excuse me--what is your opinion on cheese in a cheese enchilada?

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**SC:** Well my opinion is I use a natural cheddar in mine. And that's because I like the flavor that natural cheddar has. What many, many, many restaurants use is more of a processed cheese, which would be similar to like the American cheese slices that you get through Kraft or I would say first cousin to like a Velveeta. That kind of cheese, the big advantage there is you're not going to get as much cheese flavor; it's a mild--very mild flavor, however it does have a very low melting point so that when you cut your enchilada the cheese will flow out, will kind of run

out. It will get soft really easily, so that restaurants--so that in a mass production operation like a restaurant, a busy restaurant you can almost--you can broil your enchiladas and the cheese will be melty, you know melted and soft.

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The cheddar on the other hand you really--we have to bake our enchiladas so that the cheese can get soft 'cause cheddar has a higher melting point. But then again you're getting more-flavor. I do have customers that say they would prefer the American-style cheese. I believe that is because that's how they grew up. You know that's their experience for a cheese enchilada. Then I have customers that say they love mine because it's natural cheddar and they're getting more flavor. It's like I said, it's more work to get a cheese enchilada with natural cheddar to get soft and I'm not even--it'll never get runny but to get really soft you really have to bake it. A salamander will not do it, so a hot oven--.

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**AE:** Did your family use cheddar cheese at home?

**00:19:20**

**SC:** A little; I mean mother--mother did use a lot of American cheese. But that was just my--my preference to use cheddar was just from a flavor standpoint. And remember, I worked for Kraft so I know--I'm very familiar with their--you know all of their cheeses and some of them, you know of course the Velveeta we use in one of--it is one of the cheeses I use in my chili con queso. But--and it's--and it's wonderful again because of the melting point.

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**AE:** I want to get to your corporate career, but first I don't want to forget to mention that we were talking about cheese enchiladas earlier and my cheese enchilada memory happened to be from Luby's which I almost didn't even confess to you. But then tell me what your response was to that 'cause now I have the insight.

**00:20:07**

**SC:** Okay; when she told me--I remembered having seen cheese enchiladas on the serving line in Brownsville--Luby's was kind of the it-restaurant, it was built in the mid-'60s there, it's still going strong, but I remember seeing cheese enchiladas and I might have had them once, but anyway 'cause typically we didn't really eat Mexican food out. We ate it at home. And so anyway, my immediate response when she told me Luby's I said well of course that makes sense; Luby's is headquartered out of San Antonio, so--. That was--and then you smiled because it--it--you know you connected the dots.

**00:20:45**

**AE:** Yeah; and it all makes sense. So what would you order at Luby's if you weren't ordering the cheese enchiladas?

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**SC:** My--one of my favorite things to order at Luby's and I probably order it nine and a half times out of ten is their liver, no onions. I love their liver. Mac and cheese is fabulous and then some other kind of green vegetable, whatever, so but I always indulge in mac and cheese. I can't walk in and out of a Luby's without having their macaroni and cheese. I love it.

00:21:11

**AE:** So funny. And let's talk quickly too because we were talking [Mama Nimfa] and fajitas and you were talking about all of that coming from the lower Rio Grande Valley.

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**SC:** Yeah; fajitas absolutely were first cooked by the ranch hands in South Texas. Why?

Because first it was very, low, low, low cost. In fact often times it was meat that was ground up.

But they would buy it and being you know industrious and creative and everything I mean they figured out a way to tenderize the meat a little bit and cook it you know out in the cow pastures or wherever it was that they were working and make themselves--I'm guess tacos out there. And so that--that's how they did it, and then eventually food historians you know I've read that they--the fajita made it--the fajitas made it to a restaurant in Mercedes and from there at some point and--but they were also eaten at homes--in homes. I mean we--my dad and my friends, they would barbecue fajitas in the backyard. You couldn't find them--when I moved to Houston in 1976 you couldn't hardly find fajitas in the grocery store.

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But we're talking here about the late '60s and I remember eating fajitas at home in--you know or at people's houses. And then of course [Mama Nimfa] made them very, very popular in her navigation, her first restaurant by preparing them--not only wonderful tacos al carbon, but cooking them, making them with--presenting them with her fabulous South Texas style flour tortillas, real thin. And so you know she paired that combo, because I mean I think fajitas probably--probably are a little bit better with flour tortillas than they are with corn. I mean I do eat them with corn sometimes for dietary reasons but so yeah; so she made that wonderful pairing and I mean they took off. And I tell my--my students, in fact I'm teaching a cooking class



tomorrow on fajita grilling, and I tell them that you know [Mama Nimfa] started it in Houston and they became the rage here and then in Texas, in Houston and Texas, the US and now the world. Fajita prices are right now we're paying around \$7 a pound and that's before we trim--do any trimming for outside skirt.

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So you know they're pricey 'cause we lose well probably about 40-percent in peeling so we're talking about meat that's you know \$12 a pound by the time we trim it.

**00:23:46**

**AE:** And so you--you made your name on enchiladas and I want to talk more about the restaurant history but now you're getting more into the meat and the fajitas?

**00:23:55**

**SC:** Well yeah; so you know like I told you, I ran my restaurants by myself and so I had a lot of hats to wear. For me what has come very, very natural and very easy is to work on sauces. I mean and so my enchiladas have all been sauced with something, so we do 14 different sauces for 18 different enchiladas. So that--that's where all my energy was and so for me, fajitas were an afterthought as opposed to many of my other--other Mexican restaurants where it was the other way around. Fajitas were what they were thinking about and enchiladas were an afterthought.

**00:24:33**

Well one day I had a wonderful customer, a very loyal customer came up to me and told me in a very nice way, he said Sylvia, and he put his hands out in front of him and he said your enchiladas are here and your fajitas are here, which there was a significant gap. And I knew; I

knew why, because I was basically buying a marinated meat. It was already marinated. All we did was throw some kind of seasoning on it and grill it. It was no real effort in doing anything special to it. My comfort level was never in cooking fajitas, so I started this big research project on how to tenderize them and make them, you know make them very tender, but my whole thing was that my fajitas needed to taste like--like a steak, like beef. I didn't want my fajitas to have an aftertaste of some kind which would happen with some of the marinations that I would use. And I--I mean I went as far as calling a meat scientist that I had worked with at Uncle Ben's and asking him questions. And I mean I kept trying to figure out how am I going to tenderize this meat? But it has to taste like meat, like beef, like a steak.

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Eventually about two years later and I'm not saying I did it every day but off and on for two years and I finally--one day I cracked the nut. And so now we have gotten a couple of write-ups by the media on our fajitas, our [inaudible]. And it's real tender and for my very first restaurant I cooked them on a gas grill but once I opened Woodway and now Eldridge we are actually grilling them with live mesquite wood. We burn mesquite wood all day long from--for 12 hours a day. And that to me makes them so authentic from South Texas because you know mesquite wood is--is South Texas, so--.

**00:26:24**

**AE:** Well they're fabulous. Well let's back up and talk about when you first left home, when you left Brownsville.

**00:26:31**

**SC:** Well I went to college and what I missed the most besides my parents was the food. I--I just missed the food. And you--our flavors of food you cannot find in any restaurant, what I was accustomed to and actually along the way I've met--a lot of my customers have told me that they really never ate Mexican food out because they were so often disappointed eating it in restaurants because what we look for is the flavor of home.

**00:27:00**

So I think that that's--that--so I started really expanding my--my recipes and all that on my own. *[Interruption]*

**00:27:15**

So what I did was just started developing recipes at home to feed my family and my children and myself 'cause I do happen to love to eat. *[Laughs]* And so--and always remembering these flavors of home and knowing that you know that this is how it's supposed to taste or that's how it's supposed to taste and just figuring it out one recipe at a time, so--.

**00:27:41**

**AE:** Well you went to UT Austin for college. Tell me about that.

**00:27:43**

**SC:** Yeah; I went to the University. I got a degree in--a Bachelor of Science in Home Economics and I was going to get--I was planning to be a Home Ec teacher. And I was married and I had a child in college and so I just thought teaching would be great and I was doing student teaching. I found out about a great job at Uncle Ben's in their test kitchens and I got the job. I applied; I got it and it was a wonderful job. I worked three years as a home economist doing

recipe testing and development and running--doing their taste panels, sensory--what they call sensory evaluation, the human analysis of food.

**00:28:23**

And so I did that for about three years and then one day I got a chance to move into the new product development labs. I had become so familiar with all the different ingredients and you know just different aspects of putting a product together, they moved me into R&D and to the test kitchen, into the labs and I became a food scientist. And then I worked on not only rice projects but other different types of projects. Uncle Ben's is owned by the Mars family, the candy people; they're a huge, huge food company all over the US but really not even here--in--in Europe. And so, they would venture out and to try different things and then projects would get killed somewhere along the way either in test market or in consumer tests or taste panels or whatever.

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So anyway after I was getting to about nine years of working there I just started thinking I really needed to do something different with that life and that was not my destiny to work in a food lab all my life. So I started trying to do research and talk to different people internally and I ended up resigning and beginning a career in food sales. My first job was commission only for Kraft Food Service here in Houston, so thus I became very familiar with cheeses [*Laughs*]. All the Kraft cheeses which they have wonderful products, and I also met lots of restaurant owners like Mrs. Felix from Felix Mexican Restaurant. She was actually my secret mentor. We would even spend time together on the weekends sometimes and we'd hang out a little bit or I'd stay and have coffee with her. But for her--for me, seeing her and she told me her history and she said she had started in the restaurant business when she was about 40. So I wasn't 40 yet but I was you know in my mid-30s so I kind of had it in my mind that I was too old to do anything that

outrageous or that daring. But when she told me that I just kind of thought well I guess I could do it at some point you know if--if I'm ever ready.

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Then after 18 months with Kraft I ended up working for just food manufacturers being-- representing [AD Food Line] and I started just in Houston and then expanded to half of Texas and then in three states. It required a lot of travel from my frozen soup company. After Kraft I ended up working for the Heinz Company and then Sara Lee. By the time I'm at Sara Lee I'm looking around and I'm seeing my peers are all in their late 20s, early 30s and I'm in my early 40s by this time. We're talking about 1994 here, and so I said I've got to get out of here because one of these days they're going to ditch me because I'm going to be too old, plus I was real tired of the travel and I had--I had three states to cover and I had kids. They were junior high, late elementary and junior high and I just thought I just want to be around them more.

**00:31:23**

And so of course I found a restaurant that was for sale. It had been around a couple of years and it was sort of beginning to crawl. It was in a little town outside of Houston, two sets of partners were involved in it, they weren't getting along, they were related, and so they wanted-- didn't want to be in it, so they wouldn't wreck their families. So I made them offer. They accepted it and a year later I resigned my job and dived in feet-first. Took every penny of my life savings, our life savings, a little bit of my 401-K, dived in, bet it all on number nine and worked like a lunatic. Would take my kids to work with me on the weekends and I would--I worked all day and their--their father would work in the evenings and he would close the restaurant. But I would be there all day and during the time when the food is being cooked and taking care of all the lunch business and all that.

**00:32:19**

And after about three years we--my partnership with him, we went our separate ways. And I came to--this was in a little town outside of Houston. So I came to Houston and started my own; struggled a lot. I struggled a lot with it because it had a Westheimer address but I was actually closer to Highway 6. The front door of the restaurant faced a little side street. So even though it had a Westheimer address, the cars that were going 50--60 miles an hour up and down Westheimer couldn't see me. So for about a year, a little over a year, about a year and a half I was just making ends meet and was just sort of--just starving. And so I finally decided that I would sell it and I went to see a broker and they said well I can get you X which wasn't hardly anything. So I thought well let me sleep on it and I went home and I thought no; I'm going to circle the wagons. I'm going to find another way.

**00:33:13**

So I just decided to make some radical changes. I knew by this time my enchiladas were fabulous according to my customers. I didn't--I had probably about maybe a dozen of--12, 6 and 6, probably about 6 Tex-Mex and 6 Mexican, so I just divided them on the menu and called them South and North and knowing that my gravy was like really the favorite, but I had others. I had the Mexican style enchiladas [inaudible] and I had mole and I had a couple of others. So I redecorated my restaurant and I put bright colors. I put family photos. And I renamed it Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen. It was a different name; I knew it would be a name that people would remember. It wasn't Sylvia's Mexican Restaurant or Sylvia's Mexican Café or Sylvia's Mexican Grille or whatever; it was something that people could remember and most importantly I really gambled and I leased a billboard across the street from the restaurant. And my wonderful, creative brother who at the time was working in advertising wrote the copy and it said *the best enchiladas in Houston are also the hardest to find; turn left* with a big old arrow. And luckily the--the billboard, it was a small billboard but it was right across the street from my restaurant.

And there was a light there so people could actually turn and come. And after a while the restaurant was exploding with customers. This is 1999 and then eventually in 2001, late '01 I moved it to Westheimer and [Dairy Ashford].

**00:34:45**

Things were good for a while and then we had that recession after September 11<sup>th</sup> and the Enron scandal, so it got kind of slow there for a while but then finally thankfully in 2004 *The Chronicle* did a feature story on my chili gravy and that's kind of what brought the restaurant to--to the exposure for the whole city and then eventually in the next year or two it became a destination point.

**00:35:12**

In 2009 I decided--well in '08 really--I decided I wanted to have a restaurant closer into the city 'cause we're so far out there and so I opened the Woodway restaurant. And here by this time my fajitas are much improved 'cause I improved them when I was still at Westheimer, but when I opened my Woodway store I decided I wanted to have a mesquite grill, an all--a wood grill and so that--that in itself is not as easy as it looks. It's--it's an art; you really know how to--you really have to know how to cook with wood. I did--I was fortunate enough to have--hire somebody that just sort of strolled into my restaurant that was really, really good at grilling and actually taught me a lot. And then another person that had kind of joined me at the time that also knew a lot about cooking on wood, so I sort of had to learn from them because I think if I had a weakness it was in cooking meat. That wasn't--that wasn't my strength.

**00:36:12**

And then finally in 2014 I opened the Eldridge location; it's in the Energy Quarter and again, we're still doing the--the mesquite and hoping to soon enough convert the Westheimer restaurant to also have a mesquite grill, so--.

**00:36:28**

**AE:** Wow; here you are. It's an amazing timeline. And a couple things along the way--inspired some questions and first I want to ask you, when you went away to UT Austin, first of all was it expected that you would go to college, and second was the Home Economics major assumed or was that a personal choice or family driven?

**00:36:49**

**SC:** My parents sort of expected me or encouraged me--I shouldn't say expected, but they really encouraged me to go to college. My mother figured out sometime I'm not sure when but probably when her kids were young, the two older boys that if we went to college we wouldn't have to work as hard as they did or as hard as my dad did. So and she said she didn't want her kids to work as hard as they had to work 'cause they had been migrant workers and they had you know--I mean dad had--had some very difficult jobs. He did end up finally getting a really nice job with the Federal government. He was a cattle inspector but it was still hard work. He was outside in all kinds of weather and all that. So my mother always said, so my oldest brother went to college a couple years. My second brother did get a college degree from the University of Texas in accounting. And so I just sort of followed what my second brother did. I thought okay; well I'm going to UT, too. He was a big positive influence on me.

**00:37:47**

And so that's--I wanted to be a Long Horn like he was. And so and then as it turned out my youngest brother also graduated from the University and then he teaches there, so--. So we're all a big Long Horn family, so--.

**00:38:02**



As far as Home Economics that was--I think that was my choice. I mean I was an A-B student but I didn't have any particular academic inclination; you know I wasn't Math or Science and I wasn't--you know I didn't particularly have a passion for writing. I did like to read some. And but I loved to cook and I taught myself to sew when I was in--starting high school and I wanted to be a teacher 'cause I thought well that's a nice mom career. You know you can work and teach and be off in the summer, so that was, you know my generation. I was sort of on the cutting edge of the feminist movement was just beginning. And so for me being a teacher was fine; you know it worked. It was great.

**00:38:49**

So--so that was the career path I took and but I guess; I don't know. I was meant for other things, so--.

**00:38:57**

**AE:** Well and the corporate job that was motivated by salary or opportunity or both?

**00:39:03**

**SC:** Oh you mean when--my very first corporate job? Salary; it was--it paid double what a teacher paid and they moved--they paid my moving expenses and fantastic insurance and retirement plan. And I mean it was just--you know the Mars Company is just an extremely good employer and--and so yeah. That was--I was married; I had a child and so money was important, so yeah that was--that was the reason I took it. And it just seemed fascinating. I remember you know a lot of my peers were like 'cause everybody was just--I mean we're talking 1976. The economy in Houston, in the United States was not very good. To get a teaching job was extremely difficult. There just weren't--there were not a lot of jobs and so out of the clear blue

sky this job just comes--comes out of nowhere and I drove to Houston in my little 1970--no, my 1967 Volkswagen, interviewed all day and then came home with the job. And I was so thrilled; so--.

**00:40:05**

**AE:** And then what--you mentioned earlier about how it just occurred to you one day that you should be writing down your family recipes. Could you kind of put on a timeline when that happened and then the time is--this time span that happened in between that moment to when you decided you could build a business on those recipes, basically?

**00:40:27**

**SC:** Well the recipe thing started when I was in college cooking for my family, for my child and my husband. And as a matter of fact, I would cook for my friends, too 'cause you know none of them were married, and so they'd come over and we'd barbecue and I'd cook. I'd make my home recipes and they loved them. And so that's kind of where it got started.

**00:40:51**

As far as thinking that maybe I could make a living out of it, I mean I think it started maybe coming together for me--the least bit when I worked for Kraft, the idea started to cross my mind; then as I went to work for the other food companies and I called on restaurants in three different states and I--I began to notice that a lot of restaurants served very average food and do really well. And my whole thing was I can do better than that. I know that I can--I can serve the flavors of my home and which I had eaten in some Mexican restaurants and I didn't think that they were that great. And I thought I think if I serve really, really excellent food I can make a living at it.

**00:41:40**

And I wanted more than anything just to be in more control of my destiny than--than to be depending on you know someone else for a job, so--.

**00:41:49**

**AE:** Well let's talk about then for a minute your experiences in the corporate world as a woman and then being a female entrepreneur with the restaurants and your experiences with both just a little bit.

**00:42:00**

**SC:** Yeah; well looking back on my career, I've always worked in a male-dominated industry which is the food industry. When I was in research and development there were only like maybe three women that worked in the--in the lab and one of them was an administrative assistant. There was one chemist and then myself and my boss and you know we were both home economists. So typically every environment and really even throughout the company in many, many of the positions in manufacturing and quality control it was always men.

**00:42:39**

Once I left there into sales and marketing, same thing; in distribution same thing. I've always worked around men. You know all the different--the four different sales jobs I had it was always very male-dominated. I called on mostly males so it just is something that it wasn't so strange for me. I just did it because it was--what it was but I guess one day it did dawn on me; I thought wow. I have really worked in a male world all the time.

**00:43:07**

Was it difficult? I have to tell you yes and I have stories, stories--I've got stories of you know things that were said to me that were hurtful. I remember one time being--this was not hurtful; it was aggravating but I remember one time being introduced as this is Sylvia the Chef Friend girl. Chef Friend was a soup company. That was my title. I was the Regional Manager but I was introduced by my boss--my boss' boss to one of the Vice Presidents of one of the distributorships here in Houston and they--and I was--I didn't have a last name. I was just Sylvia the Chef Friend girl. And just being invited to dinner and showing up and I was a few minutes late 'cause I got lost. I was in another city, so I was about 10 minutes behind them. This is before everybody carried cell phones, you know and so I arrived there and they've already gotten a table for four and--and then they'd just tell me to sit at the corner. He said well just go ahead and sit right here, like pull up a chair and eat at the corner, and just things like that--that maybe didn't have a lot to do with work--work but it did sort of you know.

**00:44:17**

So I was always--I always felt like I didn't fit in really.

**00:44:22**

So and that's just two little bitty examples and I have many more--numerous more but I mean I just--I always have concentrated on anything I do I try to do as well as I can and I'm the first one up and the last one down, you know and I just always have had a great work ethic. And if something bothered me I would just ignore it and just roll on, you know because I was going to do my job, whatever it was, make that number, you know whatever it was; I was--I was going to do it and I wasn't going to let you know some condescending attitude or something like that get me down. I mean I just know that's just the way the world is. I think one of the things that always encouraged me and even up until a few years ago here in this restaurant 'cause I had a really, really difficult time getting Woodway, this second restaurant rolling to really--to where

it's full steam like it is now; a lot of the reason was because it was open during the great recession and a lot of people were not eating out as much. You know that was--I mean restaurants--a lot of restaurants kind of struggled. And so I opened it in April of 2009 and I guess the market crashed in kind of late October of '08. So it was--we did okay for a few months and then it just kind of got stagnant. And--and also I'm in a very--I'm in an area where there's two major chains, Tex-Mex chains; I'm in between two major Tex-Mex chains. And so I found myself really struggling to try to figure out how to develop the business and how to grow this restaurant.

**00:46:01**

And so one thought that finally hit my mind and it just kept me pushing forward was that--'cause I was kind of having a little pity party one day, and then I just--it just--all of the sudden it came to me. I thought you know as hard as it is, whatever I'm going through, this is nothing compared to what my grandmother and my mother went through. And so just buck up Sylvia **[Laughs]**; you know put your big girl panties on and roll and quit you know don't--don't think about it 'cause they went through--especially my grandmother. Oh my gosh the things--the stories I hear about her. But even my mother, too, and so this is not--this is not really that hard. It's hard for today's world but it's not hard in you know other generations. So I got a lot of strength from that knowing that you know I come from a line of people that have--women that have you know worked and done a lot and you know with very little, so--.

**00:46:57**

**AE:** Well and that kind of makes me start thinking about you know kind of trail blazing as a female entrepreneur and you know in the corporate world too in the '70s and '80s, and how difficult that was and parallel that to kind of the expectations of the Mexican American family

and your grandmother having raised 14 children and what that work was and what--in that kind of you know social cultural sphere what expectations were for you at home.

**00:47:27**

**SC:** You mean--what do you mean at home, when I was still living at home or--?

**00:47:32**

**AE:** No; I mean--I just mean in the Mexican American family.

**00:47:34**

**SC:** Well my mother--my mother particularly voiced her--and she never really did that but she did at that time and I always felt kind of bad about it but she said that I shouldn't be having a job where I had to travel, you know and leave my children. And for me it was the best-paying job that I had that I could get in that type of work, in food--you know sales and marketing. It was--that was a chance I had to have higher income and my passion was always to have my children in very nice private schools and I did. You know I did; I had--my children went to really, really nice private schools. And so and--and I always wanted to do that for them. My two--my two sons, the oldest and the youngest of my three children both graduated from Rice University and my daughter went to Georgetown in Washington, DC and she--you know they attended nice great Catholic schools here in town, some of the best ones. And so that was all possible because I had you know--because I was you know because my income was better than average. And you know it was just a choice I made and you know they're all really very comfortable.

**00:48:46**

My oldest son on his own went on and got a Harvard MBA and you know he's--he's doing really, really well but you know so on top of doing all of this you know of course I was always looking out for my kids and you know making sure that they--you know that they were also making progress and that the next generation would have it a little easier than--than I did, so--as my mother made sure that we had it easier than they did, so--.

**00:49:12**

**AE:** What do you want for your daughter? What do you hope for her?

**00:49:15**

**SC:** You know that--that--that she has more choices--that she has more choices in her career, and she already does. I mean she already does. I mean she--she is an IT consultant and she just left--recently left a major consulting firm and she does--she does IT consulting in oil and gas trading. And so and she just you know has--has three really, really good job offers, people that want to hire her and I mean I'm just like thinking wonderful--wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, you know that you've got--you've got these choices. But you know a lot of it is--you know another thing I did for her is I sent her to an all-girls school all the way through her education from elementary through high school and then of course college was co-ed but that also made her very strong. And I wanted my daughter to be strong 'cause it takes a lot of strength. You never know; you know maybe you're going to have a life partner, maybe you're not. You know but it takes a lot of inner-strength you know to really navigate yourself around, so--.

**00:50:34**

**AE:** Well what do you think your children's kind of perception of Tex-Mex is having the younger generation growing up in Houston?

**00:50:41**

**SC:** My children? Oh, well they grew up eating some of the food that I fix here. So they know; they know what it's like. They know these flavors and--and they probably this about the only place they ever eat. You know but I think--I think they--sometimes I think they don't really understand what I do. They really don't grasp it. Maybe the youngest one because he has helped me some, you know with the business, but I think the older ones don't really understand the complexity of it and how it can get so complicated from a business standpoint. You know because it's not just about food and the customers and you know and all that; I mean it can get--it can get very complicated, you know. Like here for example, I have a--the foundation in--in the--in the patio which was here way before I moved in here was--it's been sinking and the landlord says well it's not my patio. I didn't build it 'cause it was in fact built by another restaurant. So patio is an important part of the business, and now I have to figure out how to get that patio leveled. You know I got to come up with the money, figure out technically who can do it, and--and so it's not always just about the food and the service. **[Laughs]** It gets very complicated; you know it can get very complicated because then we're talking to engineering firms and you know it--it's you know tax issues, this and audits, and I mean it just goes on and on.

**00:52:21**

**AE:** So would you say your corporate experience helps with that?

**00:52:23**



**SC:** Absolutely; absolutely. Yeah; I mean I don't know what I would have done if I just--I mean I don't know how other people do it when they haven't had--when they haven't had the corporate experience or you know because I mean I've had to deal with all kinds of people along the way you know in the corporate world. And--and so--and sometimes I have felt intimidated, you know because I mean there are areas that I don't know anything about or very little about, you know. So but anyway, one foot in front of the other and just you know keep--just keep moving along and you know try to get people--find people. I try to be as resourceful as I can and try to find the right people to help me with these--some of these problems. I ask a lot of questions and just admit what--you know I don't know anything about this; I don't, you know so I'm going to grope around and try to figure it out kind of like I did with the fajita meat, so--.

**00:53:18**

**AE:** So then now that you're so established here and have generated this great reputation in Houston, do you see yourself in the kind of cannon of Tex-Mex icons in Houston that are you know the Felix family, the [Nimfa's] family, and now Sylvia's?

**00:53:34**

**SC:** I--I guess I never did but I'm beginning to think that perhaps I am. In fact, it was so cool. About a year ago, maybe a little longer than that one day Felix--Mrs. Felix's son, daughter, and grandson came here to eat. And I just was so tickled. I was so tickled. In fact, I don't know--I should have taken a picture of them and put it on Facebook but I'm not a Facebook person [Laughs], so now that I think about it, but yeah they came here to eat my food. And I was--that was just such a huge compliment. And I told them; I told them everything that I told you about

how Mrs. Felix had been my secret mentor you know and that I had felt a lot of inspiration from her.

**00:54:16**

In fact, when I was doing my restaurant in Rosenberg she actually came out there and somebody brought her. She was very elderly and somebody brought her out there and she said let me taste your--your chili gravy. So I brought it out to her and she tasted it and she said--she says well next to mine I like yours best. *[Laughs]* I'll never forget that.

**00:54:39**

So then I went over to invite her to come over, because I had--we had moved. We were leasing a little bitty building there in Rosenberg and we moved it to another building. And so I was inviting her over to have the grand opening party. And--and she had passed away. There was a black wreath on her door, so I didn't get to--. But I had made contact with her; she had been out there and we had--had a couple of conversations and you know it was wonderful to see her. But she was--you know her health had been in decline. She lived across the street from the restaurant so she would--I think she would make it over there all the time and that was her life, so--.

**00:55:18**

**AE:** How old was your grandmother and what year was it that she passed?

**00:55:24**

**SC:** My grandmother was 86 and she passed away in 1972. So no; no, no, '74, in 1974, yeah, yeah she was born in 1886, my grandmother was and my mother was born in 1921 and she just passed away. She would have been 92, so--.

**00:55:44**

**AE:** What do you think your grandmother would think about your success?

**00:55:47**

**SC:** Oh I think she'd be so proud. I know my mother was. She was so cute. We were--I was going to have--I had a--I never had a grand opening party at the Eldridge restaurant because it just got so busy and I didn't want--and our kitchen was still kind of wobbly you know as far as the--not so much the cooking part but getting the plates assembled and out. That's one of the hardest things in a Mexican restaurant 'cause of all the--all the different combination plates and people want their food hot and fast. And so I decided not to do a grand opening. We just kind of opened the doors. And but I had planned a media dinner to introduce the media to you know my food and you know the facility and all that.

**00:56:30**

My mother kept asking when is the party; when is the party? And I said mom I'm not going to have a party 'cause I'm afraid to invite too many people and we're going to make people mad and all that so I said we're going to have it later.

**00:56:39**

So I decided; I called my cousin and I said get her dressed up and bring her. So my cousin and she had her little dress on and her hair was all done and--and she was so tickled. And so she's sitting out there in the restaurant and when we finished I started taking some of the media people over there to meet her. And she was so tickled and she was telling them how proud she was of me and so they took a picture of us. And it was the last picture that we--'cause two weeks later she got sick. It was the last picture she ever took and we--you know they took a

picture of us standing there together, so--. And she was walking around the restaurant and she was all decked out. She had a beautiful dress on and her hair was done and she was greeting customers. And she would like to go walk around and look because I've got family photos in my restaurant of my dad and my brothers and her and her wedding picture and just you know some cool very old photos that I have. And so she would love to walk around and look at everything and--so.

**00:57:34**

**AE:** Well that's a great last memory to have of her.

**00:57:37**

**SC:** Yeah; very nice, very, very nice, yeah.

**00:57:39**

**AE:** So when yo think about the Tex-Mex, like the early days of Tex-Mex and then Tex-Mex today what can you see are the changes if any?

**00:57:51**

**SC:** Well it's for one the fajitas were not around in the early Tex-Mex. It was--it was about-- primarily it was about chili gravy and cheese and beef enchiladas. That was primarily what it was about. Now it's gotten all--you know there's the Mexican food, you know the stuff from Mexico, the Mexican style of cooking and ingredients have kind of found their way a little bit into some of the Tex-Mex restaurants. They haven't in mine because I did develop the recipes of Mexico in my enchiladas so I have South and North of the Border, but so the fajitas. I know that

I offer some fish and shrimp, which you know certainly eating on the border but it's not necessarily something that would have been old time Tex-Mex, but you kind of have to. You have to evolve or else you--you get stale and then you die. So you've got to kind of sort of keep a fresh menu. You cannot have the same items that you've had for the last 20 years, you know 'cause you'll bore your customers. So you have to evolve. Like I have whole wheat tortillas here; you know I didn't grow up eating whole wheat tortillas. They're actually really good, but we-- you know we added them to the menu. And so--

**00:59:11**

**AE:** What about the whole gluten free craze? I saw some of those things on your menu?

**00:59:15**

**SC:** Yes; I--not that I went to the R&D bench to develop gluten free recipes but I have recipes that don't have any gluten. So I noted them on the menu because people will ask. I'm gluten free; what do you have? And so you know so we noted them on the menu so that they would have choices. And I have--you know there's a number of them. Certainly not my gravy because there's a little gluten in there, you know as a thickener, but--

**00:59:41**

**AE:** So does--do any of your children cook? Do they like to cook?

**00:59:44**

**SC:** My youngest son; my daughter has zero interest in cooking and neither does my oldest son but Nick--Nick is the one, the baby. He'll call and he'll say mom how do I do this or what do

you think of that or you know what am I missing? I put this and this and you know--so yeah; we'll--we'll talk. Theoretically we talk about food and--or I'll give him, I'll send him a recipe or whatever. He likes to cook for his friends or he has parties and stuff like that you know.

**01:00:08**

**AE:** So would you say all your children's names from oldest to youngest?

**01:00:10**

**SC:** Jason, Celeste, and then Nick--Nicholas, yeah.

**01:00:17**

**AE:** Great; so and I read somewhere you were working on a cookbook. Is it published? Did you publish a cookbook?

**01:00:22**

**SC:** No; I--I have actually been working on it because of my cooking class, you know my cooking school. I have a lot of home recipes that I teach in my cooking classes. But I actually did--I made a decision a couple years ago that I would try to see if I could get a publisher to buy it and I actually got a contract on it a--it got signed about two--about two weeks ago or three. So which is very difficult to do and so it's a publisher out of New York and my book should be out in the fall of next year.

**01:01:01**

**AE:** Congratulations.

**01:01:02**

**SC:** So my deadline is early September, so--but a lot of the recipes I have but I still have to do a number of more that I've got to complete, so just you know a little more juggling. So I'm really excited. That's--that's going to be my--my legacy. That's my legacy. I want to leave that cookbook. I mean I've had people write me; one lady that comes to mind she said she was a Military wife and she was from Houston and she had eaten at my little restaurant and that she missed the food so much. And I forget where they were, in Hawaii or the Philippines or somewhere. So I emailed her some recipes. She said you know she missed the food so much and you know--so I think a lot of people when they leave Texas and you know it's just--you're not going to find it and if you do it's--it's a horrible imitation.

**01:01:52**

I always say that the further you--away you get from where a recipe was created the more it'll change. So you know the recipes of this food from this region of the world, you take it even to Dallas or Oklahoma City or you know the further north away you get the--the more it changes. And I don't know why. I guess I call them like--it's like it's a bad photocopy you know when something has been Xeroxed or copied over and over and over and it's a--it's the, you know 5<sup>th</sup>--5,000<sup>th</sup> copy. It's not going to look like the original one or something; I don't know. But you know people substitute ingredients and I don't know. Things change along the way and it's just not the same anymore. The--the recipe gets mutilated along the way, so--.

**01:02:45**

**AE:** Well thinking about the state as a whole and Tex-Mex, what do you think Houston's place in the history and future of Tex-Mex is specifically? Do you have any ideas about that?

01:02:56

**SC:** Houston's place in the history of Tex-Mex? Definitely; I'm sorry definitely the fajitas. I mean that's--that's a no-brainer. I mean that--that was huge. You know [Nimfa] bringing fajitas, something that was beyond a shadow of doubt created the tradition of cooking them like that. That cut of meat and cooking them like that, grilling them, eating them in a tortilla, in a flour tortilla I mean all of that is so--. As far as the rest, for me I believe the--you know the chili gravy had its origin in San Antonio South, you know. I believe that's--that's what food historians say but I know chili gravy was very popular in Brownsville.

01:03:41

And you know back then I remember my mother would refer to if it wasn't a chili gravy enchilada she would call them Mexican--enchiladas Mexicana, Mexican enchiladas which would be like the red--the enchiladas [rojas] or the chicken enchiladas with salsa verde. So that's what she would refer to them. So if they were--if they were gravy with ground beef or gravy with yellow cheese then they weren't ours, so--.

01:04:09

**AE:** Do you have an opinion on the puffy taco in San Antonio?

01:04:11

**SC:** I've had it once there. I've had a lot of people tell me that I should do it but I haven't eaten it enough times to feel that I could do it to the same standard and I'm--and I have a--I can't think of the world but I--I don't want to do cheap imitation of anything. It's either going to be done right or I'm not doing it. So I don't want to copy something that I'm not that familiar with 'cause



I'm a strong believer that unless you've been eating and cooking a food, eating and cooking it, well at least eating it, but eating and cooking--is better for a long, long time, you don't really know. And you're liable to--to have a poor imitation and I don't want to do that. You know so I haven't tried to do it.

**01:05:01**

I know how they're made. But like anything else, there's always a little secret. There's always one or two little things that it looks easy but then when you really go do it, it you know it makes a difference. And so, and I don't know what that is; I think if I ate them all the time I would probably maybe be able to figure it out. I just haven't--I'm not in San Antonio very often, so--which is where they were created; yeah.

**01:05:26**

**AE:** Well and I want to ask you, too, quickly--you've spent so much time with me; you're so generous--but about your inspiration for doing the cooking classes, where that came from.

**01:05:35**

**SC:** Well of course you know my history. I was supposed to have been a teacher. So they started asking me to do cooking classes, say like in 2004 or '05, probably--yeah. So I started going to like--I did Williams Sonoma and I did [La Soeur La Tal] and I did Fiesta and it was a lot of hassle. I had to take ingredients. I had to take--sometimes I'd have to take a helper you know and all that and it just seemed like a lot of work. And one day I just started thinking well if I could do them in my restaurant wouldn't that be cool?

**01:06:08**

So one day I figured it out and I found a mirror that you could suspend you know to put over my hands and I've had a table built which is over there, you know counter high and I decided I would teach tamales. And it was so successful and I had so much fun and people loved it so much that I thought okay; well I think I'm going to--I'm going to do a--you know I'm going to create a--a bunch of other classes. And I busied myself doing that. And I did you know--so like tomorrow I do fajitas and you're more than welcome to come.

**01:06:41**

**AE:** I'd love to; that's great. So is--do you have--like you said you started with the tamales but is like the grilling beef fajitas is that by customer-demand? Is it is anything that people really ask for?

**01:06:50**

**SC:** No; it's just mostly recipes that I thought are popular. Like the one after that is sweets. I only have Mexican sweets. I only have three people signed up. I don't know if I'm going to teach the class 'cause that's very small. That's not a class that's in high demand, but if I do chilies rellenos it's a hands-on, oh my gosh, it's exploding with customers; tamales, also another very busy class 'cause it's hands-on. Enchiladas, I do two different ones. I do meatless which is like the vegetarian ones like spinach and enchiladas [rojas] and then I do south of the--south of the border ones, so I do two different classes of enchiladas. And so it tends to get--those are always full.

**01:07:34**

What other ones do I--? Oh Mexican breakfast is also very full. So we do the hand--the flour tortillas, the corn tortillas, the gorditas, you know the Mexican hot chocolate, you know

[migas], [inaudible] rancheros, you know just all the goodies for breakfast. Appetizers is another one I do and I usually do it around the Super Bowl. Chili con queso and pica mole, and guacamole, salsa, two or three different kinds of salsas, just appetizers. If you're going to have a party and you say you know I'll just fix my own appetizers. So that's also a pretty popular class. So it's just you know areas of the menu that I felt would--people would have an interest.

**01:08:12**

**AE:** And you mentioned the Mexican breakfast; brunch is a big deal in Houston and you have a great brunch here, yeah.

**01:08:18**

**SC:** Yeah; it is. Yeah; I started it about two and a half years ago and it's doing really well. The--that's another recipe. This is not Mexican but I happen to love pancakes. And so it took me a--way over a year, probably closer to two years to develop my pancake recipe. It's amazing. So I do--we do an omelet, an egg station you know with omelets, or [migas] or [inaudible] with eggs or whatever. We also have a pancake station and we have a taco station, three or four different kinds of enchiladas, so it's quite a nice buffet and it's not expensive.

**01:09:00**

**AE:** Well what is the future of Sylvia's, Sylvia?

**01:09:05**

**SC:** You know kind of one day at a time. Right now what I'm trying to do is really get--opening a restaurant is kind of like having a baby. And right now I have a--an eight or nine-month old

infant over there on Eldridge. It's still a baby. So I have to get it really rolling where it--where it doesn't, you know it's very, very stable and sales are real good and all that. And so we're--we're headed in that direction. I mean it's--when you first open a restaurant and you hire a lot of people and some of them work out and some of them don't. You don't really know until the rubber meets the road.

**01:09:46**

And so we're getting real stable with back of the house and front of the house staff and all that, to that--that's where my focus is right now. I would love to have a restaurant inside the loop, but I don't know. The real estate is so expensive and good locations are next to impossible to find. So I don't know that--that will ever happen but I guess maybe this will be as close as I'll ever get to the loop, so--.

**01:10:15**

**AE:** All right; well I feel like I'm hogging your time. You've been so generous. Maybe we could take a break. I know you brought some stuff with you, photo albums and stuff. We could take a break and then maybe just record some conversation about a few of--of the things that you brought. Yeah, okay; well thank you Sylvia for this part of the--the interview. I'm going to record this formal ending here and we will be back.

**01:10:37**

**SC:** I hope I didn't talk too much.

**01:10:37**

**[End Sylvia Casares-1; Begin Sylvia Casares-2]**

00:00:00

**SC:** I'm going to start off with some of my really old photos.

00:00:03

**AE:** Okay; here we go again with Sylvia on May 1, 2015 at her Woodway location and she's brought these enlargements of family photos that are amazing. Okay; what are we looking at here?

00:00:14

**SC:** This is my mother's grandmother. Her name was Inez--I-n-e-z and that's my mother's mother. And my mother's grandfather; this is--the picture was taken about 1905. And they were from the Edna area of Houston so kind of near Houston. That's where she was born. If you'll notice, she just kind of looks like a little bit like Native American wouldn't you say? But yeah; they ended up moving to South Texas but you know they were all born in--up here near Houston, so--. It's a cool picture. I love it because I mean look at his--look at his clothes and he's got a tie on almost like a Butch Cassidy look. But it's a--you know--.

00:01:06

**AE:** Amazing.

00:01:06

**SC:** This here is a smaller copy of this I believe. This is my paternal grandmother; this is Sara. And my grandfather and I don't really have very many pictures of her by herself. It seemed like

every time they took a picture of her she was standing there with somebody. There's only two pictures that I have with--and there may be others and I'm going to be searching the family to see if anybody has pictures of her alone, but that's my culinary hero, Sara.

**00:01:35**

So and I think I've got smaller versions of this somewhere but I don't know. Let me see 'cause there's this one; let me see, let me see. Oh yeah there they are; that's them right there. So what I'm doing is getting copies from my brothers and nieces and nephews and stuff and so I had them enlarged but I also had extra copies made for them.

**00:01:54**

This is Nick [*Laughs*]. I love this picture of him so I had it copied and made again. That's my baby.

**00:02:01**

**AE:** Are the family photos going to be something that you're going to include in your cookbook?

**00:02:04**

**SC:** Yeah; yeah absolutely, absolutely, yeah 'cause these are I mean these are--I've had so many people say oh my gosh. You're so lucky to have pictures like this of your ancestors. And I said I am--I am very blessed. But I'm going to--I'm going to get myself real busy trying to see if any cousins, any long lost cousins may have something of my grandmother that I'm not aware of.

**00:02:24**

Let me see what else; let me see if there's anything here. I just started grabbing stuff when I left my house. Oh this is my dad. He was--when he was in the CC Camp he was--when

he was a young man he--he was recruited or he joined the CC Camp deal and he worked somewhere in Central Texas.

**00:02:43**

**AE:** What's the CC Camp?

**00:02:45**

**SC:** That was a public works program that the United States had pre-World War II because the Depression, to create jobs for young men. And so he went off and worked in the CC Camp. He was always a--he was also a Veteran of World War II. He did end up having to go and serve. He didn't actually ever make it to the battlefield because the War ended and he was married and had two kids so they sent him home. I don't know if you have any interest in that. I just picked that up. That's--that's us in--in 1967 I think or '66--'66, so that's Oscar and the one that went to Vietnam and then the oldest brother and me. And I'm 13 there. So I didn't know if you had any interest--

**00:03:30**

**AE:** Beauty; absolutely yes, yes.

**00:03:32**

**SC:** Here is a picture of my father's grandmother. This picture is about 1850. So that's--that's [Sarita]. That's Sara and her mother, so that's my great-grandmother, another great-grandmother, so that's Sara.

**00:03:53**

**AE:** Wow.

**00:03:53**

**SC:** Isn't that amazing?

**00:03:56**

**AE:** It's really stunning that you have that; my goodness.

**00:04:09**

**SC:** So this is all of me and I grabbed it because it just seemed like it was--like there might be something here with me and my mother--my mother and I, something that I could show you 'cause I didn't really have a lot of time to dig. But there are a lot of pictures at my house but since I--I just moved a couple of months ago and things are kind of helter skelter. That's--that's me. We have a thing called Churro Days [*Laughs*] in Brownsville and I can take it out of there so it won't--it won't be shiny. But--

**00:04:43**

**AE:** And I'm snapping away with my iPhone to record when these are happening but I'm--I definitely want to take pictures with my other camera.

**00:04:52**



**SC:** So Churro Days is sort of like Fiesta in San Antonio. And everybody dresses up in costume and so that--all the little kids are dressed like little Mexican girls and they still do it today. It's very popular.

**00:05:06**

**AE:** Which one is you?

**00:05:07**

**SC:** I'm in the middle.

**00:05:07**

**AE:** You're in the middle?

**00:05:10**

**SC:** Uh-hm. I don't know if that has any relevance. That's my--my graduation from kindergarten. [*Laughs*] My kindergarten graduation picture but if it has any interest for you at all--let me see.

**00:05:26**

**AE:** Do you think there might be anything in there that's you in a kitchen or cooking with your family?

**00:05:30**

**SC:** I'm looking. This is a little album; it's all totally me. So let me see if there's something that I can find here. Let's see if I can find something here. I just--I grabbed this album as I walked out of the house.

**00:05:56**

**AE:** Your family were great documentarians. [*Laughs*]

**00:05:58**

**SC:** Yeah; that's me in high school.

**00:06:01**

**AE:** Are you prom or homecoming queen?

**00:06:02**

**SC:** Yeah; I was--want to take a picture of it?

**00:06:04**

**AE:** Yes. [*Laughs*] Look at you; wow.

**00:06:14**

**SC:** There's college, not that it matters. A friend of mine, a very good friend of mine and I standing there; oh my gosh let me see. And UT of course and yeah; I don't know if there is going to be anything of me cooking. You know you just don't ever think about it--all those meals that I cooked and never anyone taking a picture of me. One day I just thought you know what? I'm

going to put all these pictures; I'm going to create a--a chronological album of me 'cause they were all scattered all over the place. I did that for my children of course, too, but just a bunch of old pictures of me. And you know what? It was so interesting 'cause I found a picture of my grandmother cooking or making tamales and then now I can't find it since I moved. I know it's in the house somewhere but I haven't been able to find it 'cause in the move I misplaced it. But I'll show it to you. And that was me in Mexico. I was--I made an exploratory trip. That's in Guajaca. I'm at the market there. So it's kind of a cool deal. I was down in Guajaca going to the markets and all that.

00:07:38

Let me see--

00:07:39

**AE:** What year would that have been about?

00:07:42

**SC:** Two thousand and seven, two thousand and seven; yeah. I took my youngest son and I went with another friend. This is so cool. Look at this [*Laughs*]; do you recognize her--this woman right here? She still had a restaurant in Guajaca; it's Ileana De Lavage. She's going to be--she has a restaurant in Houston, I mean in Austin called [*Inaudible*]. And I think she's going to be in that--in that--but I attended her cooking school and--and I tell people about her because I said man I found this woman in Guajaca that owned this restaurant and she specialized in moles. She did seven different kinds of moles. And she had a cooking school and I did--all I did was enchiladas. And I had a cooking school. And a lot of her cooking methods were the methods I was using and I just thought that was so cool 'cause I mean I'm way down there in Guajaca and

it was--you know grinding the chilies and all of that because that's you know there I went. I went up there and volunteered. It was just so cool. I just thought wow.

**00:08:46**

So I always tell my students about that. But then they had a lot of civil unrest and then tourism died and so she ended up having to move to the US, so you know it just sort of--it kind of just went--. And those are my kids when they were little, my two younger ones. So that's what I have right now.

**00:09:03**

Oh I think I also have some other--yeah; I've got a wedding picture, which I've got pictures over there which I could show you.

**00:09:08**

**AE:** Okay; well I'll end the recording now just so I don't have the--don't need the narrative with the rest of the pictures, but thank you so much Sylvia. Thank you; thank you; thank you.

**00:09:15**

**SC:** I don't want to bore you but [*Laughs*]--.

**00:09:17**

**[End Sylvia Casares-2 Sylvia's Enchilada's Interview]**