

Amanda Mercado

Professor Lesley Broder

English 2400-W109

11 February, 2022

### The Ugly Truth Behind Our Beautiful Culture

I am a proud member of the Hispanic community. I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York but have a strong Hispanic heritage within myself and in my family. There are many different things that make up our culture, but personally, when I think about the Hispanic community, one of the first things that comes to my mind is our food. One of the biggest activities Hispanics partake in is cooking. Cooking large meals is an everyday occurrence for many Hispanic households but is especially involved in celebrations and holidays.

Cooking is a form of socialization and a way for us to connect as a family and as friends. We all have our own jobs or dishes to make to complete cooking our meal together and we get to gossip or talk about our day or reminisce about the past while we do it. The older members of our community who are no longer able to cook also contribute by sharing recipes that have been handed down repeatedly by each generation, and even when you are a young child, often the first words that come from your mom's mouth once you get home from school are, "Are you hungry?" Afterwards, once she has sat you down to eat, she will remind you to eat everything on your plate. I believe this is because many times our parents and grandparents were raised in poverty and may have had nights where they went to bed hungry, so they try their best to ensure their children do not go through the same. It is also not uncommon to see most Hispanic families engaging in huge family gatherings. Food is a very important part of these family gatherings, as

it is what brings the whole family together and you can guarantee that you would not be able to leave that event without a bloated belly and leftovers to take home.

Even though I have fond memories of these experiences, it can and has instilled unhealthy practices onto the members of our Hispanic community. Although our food is delicious, it is usually cooked in unhealthy ways, such as frying or cooking in lard, and often served in unnecessarily large portions. It is also high in calories, carbohydrates, and fats. These nutrients are necessary for our body to function but are often eaten in excess because we are used to large portions and being told to finish all the food on our plates, so we are not being wasteful. Being raised this way, I personally still do not like the feeling of leaving food on my plate, despite already satisfying my hunger. This type of diet and practices are a major risk factor for diseases like obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.

Diseases such as obesity, hypertension and diabetes are common within the Hispanic community. The article *Hispanic/Latino Americans and Type 2 Diabetes* published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is a great affirmation of this, stating “Hispanic/Latino Americans make up a diverse group that includes people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South and Central American, and other Spanish cultures, and all races. Each has its own history and traditions, but all are more likely to have type 2 diabetes (17%) than non-Hispanic whites (8%).” That means Hispanic Americans are two times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes than non-Hispanic whites! The CDC proclaims that one of the reasons why Hispanic Americans are at a higher risk is due to their weight, stating “Hispanics/Latinos have higher rates of obesity and tend to be less physically active than non-Hispanic whites. And some see being overweight as a sign of health instead of as a health problem.” I concur with this statement. It is not uncommon for Hispanic family and friends to show their affection through

food and being a normal weight will often get you called “skin and bones” or “unhealthy”, resulting in a loved one trying to “fatten you up”. It is not only an issue within my community, but also an issue that is prevalent within my very own home. Both my father (Miguel) and one of my older sisters (Lydia) have suffered from all three of these diseases at one point in their life. Therefore, I decided to interview both about their diet, exercise practices, and the changes they can do or have done to manage these devastating diagnoses.

I think one of the first things that will come out of your health care provider’s mouth is “diet and exercise” when you are diagnosed with one of these diseases. After interviewing family members, I found that they both continued to live sedentary lifestyles but have had two completely different health outcomes. My sister was able to lose seventy-five pounds and reverse her obesity, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes, while my dad is still suffering from all three of these diseases. There was only one difference between these two individuals: Their diet.

When my father initially got his diagnosis, our whole family tried to take it seriously and help him make the right decisions. I remember my mother switching her cooking style completely. She started baking everything she used to fry in the past and started cooking with less rice, potatoes and other ingredients that are traditional to our culture. She also tried to eliminate dessert and other sugars around the house. My parents had good intentions, but a very “all or nothing” mindset. They thought that they had to remove everything they once loved from their culture completely from their lives and it was very hard for my father to adhere to this lifestyle change. Nowadays, he does try to make healthier choices, but not nearly enough to produce results.

So, what happens when healthy choices become too extreme and difficult to maintain? Non-compliance. Twenty years later, my father is still suffering from all three conditions because

of this mindset. On the other hand, my sister knew that this mindset would not work for her, and she would eventually be in the same boat as my father. The only thing that would help her stick to a consistent healthy lifestyle was to include all the cultural foods she loved in moderation and/or with slight changes.

My sister started altering all my mom's traditional recipes to make them a little healthier and fit her lifestyle and goals better. For instance, she started switching from regular tortillas to low carbohydrate tortillas, mixing equal portions of white rice with equal portions of cauliflower, air frying or baking instead of frying foods, using lower carbohydrate flours like almond flour, using sugar substitutes like agave, etc. When I asked my sister what her usual lunch or dinner looks like, she answered, "I love making arroz con gandules, just like how mom makes it, but I make sure to fill up my plate with other vegetables first, like broccoli or a side salad. Then, I will add a protein to the side, like bistec encebollado or pollo guisado. Never fried, only baked, air fried or stove-top." Arroz con gandules, or seasoned white rice with pigeon peas, is a staple in our house, but is usually served in a heaping portion and tends to be high in calories and carbohydrates. This is one of my sister's favorite foods, so instead of omitting it from her diet, she still indulges in it, but in a smaller portion, and she then fills the remainder of her plate with vegetables to keep her full and satisfied. These practices promote compliance and have allowed her to enjoy the foods that are traditional to her culture, but still maintain her health. These experiences are very helpful to my research because it shows that the health issues that Hispanics often face can be prevented, managed better or even reversed while still maintaining their culture with just a few tweaks to their diet.

As stated by the article, "Hispanic/Latino Americans and Type 2 Diabetes" by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Hispanic American adults have a 50%

chance of developing type 2 diabetes, are more likely to develop it at a younger age and have more severe complications, such as kidney failure. This is a terrifying statistic, but what I find most interesting is that one of the biggest causes of this is the food Hispanics eat. The CDC states, “In some Hispanic/Latino cultures, foods can be high in fat and calories. Also, family celebrations may involve social pressure to overeat, and turning down food could be seen as impolite.” This is true within my own household, but also holds true for my extended family and Hispanic friends. I have a friend, Yessenia, who has the sweetest mom in the world. Her mom always makes sure there is something hot and fresh on the stove to eat when I come over to visit and will often scold Yessenia if she invites me over without notice because she has no time to prepare a “real meal” for me. Even still in that situation, she will make sure to welcome me by brewing a hot pot of coffee to accompany cookies or other pre-packaged desserts. This is her way of showing hospitality, and I could never refuse it without feeling disrespectful.

I also believe a lot of people do not understand just how serious these diseases are either. The article “Diabetes in Older Hispanic/Latino Americans: Understanding Who Is at Greatest Risk” by Willy Marcos Valencia, Lisset Oropesa-Gonzalez, Christie-Michele Hogue and Hermes Jose Florez highlights many different frightening complications associated with type 2 diabetes, such as stroke, peripheral vascular disease, coronary artery disease, foot complications, diabetic retinopathy, end-stage renal disease and even death. The authors even state, “Hispanics are 50 percent more likely to die from diabetes than non-white Hispanics.” This should be a huge wake up call for Hispanic individuals currently managing this disease. Type 2 diabetes is a very serious condition that affects the entire body! Obesity is not any less serious either, which is a huge risk factor for coronary artery disease, myocardial infarctions, stroke, and more. One popular example of how serious obesity can be is a well-known songwriter and rapper within our

Hispanic and New York community, Christopher Lee Rios or Big Pun. Big Pun was Puerto Rican, and much like many others within our Hispanic community, suffered from obesity for many years, which eventually led to a myocardial infarction and his death.

Some people also attribute these diseases to getting older, but this is not the case, even Hispanic kids are becoming more prone to these diseases. In the article “Childhood obesity mirrors the nation’s racial divide” by Zachary A. Goldfarb, Goldfarb brings to light that although obesity rates for children have decreased over the past ten years, black and Hispanic children still suffer more from obesity when compared to white children. “A black child age 2 to 5 is more than three times as likely to be obese as a white child that age. Hispanic children in that age group are nearly five times as likely to be obese.” according to Goldfarb. This is quite alarming, because obesity is a huge risk factor for hypertension and type 2 diabetes. It also shows that these diseases can be present in all age groups, and a solution to this problem is needed for the entire family. After going through these articles, I believe it is imperative that we start instilling healthier practices within our Hispanic community at a young age.

The solution I believe will have the best success rate is tweaking the Hispanic diet so that it maintains culture but promotes health. Food is such an important part of Hispanic community because it is one of the biggest ways we connect with our culture. I believe making small changes in the diet will help prevent or manage common comorbidities in the Hispanic community. For instance, eating smaller portions or adding more vegetables to make portions appear larger. If the individual is used to large portions, they could try volume eating. Volume eating allows the individual to continue consuming large volumes of food without consuming many calories. Adding seasoned cauliflower (which does not have much flavor on its own and is easy to disguise) to a smaller portion of rice is a great example of volume eating.

Changing the preparation of certain foods can also make a big difference, such as cooking with healthier fats, like avocado oil or olive oil instead of lard and air frying, broiling, baking instead of frying foods. Tostones (crispy, flattened plantains) are a staple in Puerto Rican cuisine, but are often deep fried—Twice! I have found that air frying them instead of frying them is healthier and still maintains the crispy texture. You can even tweak traditional Hispanic desserts like flan very easily just by replacing the sweetener with agave or a sugar substitute like splenda or stevia. Below I have included a before and after recipe for traditional tostones:

Twice Fried Tostones	Twice Air-Fried Tostones
<p><u>Ingredients:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 large green plantain, fully peeled</li> <li>• ½ cup of vegetable oil</li> <li>• 1 tablespoon of salt</li> </ul> <p><u>Directions:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Peel the green plantain and cut it into your preferred thickness slices (I like 1-inch-thick slices).</li> <li>2. Heat the vegetable oil over a medium flame in a small pan. Once the oil is hot enough, add the plantains and take them out once they are a light gold color. This usually takes 4 - 5 minutes.</li> <li>3. Flatten the plantains with a tostonera or plantain masher to your preferred thickness (the thinner they are, the crispier they will be). The bottom of a big mason jar would work fine too.</li> <li>4. Reintroduce the mashed plantains into the oil until they are a gold yellow color on both</li> </ol>	<p><u>Ingredients:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 large green plantain, fully peeled</li> <li>• Olive oil or avocado spray</li> <li>• 1 teaspoon salt</li> <li>• 1 teaspoon garlic powder</li> <li>• 1 teaspoon onion powder</li> <li>• 1 cup of water</li> </ul> <p><u>Directions:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Peel the green plantain and cut it into your preferred thickness slices (I like 1-inch-thick slices).</li> <li>2. Add the water with half the salt, garlic, and onion powder to a bowl to make a brine.</li> <li>3. Preheat the air fryer to 400°F.</li> <li>4. Spray the cut-up plantains with the olive oil or avocado spray and cook them in the air fryer for 5 - 6 minutes. Make sure to flip them halfway through. Take them out once they are a light gold color.</li> </ol>

<p>sides. This usually takes another 4 - 5 minutes.</p> <p>5. Sprinkle the plantains with salt.</p> <p>This is a traditional tostones recipe and is usually served with a mayo-ketchup dipping sauce which is equal parts full fat mayonnaise and ketchup.</p>	<p>5. Flatten the plantains with a tostonera or plantain masher to your preferred thickness (the thinner they are, the crispier they will be). The bottom of a big mason jar would work fine too.</p> <p>6. Dip the mashed plantains in the brine you made earlier and set them aside.</p> <p>7. Reintroduce the mashed plantains into the preheated air fryer (400°F) until they are a gold yellow color on both sides. This usually takes 5 minutes on each side. Do not forget to spray each side with the same oil spray you used earlier.</p> <p>8. Sprinkle the plantains with the remaining salt.</p> <p>This is an altered traditional tostones recipe that I personally like to serve with guacamole. Guacamole has a lot more taste than the traditional mayo-ketchup dipping sauce and it is a great way to include more vegetables and healthy fats into the diet.</p>
--	--

As you can see, less cooking oil is used due to a simple change in the cooking method, ultimately reducing the calories in the healthier dish, while still maintaining the traditional “crunch” or texture of the tostones. A different type of oil is used as well, which is a healthier alternative to vegetable oil because it is a better source of a “good” or unsaturated fat. The healthier dish also contains less salt and gets most of its flavor from different seasonings like onion and garlic powder instead, which is great because too much salt can contribute to



hypertension or make it worse. However, just a quick glance at this before and after recipe will show you that the healthier version of this dish is a little more time-consuming, which is one of the biggest issues my father had in his interview, stating, “Maybe, but it is a lot of work and too much time wasted.” when asked if it was possible to make traditional Hispanic meals healthier. I agree that not everyone has the time to make elaborate recipes, but simple changes like the ones noted in this recipe are worth introducing to your life because your health is truly invaluable. We all have similar priorities in life, such as making sure our loved ones have what they need to survive and are protected, making sure we have a roof over our head, paying our bills, etc. However, it is hard to manage any of those priorities without your health. Health cannot be repaired with regret once it is too late, or even wealth, but only by making it a priority and allowing well-deserved time to work towards small changes each day, like cooking healthier meals and being more active.

There are also thousands of Hispanic recipes that have been modified to reduce sugar, carbohydrate or calories and articles that give helpful tips online too. In the article “4 Tips for Making Latin Food Type 2 Diabetes–Friendly” by Sheryl Huggins Salomon, chef Leticia Moreinos Schwartz, who has a family history of type 2 diabetes, shares some helpful tips to manage a flavorful, but healthy diet. She believes salt should be limited since high levels of salt can contribute to hypertension, and other seasonings should be used instead. Schwartz states, “I feel that using herbs and spices is one of the most important things in cooking because everything is so flavorful.” Instead of salt, she makes sofrito, which is a traditional Hispanic sauce or marinade that consists of garlic, cilantro, peppers, tomatoes, cumin, oregano and many other spices and herbs. According to Schwartz, “There is so much depth in its flavor that you need a lot less salt when using sofrito.” This is a great option for people who are at risk or who

have hypertension and is a tip I currently use in my house. As you can see, there are many ways to modify the traditional Hispanic diet while maintaining taste and improving health.

Another huge aspect of Hispanic culture is how family oriented we are. Family is so important to our identity and provides protection to us via emotional, physical, and even monetary security. I would not be who I am or where I am in life without the support of my family, and now that you understand how big of an effect these diseases can have on their health, it is time to get serious and do something about it. If you are experiencing this issue within your family or friend circle, I can suggest a “sneaky” starting solution. I would suggest preparing healthy meals for them without relaying the tweaks or modifications you have made before they taste it. A lot of people can get turned off when you mention something is “healthy” and will either refuse to try it or believe that it is going to taste bland and/or bad. However, once they have cluelessly tasted your dish, it is very likely that they will enjoy it. Afterwards, you can explain to them the modifications you have made to the dish and how doing so with other dishes can improve their health.

This is a conversation I had to have with my parents as well, and although it is not an overnight solution, small changes can make a big impact over time. It is also important to stress the complications that can occur from these diseases that I mentioned earlier, such as stroke or kidney failure, as although they can be frightening, they act as a warning that can help some individuals understand just how serious these diseases can be and how important it is to make their health a priority. Their health should be their number one priority, nothing else is more important, because without health, they unfortunately have nothing.

## Worked Cited

Goldfarb, Zachary. *Childhood Obesity Mirrors the Nation's Racial Divide: The Nation is Celebrating this Morning News that the Obesity Rate for Children Age 2 to 5 Plummeted Over the Last Decade. but One of the Sadder Parts of the Study was that the Nation's Obesity Rate is a Reflection of the Nation's Racial Divide: Blacks and Hispanics Suffer Much Higher Levels of Obesity Compared to Whites*. Washington: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, 2014. *ProQuest*. Accessed 3 February 2022.

“Hispanic/Latino Americans and Type 2 Diabetes.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 7 April 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/library/features/hispanic-diabetes.html>. Accessed 3 February 2022.

Salomon, Sheryl Huggins, et al. “4 Type 2 Diabetic Diet Tips for Lovers of Latin Food.” *EverydayHealth.com*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.everydayhealth.com/type-2-diabetes/diet-tips-lovers-latin-food/>. Accessed 3 February 2022.

Valencia, Willy Marcos, et al. “Diabetes in Older Hispanic/Latino Americans: Understanding Who Is at Greatest Risk.” *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, vol. 38, no. 4, American Society on Aging, 2014, pp. 33–40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26556074>. Accessed 3 February 2022.