



Von Diaz Episode Transcript

Intro music plays.

- Rashaun: Shot Caller .is for mature audiences only 21 and over. Please drink responsibly.
- Rashaun: Welcome to shot, call it premium podcast with two parts boobs, one part pop culture. Every other week we'll be bringing a spirited conversation with bartenders, artists, influencers, and anyone else who loves a good cocktail. I'm your host for Rashaun Hall, pop culture expert and a cocktail connoisseur, thanks to growing up in New Jersey dive bar.
- Lucinda: And I'm Lucinda Sterling. I'm a bartender and managing partner of Middle Branch in NYC. I'll be mixing it up with our guests and creating original cocktails for our Shot Caller fam. Stay tuned to the end of the episode for a one-of-a kind recipe inspired by our guest.
- R & L: Cheers.
- Rashaun: So, Lucinda, growing up, what was your favorite home-cooked food?
- Lucinda: My grandmother was more of a comfort food from the Midwest, like meat, potatoes, and my mom was Vietnamese and so we enjoyed a lot of street food from Vietnam. But if I had to toss everything up and pick, it would definitely be, like, chicken and biscuits, and gravy.
- Rashaun: To your point, biscuits were were our key thing in my. In my grandmother's household, both of my mother and father's family, that you really get you with biscuits or rolls, whether that Thanksgiving or if you had a family reunion or some sort of cookout, having some of those foods that you grew up with, they do kind of bring back those memories.
- Lucinda: Definitely good food, good memories.
- Rashaun: Yeah, but I think you know, cocktails at the same way. I think that when you, you have a, a good cocktail that, that same feeling, you want to have a good cocktail that reminds you of a time in your life for the first time you ever had that drink. And I think that's kind of what are our guests that we talked to today is going to talk about today.
- Lucinda: Oh yeah. Today we're talking with Von who is reimagining recipes that she's grown up with and her new memoir cookbook.
- Rashaun: Yeah. So she is a writer, a radio producer, and a self-taught cook. She explores Puerto Rican food, culture and identity in her recent memoir cookbook titled "Coconuts and Collards: The recipes and Stories from Puerto Rico to the Deep South." Welcome to Shot Caller, Von Diaz.
- Von: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Rashaun: So Von, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Von: I am a writer and radio producer and sometimes a documentary film consultant based here in New York City. I was born in Puerto Rico and raised in the American South in the fabulous suburbs outside of Atlanta, Georgia, where I lived for most of my life. Eventually, as a grownup, I found that I really wanted to tell stories about food and kind of made a space for myself doing that and wrote this cookbook.

Rashaun: "Coconuts and Collards" does cover cocktails as well as food. So tell me a little bit about some of the cocktail recipes and obviously Coquito is in there. What, tell me a little bit about Puerto Rican cocktails and why you chose the cocktails you did.

Von: The most kind of basic Puerto Rican ingredients for a cocktail are particularly delicious, you know, rum and tropical fruits and citrus. Well, let's start with Coquito. Coquito is one of the most known of exports of Puerto Rican food culture. You know, you've got your mofongo, your pernil, your tostones and then you have Coquito. And here in New York we have a amazing Coquito competition every year that is like across boroughs. There are at the very least two independent Coquito producers in, um, in like one in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn who are Puerto Ricans making their own Coquito. It's a popular drink, but it's historically a holiday beverage, right? It's an eggnog. So typically it's, eh, crema de coco, or cream of coconut, which, you know, has the little, the little tucan guy on the can, it's Coco Lopez, which you could get at any grocery store probably anywhere in the US. And then usually some kind of milk, some cream or, or whole milk, rum. And then the variations are, go wild. Um, you do use, most people use eggs, but not everybody does.

So my family, my recipe is actually was derived from one of my dad's recipes because he was always the Coquito master of, um, of our family. I mean to the point where my grandmother would ask him to make it. And if you couldn't tell from that tone, she didn't typically like him or ask him to do much of anything. So um, his version was super popular. And my variation is that I am pretty lactose intolerant. I mean you will find maybe there's two, like, milk dairy recipes in this book. I just, I avoid milk dairy as often as possible and especially anything that is like a cream, a heavy cream. No puedo, I can't, it just tears me up. So I was like, well can I figure out how to make this with the same consistency, the same thickness richness and flavor but more completely coconut based? So that was my main variation. And so condensed milk is the only dairy that's in there, but it's, you know, so it's like almost vegan except for the eggs, which you can also leave out. But more than anything I wanted to, I worked on that recipe a lot because I wanted the consistency to be right. And then you add as much rum as you want. So it's a super classic recipe done in, I think the general style of the book, which is to try to adapt it in ways that make it optimally delicious but a little bit lighter.

Rashaun: So next time you're testing and you have to make it a lot, but you know, just give us a call. We'll come on over.

Von: You got it.

Rashaun: Give me another cocktail that you particularly love, another recipe that you particularly love in "Coconuts and Collards."

Von: One of my favorite cocktail recipes in "Coconuts and Collards" is the Sofrito Bloody Mary. You know, sofrito is this incredibly powerful, delicious flavor base. And I was sort of thinking, okay, so maybe it's a Saturday morning, maybe I'm making a meal for my family or for my friends and I

need to make sofrito any way. What if I just put like a scoop in my bloody mary because ultimately onion, pepper, garlic, salt, pepper, lime juice. Those are things that are often in bloody marys anyway. So I was like, oh, let me try it. And I have a, a good friend who actually a Bloody Mary master. Her name is Marissa Cadena Belsky and she and her husband Ken Ho live here in New York and they have won the bloody mary competition like more than once. So I took advantage of their brilliance and was like, can you help me design this Bloody Mary recipe? So we drank a bunch of Bloody Marys on a Saturday afternoon, I'll say. And I made variations on Sofrito that I felt like I was like, oh, I'm going to make it super, super classic. I'll make one with a little bit more of this. And that. Mostly for me it was about the onion, because I don't love raw onion in anything. I know a lot of people feel really great about raw onions. I just don't. And so I tried one with regular onion, one with red onion, and then one with green onions, which I tend to prefer green onions in most things. I just have a particular. I just love green onions. And that ended up being the winner. The green onions, a little bit less sharp than the raw onion.

Rashaun: Research. It's called research.

Von: And it really did feel like this is a brilliant way to use sofrito, but the Bloody Mary mix itself that Marissa and her husband helped me design is really solid. I mean, it's solid without sofrito in it. So that felt like a nice contribution. I should say, I don't really know that I'm bloody marys are as much a Puerto Rican cocktail as they are to me, a southern cocktail. So in that way it was, it was a way for me to be between my two worlds and come up with something that uses up things that you might already have in your house and is optimally adaptable.

Rashaun: So what led you to wanting to tell stories about food? What was that impetus?

Von: I think that I was always obsessed with food. My earliest memories are taste memories. Particularly, my earliest memories around visiting Puerto Rico after my family relocated to the South are almost all taste memories. When I started to kind of think where does my background and my passion kind of overlap and it was in food. I had always really wanted to write about food and felt like this natural fit for me. I'm obsessed with food. I love to eat, I love to cook, so I started her early on to write about food and I didn't like anything that I wrote. I just felt like,

Rashaun: Which is the true sign that you really love what you're doing. Everything that you created...

Von: Everything that came out was just so trite and so terrible and not interesting and not a thing that I wanted to read. And so I started the project that would become "Coconuts and Collards" as a way to kind of try on my food writing legs. I sort of thought, oh, you know, this is an area that I feel like I know enough about to just start to write about. So I started to cook my way through "Cocina Criolla," which many people consider the Puerto Rican "Joy of Cooking." It is a book that just about every Puerto Rican I know has on their shelf. It's a thing that you'll get as a gift from your parents when you finally move out of the house and things like that.

Rashaun: So it's tradition.

Von: Exactly. And so I thought, hey, let me just start to cook my way through this and learn to cook in a way that isn't actually how I was raised to cook and also simultaneously explore the ingredients and the name of the techniques that make Puerto Rican food, Puerto Rican food.

Rashaun: That transition, moving from Puerto Rico to the Atlanta area, obviously at a cultural shift in many ways, food being one of them. Tell me about some of your early, earliest kind of taste memories having southern food or soul food back then.

Von: I think some of my earliest taste memories in the south were not particularly positive memories. Cheese grits are delicious. They are a perfect food. There is nothing to be. Nothing more delicious in the world, but when you're in public school, in the suburbs, in Georgia or you're in daycare, they feed you instant food fairly, you know, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, things like that. It would make us these instant grits. And so it was, you know, instant grits from a packet. You pour them out and then put this little, uh, American cheese square on top and let it melt and you know, you might put some margarine or some butter in there and they would serve it to us and I was suspicious from the start. I was like, I don't know about that thing. Does not look delicious to me, but I was ultimately forced to eat it.

Like any little kid at daycare, you know, they're like, you eat that or you don't eat anything. So I ate it and I did not like it tasted chalky. That texture was like wiggly, you know, you sort of poke it with the edge of your spoon and it would stay. I didn't give up though, you know, I kept trying things and for awhile grits in particular were thing that I really died until I met this incredible woman who happened to be my best friend's mom who started to make real grits for me and she sort of walked me through how you actually prepare grits. I had fairly, I would say, standard cafeteria food as my southern food for most of my childhood. None of my parents friends were southern, they didn't cook that way and so I had kind of bad versions of southern food, bad fried chicken, bad barbecue, and then every once in a while we'd have it done really well and that started to open the door for me to understand that food is one of those things that can be prepared very badly or prepared very well. And knowing the difference between those things helps you have a more enjoyable eating experience ultimately.

Rashaun: So the ultimate groups question: sugar or salt?

Von: Oh, salt.

Rashaun: Okay. I was gonna say, we'll end the interview right here. As someone who grew up with a, with a family in Florida and Virginia, if you say sugar, I'm going to let you know at this. Ma'Am. Thank you for coming. We're good. I'm going to now unreached yearbook. So getting back to uh, the Puerto Rican "Joy of Cooking," if you will. So as not to butcher the name of it. When your first reading of that book, tell me kind of what that experience was like and why this book is so iconic to the Puerto Rican community.

Von: On a very personal level, that book, "Cocina Criolla," was the book that, at least in my memory was my grandmother's kind of cooking Bible. My grandmother, who I talk about a lot in coconuts and collards. She my culinary muse. I loved her and was so felt so connected to her. And I actually started cooking my way through that book partly to, as I was saying before, can try on my food writer legs, but also as a direct result of her having been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. And so I was like, well, this is like a good way for me to keep her culinary memory very much alive. And while she was still alive to get to ask her these very specific questions about, okay, in this chapter and this, in this recipe, you said use half this much. Why did you make that variation? So I did have a little bit of an opportunity there. For Puerto Ricans, I think historically it's made us feel really proud that we have this kind of encyclopedia of Puerto Rican cooking and it's been re-published many, many times since the fifties. But with very little variation and so the recipes that are in that book really are kind of a compendium of these classic dishes. It's very likely that you grew up eating very likely you had some of these dishes over the holidays. You know, it mattered that you had it and potentially we had been sort of this gift passed down.

Musical intro.

Lucinda: So you're ready to make one of Shot Caller's signature cocktails, but you don't have all of your ingredients.

Rashaun: And remind me I need a bourbon. Can I get a bottle from you?

Lucinda: No, I can't lend you one. I don't have any despair, but you can get your own from our friends at Saucey. They'll deliver whatever spirits, beer, wine, or mixers you need directly to your door.

Rashaun: Well, that's rude. But you can go to saucey dot com. That's s a u c e y, or download the saucy app today in the app store on Google play.

Lucinda: Remember to use our special code shotcaller, all one word.

R & L: Cheers.

Music fades.

Rashaun: As we become more health conscious as a society overall, obviously people of color as well becoming more and more kind of food conscious in recent years, what were some of the challenges of, of recreating those recipes going through this process?

Von: When I started cooking my way through this book, I realized very quickly I would say within the first 20 to 20, 30 recipes that I could not cook in this way consistently, right? Um, that actually cooking my way through the entire book was going to be a tremendous challenge health wise and also sort of creatively as a cook because the book reflects a lot about Puerto Rican culture, about the socioeconomic status of Puerto Rico, about its culinary history, about its social history. Among which is that everything in there's really heavy.

Puerto Rican food can be incredibly heavy. And don't get me wrong, I love all of it. I love pernil, you know, which is roasted pork shoulder. I love arroz con gandules, which is kind of like our rice and peas, but it's just I can't imagine eating that way every day. So my approach to the recipes was how do I make this a little bit healthier because I actually don't eat this much pork in a week or I don't tend to fry things this often or I don't tend to cook anything in lard, and so I started looking at the recipes and figuring out can I keep the deliciousness of this recipe, right? Can I keep the flavor profile intact while just making some tiny adjustments that might lead it to be a lighter, fresher dish? So that like light on your stomach and your palate and also actually light, so some of my first variations were can I cut the oil and half? Most of the time I could cut the oil by in, to a quarter of what was being recommended.

Rashaun: As a storyteller, you're also also we even personal stories of your family and your history into this book beyond just it being a straight ahead cookbook. Tell us a little bit about why that was so important for you.

Von: I don't think I could have written any other kind of book. About a year into me working on the project, before it had been turned into a book, I ended a 10 year relationship, which is always significant moment in your life. I moved houses, I changed jobs three times. You know, and, and those moments shifted the way that I ate along the way and shifted what I felt like cooking or how often I felt like cooking and, and so it sort of felt like the, you know, the cooking and the recipes and the reflection that was happening naturally needed to be captured in the same book, in the same document. I also just personally love culinary memoirs and narrative cookbooks. I

think that the stories behind why we like to eat the things that we like to eat and why we cook the way we do are so much more fascinating than me telling the story of how I cut the thing and how I put it in the pan and listening to it sizzle. You know, I mean, all that stuff is great. It makes for great short copy, makes for a great article in a magazine, but I don't know, I felt like in order for my story and Puerto Rican food to hold this kind of weight in an entire book, it should be personal.

It was certainly a different, ultimately more authentic way I think to approach what I think is a very difficult task of reimagining the food that you grew up eating because those comfort foods that we all have are an absolute time capsule and it can be a time machine. I remember so distinctly the first time I ever made sofrito. Sofrito is of course the flavor or foundation of so much Puerto Rican food, particularly braises stocks, soups. And the very first time I ever made sofrito from scratch and you know, turned my, my skillet on and put a tablespoon of olive oil in there and put that first tablespoon of sofrito in, it was the most, I mean, it actually brought tears to my eyes because like this smells exactly like it smelled and my grandmother's kitchen, smells exactly like it smelled in my mom's kitchen. Oh, exactly, like it smelled in my best friend's mom's kitchen. You know, it just became this like this thing I was like, you know, I could do so much to food, but some of it is just magical and beautiful and delicious and simple.

Musical intro.

Lucinda: Hey, Shot Caller fam. Are you guys planning a bridal shower or maybe a birthday party for somebody who is turning 21? Or how about watching the game at home?

Rashaun: Well, no matter what you're planning, the perfect party favor would be a nipyata. Check out nipyata.com. They have awesome pinatas that are filled with little nips, a.k.a. airplane bottles of liquor. It's perfect for the over 21 party. So go to nipyata.dot com and use the promo code shotcaller at checkout, so they know we sent you.

R&L: Cheers.

Music fades.

Von: I also, I would be remiss if I didn't bring up that, um, you know, Hurricane Maria evastated Puerto Rico in September of last year. There are a lot of people who are still without basic electricity. This is, Puerto Rico is part of the United States and it has been for a very long time. I was born a US citizen. I travel back and forth between the island. So the interesting thing that's happening as a result of this awful natural disaster is that Puerto Rican are starting to come to the mainland. I mean how long would you stay in your home without electricity, you know, if you had family somewhere else where there was electricity and potentially better schools and more job opportunities. So we're going to see a lot of Puerto Ricans moving to the mainland. So I have a sneaking suspicion that within the next year we're going to be learning a lot more about Puerto Rican culture. It we're already hearing reports about how Puerto Ricans may impact the next election because Puerto Ricans cannot vote for president on the island, but they sure can hear.

Von: I don't know how we will engage with or accept or absorb Puerto Rican ness into our larger kind of us culture yet because it's kind of happening in the moment. And I do feel very grateful to have had the opportunity to write a book celebrating my people's food at this particular moment. Hopefully, open some people's ears and some doors into understanding that it is a cuisine that's really interesting and sophisticated. Similar in some ways to Cuban cuisine, similar in many ways to Spanish cuisine, that deserves to be in the spotlight.

Rashaun: How do you think food culture has been affected or will be continued to be effective on the island?

Von: Puerto Rico has not historically grown all the things that its people need to eat and the folks who were there on the ground trying to revive the island and its agriculture, they have their work cut out for them because the infrastructure doesn't exist. Puerto Ricans historically don't eat a ton of vegetables also. You know, and so he got two things going on. You're going to have to grow things that have never been there before and then convinced the people there that they should eat different things. So I do think that we'll see some shifts and I think that things will become clearer over time in the next year or so. I don't know that they're sort of one fix, but as always, I mean like my people will rise. Um, there's so much resilience in the people of Puerto Rico and I would also say that there is a kind of scrappiness to Puerto Ricans that, you know, makes it so that, you know, give us any kind of tool, we'll figure out how to make it work. So I think that that's continuing to be the case there. And, and you know, I think we should all just keep our eye on it.

Rashaun: So what is next for you, Von?

Von: I'm still figuring that out. Um, the book came out on March 20th and I've had really, really good responses. I'm getting to have really great conversations with people that I don't know I fully imagined. So I think my fascination with the Caribbean grows exponentially every year. And looking at the similarities and differences between our cuisines is infinitely interesting to me, so I think there is very likely a project around those things in my future.

Rashaun: Well Von, thank you so much for coming by and sharing your stories and sharing your book, which again is "Coconuts and Collards," that you can get on Amazon or wherever fine books are sold. Thank you.

Von: Thank you so much for having me.

COCKTAIL RECIPE

Lucinda: The name of the drink is the Southern Borinquen. We're going to start out with two dashes of orange bitters and then half an ounce of peach liqueur and then half an ounce of cane syrup, which has also a little bit of vanilla to it. Then one ounce of Jamaican rum and one ounce of Puerto Rican rum. All of these ingredients, we're going to shake with ice and then you're going to find yourself a Collins glass with ice. Just shake for a quick moment, and just drain it off, and then you're going to finish the drink with club soda, and add some bubbles and aeration. Cheers.

Music fades

Rashaun: Last, everybody.

Lucinda: I'm Lucinda Sterling.

Rashaun: And I'm Rashaun Hall, and in immortal words of Kanye West, "Here's a toast to the assholes."

Von: Thanks for listening. Our theme song is "You Know You Want To" by Dan Phillipson. Our producer is Samira Tazari. The podcast is produced and distributed by Lantigua Williams & Co.

Rashaun: Big thanks to middle branch in New York City for letting us hang today and thank you for listening. Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @ShockCallerPod and use the hashtag #ShotCallerPod to let us know what you want to hear coming up, what's shaking, what's stirred, what's twisted, anything and everything we want to hear about it and make sure you subscribe, rate, and review us on itunes or Google play.

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