

Colorado chef Erasmo Casiano finds success with Latin American cuisine

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By Daliah Singer

September 25, 2024



It took 20 years, but Erasmo Casiano is finally cooking his own food.

The chef, known fondly as Ras, is of Mexican descent. But he has spent most of his career making upscale Italian, Southern and American cuisine.

That changed amid pandemic closures that forced business owners to get creative to stay afloat. Casiano and business partner Diego Coconati hosted a pop-up dinner with a Latin American menu — and began to rethink what they were doing in the kitchen.

“Why are we not appreciating our culture as much as we value French cuisine, Italian ... ?” Casiano recalled wondering. “Why are we not appreciating rice and beans for what they are? Arroz congri (a black beans and rice recipe from Cuba) is a beautiful dish that takes a lot of time to make; it takes more time to make than making a pasta dough, pizza dough. There are a lot of nuances in flavors, in timing.”

The food world's elite seem to agree: In March 2022, the business partners opened Lucina Eatery & Bar in Denver. This year, they were named James Beard semifinalists in the best chef: mountain category.

Casiano became hooked on kitchens as a teenager. Born and raised in the Dallas area, he began his food career scooping ice cream. He relished the feeling of making people smile. That sense of achievement remained even as he transitioned to the burger and fries station.

"I really enjoyed the process of making something for somebody," he said. "It sparked my joy of cooking."

Casiano quickly built a name for himself, working his way to sous chef level at fine dining eateries in Texas. Eventually, in 2009, he made his way to Colorado.

It wasn't an easy adjustment. For the first two weeks, he slept in his car; it became his mobile home on and off for a period, as did restaurant colleagues' couches. Slowly, he built himself up, working in the kitchens at CRÚ Food & Wine Bar, Cafe Colore and North Italia.

Then Casiano was diagnosed with a degenerative disc disease. At times, he couldn't walk. (He's had four back surgeries; the most recent was a multilevel spinal fusion in 2018.)

So he transitioned again, this time to teaching at the now-shuttered Kitchen Table Cooking School. A chance meeting with Coconati set Casiano on the path to his next life. The business partners first opened their own culinary school, Create Kitchen & Bar, at the Stanley Marketplace. During the pandemic, they shifted to virtual cook-a-longs and, when things started to open back up, small group dinners.

For one event, Casiano and Coconati, who was born in Argentina and raised in Puerto Rico, designed a menu that was entirely Latin American. The response was effusive. Empanadas, mofongo, paella, mojo-marinated pork with arroz congri — diners wanted to know where they could find these dishes around town. Casiano directed them to an array of food trucks, but the spark of a restaurant idea had been lit.

The pair (along with co-owner Michelle Nguyen) eventually opened Lucina. It was initially planned as an Italian, pizza-focused spot, but the support from customers and friends changed the vision. "I've been cooking professionally for 28 years. Five years ago, I finally felt comfortable ... being able to show those dishes that I grew up with," Coconati said.

The mural-decorated restaurant is named after Casiano's mother, Santa Lucina. It's designed to be "a culinary education," he said. He wants everyone to have their senses piqued enough to "keep asking questions: where is this from and why am I just now tasting it?" Many of the dishes are based on family recipes and memories. The churrasco y papas, for example, is derived from a meal that Coconati's mom made regularly.

This summer, Casiano further expanded Denverites' palates as Xiquita opened in August. Focused on the gastronomic melting pot that is Mexico City, the eatery was named to Bon Appétit's list of must-visit restaurants before it had served its first patron.

The menu, developed alongside chef Rene Gonzalez Mendez, is built around the three sisters, or tres hermanas, of agriculture: corn, squash and beans.

"It's that natural progression over the past 20-something years of being in kitchens," Casiano said. "Why have I not been paying attention to my own cultures? ... I want people to really understand it's not necessarily about the food, but it's a story that it's telling."