

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Pati Jinich

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Pati Jinich, where I ask her: What can food tell us about the US-Mexico border? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness, I cannot wait for our guest this week. She is major. We're going to talk about a really major subject, which is food. Welcome to the show, without any more buildup, Pati Jinich, who is a James Beard award-winning chef who has dedicated her career to building a shared understanding between her two home countries: Mexico and the United States. And you have a new PBS special called *La Frontera*, in which you use food as the vehicle to explore the culture and people of the Texas-Mexico border. Her third cookbook, out now, is *Treasures of the Mexican Table*. Bienvenidos a Getting Curious, como estás, Pati?

PATI JINICH [00:01:00] Oh my god, I can't, I can't. If you talk Spanish to me, I'm going to have to jump through the screen!

JVN [00:01:07] Pero puedo hablar español pero necesito hablar un poquito lentamente porque me olvidé las palabras.

PATI JINICH [00:01:17] No, no, no. Esto esta precioso. Esto esta precioso. We can just talk Spanish, esta precioso, me encanta tu acento, me encanta tu español, me encanta todo el tú. Asi que, a donde quieres a lo que quieres.

JVN [00:01:30] A otro tiempo necesito clase de español contigo. Ahh, hacemos un tiempo... later! Because you are a very sought after person. And we only have, like, 58 minutes, and I just took two minutes to say a basic, like, third grade sentence. So here's the thing, though, excuse my French, but what the fuck are we supposed to make for the holiday season? OK, like, we are so sick of all the same things and we need change. We need new things. But first of all, how are you? I'm going to stop talking now, Jesus, that was such a long time.

PATI JINICH [00:02:07] Oh my God, no! Keep on talking. I can just sit here. You are so delightful. You're so entertaining. First of all, we need to do a full immersion in Mexico. You come with me. We go to Mexico to a place where nobody speaks English. I do not speak English to you and we go full Español. Any time, whenever you want. In three days estás todo español perfecto.

JVN [00:02:32] Really?

PATI JINICH [00:02:33] Three full days of nonstop talking with me in español, in an environment where people have Spanish. If you have the Spanish that I already heard, you have, you're set, you're done.

JVN [00:02:45] Cómo se dice, en ingles, it's, it's going to take me way more than three days.

PATI JINICH [00:02:51] You know, when I first moved to Texas, Jonathan, it was like 20 years ago. A little over 20 years ago. I moved to Dallas, Texas, and I thought I knew English. But the truth is that when I arrived to the US, I couldn't even string a sentence in English, and it was so frustrating. I kept asking, "Cómo se dice? Cómo se dice? Cómo se dice?" And now, I mean, I have the very heavy accent, but I can totally string sentences. So I think you will be, like, you know, my boys were born here in the US and I feel like you will be a little bit like them in that they speak. They speak Spanish perfectly, but they have the very charming accent in English, which Mexicans love.

JVN [00:03:36] They do?

PATI JINICH [00:03:37] Oh yeah, I feel like if you go to Mexico and you speak Spanish, like, if you try to speak Spanish, and they hear your accent but you're speaking in Spanish, they're so appreciative. We're so grateful. And so people will just love you.

JVN [00:03:52] I did just go to Mexico with my husband, and I was speaking, like, a lot of Spanish, and every time I go to, well, it's like the second time I've been, been, the first time I went with my tía. And everyone's, like, low key kind of impressed because, like, once they get there for like for like a day like, then it really comes back and then it's like, OK, but Jonathan, focus! Can you just tell our listeners a little bit about who you are? And then what your expertise is?

PATI JINICH [00:04:13] Of course, of course, of course, but I am so distracted by you because you're so entertaining and so charming. OK, so I am a Mexican-born person, grew up in Mexico City. I was trained as a political analyst. I wanted to be an academic. Long story short, I married my Mexico City husband. We moved to Texas. I became insanely nostalgic about Mexico, kept on meeting myths and preconceptions about Mexicans. After doing a Master's in Latin American studies and then doing a political analysis gig at a think tank, I resigned, switched careers, went with cooking, and instead of political analysis, I wanted to do food writing. And then long story short again, I started teaching Mexican cooking, started my show, Pati's Mexican Table on PBS, where every season I go to a different region of Mexico. Explore it.

I started with the Mexico I knew and loved, you know, Mexico City, Puebla, Oaxaca. As the seasons have gone by, I started going, "Wait, I want to go to Mexico I don't know." And it turns out, I don't know much. So much, so much, so much. You know, you think you know, and the more you learn, the more you realize you don't know. So increasingly, I've gone to places in Mexico that I hadn't even heard of, or that were, like, a bigger challenge, like Sinaloa. Everybody's talking about El Chapo, and not because I'm like, "No, no, no, we're going to go and find out what's really going on down there and bring the microphone to the people." So after doing that back and forth 10 seasons and doing a few cookbooks, I decided that after treading, you know, these two worlds, Mexico and the US, Mexico and the US, and having to explain myself all the time, you know, having this very heavy accent in the US, in Mexico, explaining kind of my heritage and where I come from, I was very attracted to the border.

And I decided that that was one place where there were even more myths and preconceptions and very narrow labels. And I kept meeting people from the border and hearing all these stories that had nothing to do with what we see on the, hear on the news. And I started visiting la frontera and realized that la frontera is this place, this kind of science fiction new world where these two countries meet and are rubbing against each other all the time. And by doing that, they create this kind of third dimension or universe where possibilities that cannot exist anywhere else exist there. You were talking in the beginning of our conversation about how in the holidays we want something new and we want to change. But at the same time, we want the classics, we want the comfort, we want nurturing. Oh my gosh, my dog wants to come meet you, do you want to see her--

JVN [00:07:04] That's okay when that happens. We love this on Getting Curious. I already love her.

PATI JINICH [00:07:06] She's so cute. And here she is. She's going to jump in any second. Her name is Mila. Anyway, so I, I realized that it's the place where people hold on to traditions and to their identity really strongly. But at the same time, it's a place where people can break new ground because in La Frontera you can be anything, you can be everything at the same time. There's these continuous, like, trade off and mixing and blending, but also solidifying. And it's this magical place that people don't understand until they get there. So I find that food and the kitchen is like the most noble place to break down walls and lift veils and share who we are without judgment because somebody doesn't like you, but you present them with a giant plate of irresistible tacos, they're not going to say no. They're going to listen to you when they're hungry. We're just animals. We need to eat. And then the stories that go behind it. So I realized that it was by way of food that I could understand more la frontera. And it was mind boggling, Jonathan. And then I just, I did all the way from El Paso to SpaceX to Brownsville. Hmm. And it was the entire

Texas-Mexico border. And I thought that, you know, Tex-Mex food and Tex-Mex culture was going to have much heavier common denominators. I mean, yes, there are some common denominators, but the variations, the diversity, the richness is insane.

JVN [00:08:55] Give me a gorgeous example of, like, some of the, like, gorgeous, like, unexpected food that you encountered.

PATI JINICH [00:09:03] Well, in El Paso, Ciudad Juarez, for example, I went on both sides of the border to eat burritos. So in El Paso, we went to La Colonial, and then you realize that just burritos, you know, burritos are, like, I need to hear you roll your "r"s because you're so beautiful.

JVN [00:09:20] Burritos!

PATI JINICH [00:09:21] Oh my god. OK, so burritos. Burritos is one of the most iconic foods of the border.

JVN [00:09:30] I'm literally slobbering, I'm slobbering. Just thinking about it.

PATI JINICH [00:09:33] OK? And they were created in El Paso Ciudad Juarez. But the reality of the border is just like the burritos. When you go to El Paso and you have the burritos, they're made with extraordinary flour tortillas. And one or two kinds of filling that are such good fillings that they can stand on their own. They are thin burritos, fresh, hot, and they're meant to be taken on the go. And they're accessible, adaptable. You can eat them for breakfast, lunch, dinner, anything, anything. The farther you get from the border, the more people need to stuff them. Right? Rice and beans and cream and cheese and salsa. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Those gigantic atomic burritos are also delicious, but they're not that of the border. You realize that the reality of the border is simple and complex at the same time. But to give you an example, the burrito in El Paso, in La Colonial, had a mash-up of, like, American style brisket, all that delicious coming apart with that kind of, like, gravy, like, seasoned gravy in queso. But like the American queso, you know, Velveeta, Philadelphia cheese? Roll it, yum, okay?

JVN [00:10:55] Oh my God. Yeah, smack me in the face. Oh my God, yes. Oh my God.

PATI JINICH [00:10:57] But then, you cross the border to Ciudad Juarez. And the burritos there are in saritas, which is a food truck, also extraordinary flour tortillas. But here, they're handmade, cooked on a griddle and made to bubble and heat with a wooden kind of a wisk. So they kept these like rustic, purri taste, and the filling. I mean, do you eat everything? I eat everything.

JVN [00:10:26] Yeah, I eat everything.

PATI JINICH [00:10:26] OK? The feeling one which was ridiculously to die for was that papas con rajas, you know, potatoes with Anaheim rajas and cream and cheese. But the kind of cheese that you can't get in the US because it doesn't pass the tests of pasteurization, sanitization, salvation, -ation, -ation, -ation. That cheese from the ranch, and fresh cream. Ridiculous. Another one with tongue and salsa verde. I mean, just simple, like, the flavor is so nuanced, the ingredients so, I don't know how to explain, so alive when you bite into them. And both burritos, extraordinary. You know, north of the border, very American in the Mexican home of the tortilla. And the Mexican ones, very deeply Mexican, but kind of with an American spin in the burrito style. I don't know how to explain, like the Mexican in the US and the American in the Mexico. It's like this whole mixing and combining. But at the same time, things hold their own. And we're just talking burritos there.

JVN [00:12:47] Alright, but I have a question really quick, OK, because you were telling me about burritos. And you said that they were invented there. Is that, like, a widely and accepted fact that it's, like, El Paso slash like Ciudad Juarez? Or is people from like, like Cabo or, like, some other place in, like, Mexico or Texas, like, "Nuh uh, we did it!" Or is it like a widely accepted fact that it's definitely like El Paso and Ciudad Juarez?

PATI JINICH [00:13:11] Yes.

JVN [00:13:12] What's that second city you said?

PATI JINICH [00:13:13] Ciudad Juarez.

JVN [00:13:14] Yes. Yeah.

PATI JINICH [00:13:16] Oh my gosh. You would love Ciudad Juarez so much. Have you been?

JVN [00:13:21] No.

PATI JINICH [00:13:22] OK. That's where it is. Said that the margarita was in the. Did that, Juan Gabriel, do you know who one guy is, one that really is like Mexico's Elvis Presley?

JVN [00:13:33] Yeah, I was just, I knew: hot.

PATI JINICH [00:13:36] I mean, yeah, we grew up. Juan Gabriel created the soundtrack of the lives of Mexico in the 70s, 80s and 90s. I mean, and he's from Juarez! [CROSSTALK] So anyway, what I was going to say is it is a known fact that burritos come from that region. There are many legends as to what was the origin. Was it kids that were helping people shop from one side to the other side and they were carrying these burritos? Was it in the revolution that somebody was selling food to go, but it is known that it was in that place, in that location. And also, you know, El Paso used to be Mexico before. You know, there's a big part of the borderlands that used to be Mexico, and people didn't move, the border moved. So that's why you have such an intense presence of Mexico in a way that has evolved, but also before the US was US and before Mexico was Mexico. All of that was part of the colony of New Spain.

So there's so much history and people, when people think about the border, they just think about, "Oh, politics, oh, border. Oh wall. Oh, just Tex-Mex." And that's that. And what I realized in this also happened in Paso is that there's so many immigrant waves. The border is a magnet not only for Americans and Mexicans, and there are a lot of Americans that leave south of the border because they prefer to, and they have the benefits of south of the border. And then, of course, the Mexicans that leave north of the border and then the people who just swim, you know, every day between both. And, you know, their communities that are bi-cultural, bi-national, thriving, and they go to the north of the border and buy the brisket and go to the south of the border and get the flour tortillas. But aside from Mexican-Americans, there's Syrian and Lebanese. There's Haitian, there's Cuban, there's Asian. So can I tell you another beautiful story that we just ran into as we were filming?

JVN [00:15:51] Yes.

PATI JINICH [00:15:52] OK, so we're eating our way right through all of the border. And as we get out of El Paso, Ciudad Juarez, we go through Isleta, where we have crazy good tamales, and we go to the Big Bend National Park. I didn't even know so much beauty, you know, in terms of national treasures were there. And then we drive to the Laredo regions, which also, I mean, we'll talk about that food, it's incredible. And then in the Rio Grande Valley, which is its own thing, and not many people know about it the richness of the Rio Grande Valley, we try the raspas, you know, those crazy raspas things that are, like, shaved ice with, like, a gazillion thousand things.

JVN [00:16:37] No, no, no, no, no.

PATI JINICH [00:16:38] No? OK, OK.

JVN [00:16:39] I didn't know. I'm a nightmare, I'm gonna have to look it up. You got to keep telling me.

PATI JINICH [00:16:46] OK, raspas are, so, you know, shaved ice. Imagine shaved ice gone crazy, wild. Like it can go sweet. It can go spicy, it can go savory. For example, there's the, I think the most famous raspa there is shaved ice and they do, like, a berry or grapefruit or grape syrup. And then they do chopped pickles and Kool-Aid and just, like, crazy flavorings.

JVN [00:17:18] I hate pickles. I'm devastated. You had me til the pickles.

PATI JINICH [00:17:21] No, no, no, I think that honestly, that that wasn't up my alley. Like, I tasted it because people there loved that and I was, like, "OK, I'm not convinced," but they had other raspas they had, like an arroz con leche, like, a rice pudding raspas with coconut and nuts and berries. [CROSSTALK] And you know everything that you can imagine chocolate with, like, tres leches and brownies. I mean, just wild, wild, wild. But we haven't gotten to the story that I told you that is so fascinating. So then we go to the Rio Grande Valley and we were, you know, Tex-Mex has such a reputation. You know, many people say, "Oh, it's not real Mexican food. It's our bastardization of Mexican food. It's fake Mexican food." Well, it turns out, as I have learned, that Tex-Mex food is really its own regional cuisine. That's a beautiful, evolving thing, and that there are many kinds of Tex-Mex food.

There's, there's very different things in San Antonio than El Paso than Laredo than Rio Grande. So in Rio Grande, I'm meeting with this chef called Larry Delgado, and he has restaurants in McAllen. He has all kinds of restaurants that are international, Italian, and American, but he loves to cook Tex-Mex at home, and he's like, "I'm going to show you, you know, why Tex-Mex needs some respect. Come, we're going to cook at some friends' ranch, and I'll make you my favorite Tex-Mex food." Not knowing what to expect. We show up to the ranch. Well, it turns out that this beautiful ranch in the middle of the Rio Grande valley is ruled by this Japanese-American woman. So beautiful, Jonathan, with her daughter. So she's Japanese American, married a man of Hispanic heritage. But, like, many, many generations ago, so you have Japanese, American, Mexican. The daughter is Japanese, and she's now pregnant.

She was living in the city in McAllen, but she decided she wants her baby to come leaving this ranch and they are raising Akaushi cattle, which makes wagyu beef, the most incredible wagyu beef. But listen to this story. We start talking, and I mean, the mom tells me that her grandparents, you know, I also come from the same grandparents who fled, who were refugees into Mexico. So I, you know, I have so much empathy for people who have

moved, who have had to make their homes in different places. Now I'm growing roots in America, right while part of my roots are in Mexico, so I really have a lot of empathy for that, those stories that she's telling me her grandparents were Japanese migrant farmers in California. Pearl Harbor happened. They were put in camps.

A few years later, they get out, they have nowhere to go. They have nothing. They moved to Texas and become migrant farmers again. And then slowly but surely, they started getting this Akaushi beef from Japan and they start raising, she starts raising this Akaushi beef, which is Japanese, makes wagyu beef. You try this beef, Jonathan, it's insane. It melts in your mouth and they sell these wagyu beef to gather at another restaurants that are making Tex-Mex fajitas with. So it is, like, so many people from so, so many different cultures and immigrant ways enriching the cuisine of the border. And I was asking her, like, "How proud do you feel your grandparents would feel if they saw that you are now, you know, bringing wagyu beef to enrich the American table from your heritage?" And they are so proud, reinventing the business of ranching. And so anyway, that's just one story of so many that we found.

JVN [00:21:30] I love that! People, if you have not seen this, you've got to see this. Did you notice any, like, recurring, like, ingredients or cooking techniques that kind of, like, a unified Tex-Mex cuisine?

PATI JINICH [00:21:40] Yes. Queso, queso, queso, queso. I mean, cheese.

JVN [00:21:45] What about the white runny cheese, you know that white runny cheese. It's, like, I could bathe in that and just drink it for the rest of my life. Like, that's all I could ever eat for the rest of my life.

PATI JINICH [00:21:54] Oh my gosh. And this is where you say, ok, people who criticize Tex-Mex food for not being "Mex," it's, like, it's not supposed to be "Mex." Like, here, I'm Mexican. I love Mexican food, but I've really grown to respect and love Tex-Mex food. Tell me what can be wrong with, like, a mixture of heavy cream, cream cheese, and American cheese, all melted into roasted poblano peppers and chorizo and guacamole and freshly made tortilla chips. It's, like, "Give me, give me, give me."

JVN [00:22:37] I'm so hungry. I'm, like, literally so hungry. Okay, so cheese, queso that was a really unifying thing as well. [CROSSTALK] Tacos, what else?

PATI JINICH [00:22:43] And so I would say queso, queso, queso, queso, tacos, tacos, tacos, tacos, but all types of tacos. Of course, burritos. And I would say, like, the way that people eat is very casual, family-friendly, like, in that, in that Tex-Mex or border combination

between American and Mexican, they take a lot of the Mexican hospitality in that you just show up. You know, I remember when I moved to the US and people would invite us to their homes and they would say, "OK, we'll see you at six and you know, it's from six to seven thirty five." We would show up at 7:00 because in Mexico, it's not polite to show up on time. If you show, so this you have to know: if you know Mexicans or have Mexican friends or go to Mexico if you show up on time. You're not giving people time to get ready. It is a sign of you rushing your hosts. I know this is, like, counter-intuitive.

JVN [00:23:47] I love that.

PATI JINICH [00:23:49] Oh yeah. And the other thing is that people don't leave.

JVN [00:23:52] I don't like that! I'm, like, after, like, 8:00, I usually, and I've done this to so many of my friends. Like, I just fall asleep on the couch, like, I just am asleep. Yeah. And then they're, like, waking me up and I'm, like, "Bye, girl," I just fall asleep, I'm a nightmare.

PATI JINICH [00:24:08] But then they go. But then they go. But it's, like, that ending time is like, you don't know, you know, maybe you want to leave before, maybe you want to leave earlier, you know? Why do you have to tell me until what time I might want to say, maybe you wanted me to leave before, like, things and when they end?

JVN [00:24:25] Oh, I love it, it's just more open.

PATI JINICH [00:24:27] Yes, it's more like feeling it is more like you feel it.

JVN [00:24:47] OK, that actually makes so much sense. Of ten seasons, how long was that?

PATI JINICH [00:24:38] It's been 10 years. I've done a season a year, and each season I go to a different region of Mexico and then come back. And you know, it's, Pati's Mexican Table is part travel, part cooking, part English, part Spanish, so it's been really hard to fit it in. Like, when the shows get submitted for awards, like James Beard or anything, you know, there's these categories. Is it travel or is it cooking? And I'm like, uhhhh...

JVN [00:25:14] It's a little bit of everything!

PATI JINICH [00:25:15] Is it instruction or is it entertainment? I'm like, uhhh, you know, is it English or is it Spanish? And that's why I felt so at home, at la frontera, and at the border, because the boxes of who you are and what you are and what you can be and what defines you, like, go topsy turvy.

JVN [00:25:36] So I know that I like, lured people in with a cooking episode, but then you brought up how you, like, originally were, like, really interested in, like, politics and stuff. And then you mentioned that your grandparents were, like, refugees and stuff. And then, you know, that's just kind of asking for how long because it's, like, ten years. And that's like, you know, 2011, which then I'm thinking, like, OK, it's, like, the Obama administration. And then, like, I was thinking about, like, just everything that's happened in, like, Mexican politics and American politics since you've started. And then obviously, you can't think about that without talking about he who must not be named or, like, forty five or whatever you know you want to call him.

You know, cause you said, like, you know, "You can't be mad at people who are going to have a big old plate of tacos," and you know you're going to be friends. It's a great way to break down barriers. My first thought was, like, "I'm not going to Trump supporter's house on the border because the tacos might be laced with some fucking shit to try to fucking, you know, there's voter suppression in all sorts of ways." So it's just to say, it's like, we're in a very polarized time. And I think that that was like literally my first reaction to the thought of eating someone's tacos that disagrees with me on, like, a lot of these issues, I was like, "I'm scared." So are we just all fucked up? Is there some people who you've seen in your experience, like, mend broken relationships through food?

PATI JINICH [00:26:50] Oh my, I love. I love your questions and I love what you just said. And I think if I've learned anything is that I've, I've become so humbled with realizing that we can not generalize. That's the one thing. Mexico has its own kind of crazy racism. And there are Mexicans and Latinos that are fully on for Trump, you know? And the other way around. And I've realized that humans, we're just so vulnerable. We're flawed, we're afraid.

JVN [00:27:33] So afraid.

PATI JINICH [00:27:34] Where nothing protects nothing from anything, and we just have to, each one, try to do our very best in our, in the space that we can. And I have tried to learn to not judge, which is hard when you have a president, as you're saying, who's attacking Mexicans, attacking immigrants, attacking working moms, attacking, you know, so many of the things that I am at my core. And then, you know, I remember during those, those years, very recent years, that I would look at my Twitter feed or my Instagram feed. And I would see so many followers telling me, "Your show is my favorite show. I love your tacos." And I would look at their, you know, at their Twitter handles and they would say, "Vote for Trump and build the wall and no more Mexicans." And OK, I'm, like, I'm instead of saying, or getting angry, I'm like, "Hey, you're watching this show of a Mexican who's showing all the beauties of Mexico. You want to make tacos in your home." I'm like, "Take that."

You know, it's, it's that kind of soft power of, that's why I say that food in the kitchen is such a noble space to share. Because it may be, it may seem more gentle. It may seem more subtle, but it has a way of unlocking doors and, and bringing some communication and understanding. And I know I'm overly hopeful, you know, whenever, whenever we talk about with my friends about glasses half empty and half full, I tend to see them overflowing. You know, which is the one way I feel that that's the only way I can go ahead and work on my next project. And I always say if I had to go back. People ask me if you had to do it all over again, you know, to make Pati's Mexican Table happen, to have a cooking show with a Mexican in, in New York that is, has the spoken English with my accent. If I had to look back at how difficult it was to have La Frontera happen, like, would I do it again if I think about all the obstacles? I don't think I would think it possible, you know, so yeah, it is, it is very disheartening when you find people that you think because they are Mexican or Mexican-American or immigrants, you think are going to think or feel like you and then you, you realize one just cannot generalize.

JVN [00:30:12] One thing that you said that made me feel very convicted that I feel like I've really been struggling with lately. And then I swear to God we have to talk about, like, holiday foods, but you're just such a cool person that's just naturally what's happening. It's, like, generalizing. And I think that a lot of times, like, we have all become so polarized. And obviously we all have to have boundaries about, like, who and what you know you will allow in your space. But I feel like I have lost so much patience with so many people. And I think that when we lose patience, it's really hard to, like, stay compassionate and not judge and not generalize. So that just, like, made me feel a lot in my heart. And with that being said, I am going to stop going in the political way and talk more about food. So, you, and you are, I mean, you are a literal chef. You are a literal cookbook author. You are an expert in food. And one thing that's so interesting about you is that you are both Jewish and Mexican, which is so fucking fierce, but not to cuss, but it's just, like, so fierce. I love that story so much. And so how has being that gorgeous intersectional person informed your cooking, particularly around the holidays?

PATI JINICH [00:31:23] It has informed who I am so deeply, so strongly. And it's been a journey. Being Jewish in Mexico, which is a country that, when I was growing up in Mexico, you know, I was born in the 70s, and Mexico then was 98 percent Catholic. Now I think Mexico sees itself as, like, 75 percent Catholic, and most of the foods, traditions, holidays revolve around that calendar, that clock, those celebrations. But Catholicism in Mexico is also intertwined with Mexico before the Spanish and the church arrived, right? Right. All the pre-Hispanic Mexican Native tribes, religions, it's been a combination, and it's so fascinating. And people don't know that Mexico is not only made of old world, you know, the Spanish that came and settled for three hundred years, and new world, the Mexico that

had all the different Native Mexican tribes, but all the immigrant waves. So they teach us, it's a combination of Spanish and Mexican, but they don't tell us about the Africans, you know, 300,000 African slaves were brought with Spanish. Nobody talks about it in Mexico. Talk about racism. You know, now there's the stories, and now there's the acknowledgment. But oh no. You know, Asian, Asian waves from the Philippines. Chinese, Japanese, Syria, Lebanese, Jews. So French, Italian.

JVN [00:32:55] Because meanwhile, Mexico was actually, like, accepting people seeking asylum, like, throughout all that time while we were, like, "Leave." So that's part of, like, where that, like, dynamic, multicultural community is even taking place in Mexico because as a country, like, Mexico's actually been, like, taking people on.

PATI JINICH [00:33:13] So Mexico has been taking all these immigrant waves in. But there has been a lot of racism, too. You know, that being said, the Mexican Jewish community has grown deep roots, has been in Mexico, since the 1500s. And there's something, people don't know that there is Mexican-Jewish cuisine, and it's not only, like, throwing a jalapeño into something. The foods are, for example, there's gefilte fish a la Veracruzana. Have you tried gefilte fish?

JVN [00:33:48] Yes!

PATI JINICH [00:33:49] OK. So, you know, gefilte fish is the cold fish patties in aspic. [CROSSTALK] In Mexico, we cook the gefilte fish in a spiked, seasoned tomato broth, with capers, with olives, with the pepperoncini peppers, with slivered almonds. I mean, you don't need an acquired taste for that. [CROSSTALK] There's even the Jewish, the Sephardic Jewish foods. You know, there's also the Arab Jewish communities in Mexico. So think about the kibbeh. Well, the kibbeh is seasoned with ancho chiles, and then we eat it with tahini, tahini, and chipotle sauce and guacamole. I mean, it's just, like, you know, so the foods, I mean, the way that the identities have made a sense of themselves in Mexico is by integrating, you know, and marrying those ingredients. And the fascinating thing now with the evolution of Mexican food is I've devoted my professional life at sharing the richness of Mexico's regions and states. But increasingly, as I've been here, almost, you know, 20 years and growing roots here, the evolution of Mexican food knows no borders. So you get the Mexicans from Jalisco, say, birrio is now hot in the US, right?

JVN [00:35:11] Yes. Yes. Yes, yes. Yes.

PATI JINICH [00:35:11] How hot is birria? Okay, I don't know why, but birria comes from Jalisco, and it's traditionally made of goat and lamb cooked in the spiked chili broth, falls apart, you eat it in tacos. You know you can make us have you have to. For some reason in

the US, it started being the hottest trend ever. But birria comes from Jalisco. What happens when Mexicans from Jalisco move to say, New York City, and they start making the birria with some ingredients they find in New York? Like, is that wrong? No, it's delicious! So it's, like, you know why does Mexican food need to stay in, south of the border. So all this has deeply informed the way I see cooking and food, and it's like cooking in food. It's this living, breathing thing. And I'm just so grateful because we don't own it.

When I see cocina de autor or, like, author, you know, chefs that try to leave their mark and create new dishes solely, which I think is brilliant, you know? But for me, cooking is more of a communal thing where before we arrive in this earth, Johnathan, all these recipes, all these visions, all these food is here for us. It's an inherited richness, treasures. We come here, we eat them. They're part of who we are. And as you know, you grow older, there's new dishes, you know, that come to the fore. You play with ingredients. So you have these classics that need to continue to be passed down. And they, they are who we are, you know, depending where you're from or say, you know, what is the food where you grew up? Give me an example, what defines the food of where you grew up?

JVN [00:37:03] OK. Not trying to be ironic, but there's this place called El Rancherito, and all I lived off of was, like, white cheese dip for, like, my entire life, it was, like, white cheese dip and then, like, Pop-Tarts.

PATI JINICH [00:37:15] Yum. OK, OK.

JVN [00:37:16] And, like, powdered donuts. And there's like, and-

PATI JINICH [00:37:20] I love powdered donuts.

JVN [00:37:20] It's just, like, Midwestern food, you know, like, we have, like, Tex-Mex places and then you have, like, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell and McDonald's.

PATI JINICH [00:37:28] OK. Well, you have all those things that are part of who you are in your community and you can connect with the people in your community.

JVN [00:37:37] Yes, Tower of Pizza. Yes, El Rancherito. Yes!

PATI JINICH [00:37:41] And then there's these new things that appear and that become part of, you know, the, the food, the food scenery, and it's like, you have to treasure what exists and be open to what's new. And, but most of all, I see food as we don't own it. We

share it. It's our common ground. It's our common denominator. It's how we can see eye to eye, you know?

JVN [00:37:10] That's so beautiful.

PATI JINICH [00:37:11] There's so much meaning in food. Yeah. So in terms of the Mexican-Jewish that you were, you know, asking me about, it is, it has really helped me understand how we can be many things at the same time and not be less because we are not fully just one.

JVN [00:38:35] Oh, OK, slay. OK, so actually, I feel bad for, like, categorizing all of my life growing up food to, like, white cheese dip and powdered donuts and...

PATI JINICH [00:38:45] No, I want it, I want it!

JVN [00:38:47] But, like, my mom, she does, like, fierce, like, casseroles for holidays. It's, like, very, you know, like, egg, and, like, like, green chilies and, like, sausage or, like, these, like, fierce, like, coffee cake, things that she does. But what I like, that's like what we like on our Christmas morning. That's, like, what we're, like, really all about.

PATI JINICH [00:39:09] See, I grew up celebrating Hanukkah and Navidad and New Years and Posadas, everything. It was just everything, everything, everything. And, and the amazing thing is that all those foods, I'll tell you what they're like. So buñuelos is that gigantic, thin fritters made freshly. Imagine, like, fresh flour tortillas, but, like, just rolled out deep fried in lard. And then you take that out. I mean, you can deep fried in something else, but lard is so delicious.

JVN [00:39:40] No, I'll fuck up some lard, I'm so into it.

PATI JINICH [00:39:41] Okay. You get these huge fritters that are like gigantic sweet tostadas and then drizzle them with piloncillo or dark brown cinnamon syrup and powdered sugar. That's Christmas to me. And Hanukkah, okay, sufganiyot, you know, the puffy kind of filled donuts in Mexico. We make them, you know, so sufganiyot are, like, the filled donuts. I don't know what the official name is for them in English, but it's like-

JVN [00:40:11] Do they have, like, cream in them?

PATI JINICH [00:40:13] Yes. OK. Yes. What's so annoying in, like, in Hebrew, it's sufganiyot, and yeah, they're, like, cream donuts, like, the jelly-filled donuts.

JVN [00:40:25] Yes, I love jelly filled donuts.

PATI JINICH [00:40:27] Okay, in Mexico, we fill them with cajeta, which is, like, Mexico's dulce de leche.

JVN [00:40:34] Oh, is that, like, oh, I know dulce de leche, it's just, like, sweet cream.

PATI JINICH [00:40:38] Yes, it's like candied, candy milk, but different from Argentina and Brazil, which I'm not going to criticize, it's still OK, but Mexico, we take it deeper because we almost burn it. You know, it's like that almost burned caramel flavor. You know, Mexicans like things to the extreme, it's, like, intense.

JVN [00:41:01] Yes!

PATI JINICH [00:41:01] Oh my God, I have a recipe for burnt milk ice cream. It is so, you make caramel and right. When it's about to burn, you add this sweetened milk. It is ridiculous.

JVN [00:41:15] And then you put that into an ice cream machine or something. OK, but wait, but it in first grade, we did this thing where we took like a big, like, empty thing of coffee, like, like, a big empty thing of Folgers. And then you put like rock ice and there and like ice. And then you put like a little thing of coffee on the inside of that was like all the ingredients to make your ice cream. And then you, like, you know, you put the lid on the little one and then you put the lid on the big one and then you, like, duct tape and you roll it back and forth. You bring me some ice cream. And so I tried, I don't know. I had to tell you that I did.

PATI JINICH [00:41:44] Oh, and there's so many things that they can make in terms of sweet, for example. In my new cookbook, I have these cookies that are these I'm going to show you. They're these dressed up. I call them dressed up cookies because they're sugar cookies. You're going to love these. There's sugar cookies.

JVN [00:42:07] Oh, they're, like, snowflakes with something in them.

PATI JINICH [00:42:14] Cajeta. Oh yes, I mean, these are read the and you make this sugar cookies like the little flowers you snip them with, like, kids scissors and then you just they're so easy to make.

JVN [00:42:25] I worked out really hard this morning and I haven't eaten and I'm gonna freak out. OK, so that's, what about, but what about savories!

PATI JINICH [00:42:32] Savory, okay, tamales. And there's very easy tamales to make. I mean, you can now find masa harina now, which you would just mix with water and vegetable shortening or lard or butter. You make your masa, you make tamales. You can make a tamale casserole for Christmas or New Year's. You can make bacalao. You can make Christmas salad, which is a mixture of, like, fresh oranges and peanuts and beets, in, like, a sweet vinaigrette. I mean, there's so many traditional things. There's the tortas. You know, we eat turkey in Mexico for Christmas and New Year's. So just like you guys do here for Thanksgiving, we make adobo-roasted turkey, the adobo is, like, this-, the adobo I make is, it has freshly pureed fresh pineapple, and then mix that with dark brown sugar until it becomes caramel-ly. And then I add adobo to it, like, pureed tomato, rehydrated chilies, spices. It sounds complicated, but it's very easy to do.

JVN [00:43:37] That sounds like such a delicious, like, marinade. But then what happens?

PATI JINICH [00:43:42] So then it becomes, like, this Mexican version of a barbecue. You marinate your chicken or your turkey in it, and you get this smoky, spicy, sweet, tangy, sticky, irresistible sauce that coats the chicken, or the turkey becomes crispy. And then it's really moist inside because you can wrap that with banana leaves and put it in the oven, or just cover it in aluminum foil.

JVN [00:44:11] So we're going to do this because, like, my husband and I, like, because it's just us two, we're gonna play.

PATI JINICH [00:44:15] Please, please, please!

JVN [00:44:18] So you just make that marinade and then you just, like, pour it all over the turkey, and then use, like, you wrap it in a banana leaf.

PATI JINICH [00:44:24] Yeah. So you first you make that marinade, which I'm going to have your team text you my number and you can just text me as you make it OK.

JVN [00:44:32] And that skillet?

PATI JINICH [00:44:34] No. So you make this, you make us. That's marinade, OK? And then you grab a plastic bag or a brining bag. You put your chicken in your turkey in there, you pour that adobo and you let it marinate for 24, 48 hours.

JVN [00:44:47] Can you do that if you're doing like a whole ass turkey, you just get, like, a bigger bag, right? You don't chop the turkey up or something.

PATI JINICH [00:45:54] No, the whole thing. I make enough of the adobo, and it's just sitting in it, and it's just soaking that flavor from the candied pineapple and the rehydrated ancho chilies, which taste like a bittersweet chocolate, like, prune, like, chocolate, like, sweet is like. And then it has all of these spices. It has anise seeds, so it's nice and fragrant. And so the turkey, like, your, your bird is marinating there. And then I make a stuffing.

JVN [00:45:26] I was just going to ask if there was a Tex-Mex or Mexican equivalent of a stuffing!

PATI JINICH [00:45:31] Yes, yes, of course! And our stuffings are insane, because we do, as far as I know, all Mexicans prefer the stuffing inside of the bird because I know there's a thing against that, and you can do it outside, it's fine. But then you don't get all of the flavors from the bird, the juices and the adobo, but you can do the stuffing outside, it's fine because then you can do the sauce. You can pour some of the adobo after the turkey has come down. But listen, if you ask me, please stuff the turkey, please stuff your chicken. Then, I make the stuffing with turkey chorizo, cashews.

JVN [00:46:13] OK?

PATI JINICH [00:46:14] Green apples...

JVN [00:46:15] Ahhh...

PATI JINICH [00:46:16] And then that goes mixed with vegetables that I saute. Celery, garlic, a little carrot, a little bit of tomato. And all those often softened vegetables go mixed with brioche or challah or some soft bread. To that, you add your fried chunks of chorizo, your chopped cashews, your tart apple, your spices. You mix all that up. And so your stuffing is, like, nutty, spicy, crunchy, seasoned, like, you don't know what hit you when you eat it.

JVN [00:46:52] What if you just, like, what your face to be burning kind of like, what if you just need, like, a little kick in your face with some heat, like, what would you put in there?

PATI JINICH [00:47:01] OK, I have another stuffing, and there's many other stuffings, but there's another stuffing I have that's made with cornbread and then you do poblano chiles, jalapeño chiles, if you want it super spicy, you can do habaneros. But I, I love the combination of sweet and spicy because I find that the spicy is heightened and highlighted much more when it's mixed with something sweet.

JVN [00:47:29] I just always want, a little bit, like, yes, I mean, I don't even know enough about food, but yes, I'm like, I'm just, I'm definitely seconding that, like, 100 hundred percent, like, one time I had these, like, habanero peach wings that were really good. You think that piece that, like, you know, made it amazing? I just feel, like, sometimes I just feel like stuffing. If I was going to complain about, like, American stuffing, I just feel, like, it's sweet and I just want, like what? Just think of it like, not spicy. And I, like, I just want, like, a little bit of spice in my life, like, throw a jalapeño in it or something. But what you said sounds better.

PATI JINICH [00:48:01] You know the other thing is, I feel like we need to talk about meats and preconceptions like why do people have to use just one chili pepper in a recipe? You can mix your chilies, you can mix your fresh jalapeño with your dried chili de arbol. You can mix your roasted poblano with your chili flakes. You know, like chilies love the company of chilies. So I see you, you love heat, just like me, and you can make-, I have a cornbread that's, like, a skillet cornbread that I make with bacon and cheddar and roasted poblano and jalapeños. And I think that's right up your alley.

JVN [00:48:40] That sounds so good. I cannot stand how good it is, so lemme ask this question. It sounds good. OK, so I know the OK, but I know that you don't have that much time so, like, rapid, rapid fire for the last five questions because I know you don't have that much time.

PATI JINICH [00:48:58] I love rapid fire! Hit me.

JVN [00:49:00] OK, but these are all, like, all kind of big questions, so you're really going to have to rapid fire it. I think that there is this feeling of, you know, we were taking off for the news and you know, that was all that was informing your understanding of the border. You have a much more, like, human experience with this region because you've actually traveled it. You've been at, you've been in people's homes, you've been researching it. You're like dedicating your life to not only, like, bringing more awareness to cuisine in Mexico, but you've also dedicated this entire new project with, you know, La Frontera with this beautiful, you know, area. And so what are some of the misconceptions? Would you say it's fair to say that the coverage is, like, so many marginalized communities, it's, like, only showing, like, the dark stuff and none of, like, the positive, amazing, like, human stories that are coming out of this area?

PATI JINICH [00:49:54] A hundred percent. I think it is so narrowly focused that when the news goes there, they just go and get the tiniest pieces that are treating, as my friend, the journalist Alfredo Corchado, said, they're treating the borderlands as a piñata for political points. But at the border, nobody's bringing the microphone to the people and to the

communities to show how they do the music, the art, the culture, the food. And it's so insanely rich because imagine what they're getting and I and the trailer of my series, which I can share with you, La Frontera, I end with this. "They say the grass is greener on the other side. But what happens when you're right on the fence?" And as I say this, I feel chills go all over my body because this is what being in the borderlands is. You're in a place where you're in two places at one time, which makes it that you're in a third dimension and nobody's highlighting what happens to the-, it's so intense. Jonathan, it's so intense there that, you know, people try to label it as good and bad. Happy. Sad.

It's, like, so many things at the same time, it creates new things. And yes, it's mislabeled and misjudged and very narrowly focused. And what I found was that you can find food that you can't find anywhere else. You find music that you can't find anywhere. The art is, there's such freedom at the same time as the clash. You know, and, and that continuous tension just makes for incredible experiences and art, and it makes for really generous and kind and loving people. And they've been through so much, and against the odds, they continue to thrive and share and help each other, which is the crazy thing! You hear all about the border and these side and bad side. And they're like both sides at each point over the border. There's families on both sides, there's friends on both sides, their businesses that are thriving on both sides. And it's just it's just you really have to see it. You have to be there to see how it's like nothing we can imagine. So people can't explain it and describe it because they come with their baggage of agenda of what they want to say, and they take that to fit their narrative.

JVN [00:52:34] What's your hope for la frontera and the borderlands?

PATI JINICH [00:52:39] So my hope is that we can all learn from them because the, the borderlands, the communities there, against the odds, are resilient. They work with each other. They help each other. The people there are bi-cultural, bi-lingual, bi-, they, they, they can swim. They're adaptable, they're accessible. I wish we all could be that way, be many things at the same time and be accepting of the others. And I think that in order to help, you know, the myths and the preconceptions, and my hope is that people will learn to see what they don't know with curiosity instead of with an already idea of what they're going to find. Because if that's what you're going to find, if that's what you want to find, that's what you're going to find because it also lives there. Yes, there is crime. Yes, there's darkness, but yes, there is that here, too. [CROSSTALK] So if that's what you want to find at the border go, you're going to find it. [CROSSTALK] But go there and be open to see what are you going to find without looking for that, you are going to be so beautifully surprised. Just let life flow in and show you what that life is. Just be humble and have all, you know, curiosity.

JVN [00:54:08] And to even double down on that sentiment more, it's, like, yes, have, approach what you don't know with curiosity. And also, I think what I'm seeing is that so many of us, and I've done this too, we approach what we don't know with, like, vitriol. It's like this anger and vitriol. And I think that is what I've noticed the volume get turned up on and I so hope that we can kind of turn that down. This is also a second question I wasn't going to ask, but did you get to go to Nogales?

PATI JINICH [00:54:33] Yes, I've been to Nogales many times, not for La Frontera, but I am going to Nogales and maybe you want to join me for the next round of La Frontera because the next season is going to be, this time, I did El Paso to Brownsville. Next time I'm going to do from El Paso to Tijuana, and I'm going through Nogales and I've been there and it is incredible.

JVN [00:54:55] I have so many friends in Nogales that I met in Tucson and actually, like, this girl that I love who housesits for me and she babysits our cats and stuff. I love her so much. She's amazing. She just moved to Austin from Tucson, but she's a good friend of mine. Her whole family lives there. So if you need anyone to interview, let me know because her family is amazing. [CROSSTALK] I will hook you guys up. And so then my final question is how can people explore cuisine across the US-Mexico border from home? [CROSSTALK] Watching your show, first of all, like, how can people look explore this cuisine? And I'll answer this for you: by watching your show. Yes. Is there any other way? Like, well, they can get your cookbook, too, that'll help.

PATI JINICH [00:55:36] Yes, yes! But also if you go to PBS.org, La Frontera, I have recipes there. I think we have like three to four recipes per episode for the queso, for fajitas, for menudo, for taquitos, for drowned taquitos, and just be open to La Frontera, you know, and maybe you may want to visit. I don't know. It's an incredible place.

JVN [00:56:01] You put recipes online? That's so sweet of you. I am obsessed. I cannot even stand. This is, like, the most fun we've ever had. Pati Jinich, thank you so much for coming on. We had so much fun. We're absolutely trading numbers and thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious.

PATI JINICH [00:56:18] Thank you so much for having me. You are such joy.

JVN [00:56:23] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Pati Jinich.

You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe.

Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital.

Our editor is Andrew Carson.

Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.