

FOOD

The arepa is the great democratic food—for rich and poor alike. It’s a mestiza food, a mixed food. There’s a really heavy influence from African foods, as well as food combinations from indigenous populations in the Americas and the stuff that was brought over from the Spanish colonists. ● Our food is not too spicy compared to what you might find in Mexico. Venezuelans eat a lot of black beans, rice, and arepas three times a day. Our main dish is called pabellon, or “big flag,” which includes black beans, plantains, rice, carne mechada (shredded meat), egg, and arepas. In the area where I live, we make arepas daily. It’s like our bread. ● Every family in Venezuela has hallacas at the Christmas dinner. It is like a very elaborate tamale. Everyone believes that the best hallacas are those prepared by their own mother, and most people say “La mejor hallaca es la de mi mama”. The whole family gets together to find and buy the ingredients, which could take anywhere from an afternoon to several days. Then, some family members get together to cut the ingredients into little pieces, clean and prepare the plantain leaves, and after that, prepare “el guiso,”—the stew that goes inside the hallaca. We assemble the hallacas in stations, similar to an assembly line. With time, each family member becomes an expert on a particular operation. In my family, we make between 100 and 200 of them. My mother is never happy with the way they taste at the end; she says they have too much or too little of a certain ingredient. Of course, they always taste wonderful anyway.

OIL

Oil is Venezuela’s handicap. Oil is fast and instantaneous richness. The country’s economy is dependent on a non-renewable resource. Oil is a burden that the politicians have leaned on; they don’t care to develop tourism, industry, agriculture, or services to diversify the economy. ● Our oil was discovered in the 1930s. Since then, Venezuela has transformed from a rural country into a highly developed urban one. Some people say that the oil is our curse: it makes us lazy; it makes us think that we deserve it just because it’s there; we don’t have to work hard to get it. However, without oil we would be significantly poorer than we are right now. In a way, the oil saved us from our past but cursed us by corrupting a culture of hard workers. ● In the 1970s, we nationalized the oil industry, so we had already taken the imperialist hand out of our oil. What Chavez did was somehow take this discourse, dress it up with the Bolivarian culture, add some imperialist resentment, and build a political movement out of it.

CULTURE

People in Venezuela are very warm, with a great sense of humor. They can make lemonade out of a lemon storm. Venezuelans would consider the noise of the falling lemons as a song and would invent a lyric for it while dancing to the rhythm. ● The people who are not aligned with the regime have used cultural activities such as theater plays, poetry lectures, art performances, and book readings as a safe place to express themselves without risk. Although there is a high level of crime, citizens are trying to recover the right to walk and enjoy the streets, squares, and outdoors by arranging diverse activities like music concerts and graffiti contests. ● Many Venezuelans, particularly those who are poor, believe in local religions and mix them with Catholicism. The Catholic clergy have been judgmental about the regime, and Chavez has threatened and punished them many times. He has also besieged the Jewish community as a reprisal for Israel. ● I miss the landscape, its colors and light. There is a sensation in Venezuela of living in a perpetual blossom. But I hated the shallowness and lack of commitment in people. And the chaos. ● Everyone who can afford it goes to private school. Very few people in the upper classes go to public school. Higher education is excellent at both private and public level, particularly the public universities that specialize in medicine and engineering. ● Venezuelans have a great level of political awareness, so there is constant debate going on. There is also a general cheerfulness, as well as the guts to take on change. But corruption and bureaucracy are serious problems, which we are organizing to fight against. ● In Caracas, the situation is socially, economically, and politically unstable. Any day, anything can happen. It’s very dangerous. I believe that we have the second highest murder rate of any Latin American city, with thousands of murders each month. The police are a joke and kidnapping is almost commonplace. There’s even “express kidnapping,” where the kidnapper gets in your car, drives you to the ATM, makes you empty your account, and then drives away with your car. ● The sense of loneliness that people experience here in the U.S.—especially in some big cities—doesn’t exist in Venezuela. We have very strong ties to family and friends. It is very rare for someone to call and say, “I’m coming to your house.” They will just show up, maybe with a case of beer, and all of a sudden you’re having a party. ● My dad used to own a record shop and made his money selling imported music. Since it’s so difficult to import goods, he was required to buy in Venezuela and would go to the black market for the records. This is one of the reasons the value of all our goods is inflated. We have the highest inflation rate in the world, anywhere between 25 and 35 percent during the last five years. ● The latest trend in Venezuela is the creation of the “Alba stores,” which belong to the Venezuelan government. These stores allow us to buy clothing made in other Latin American countries at a very low cost. Meanwhile, in Merida, there are industrial and graphic designers who have dedicated themselves to making fashion from a local perspective and have started brands such as Yellow Chicken and NADA. ● Venezuela really is a world of possibility. This is proven by the presence of many foreigners living in our country, in love with the landscape, with the people, with the alternative ways of social organization, in love with the effervescent and ever-changing society.

INTERNAL POLARIZATION

Chavez reflected a division that exists in society and that is finally being recognized: that between the rich business, land and media owners, and those who scrape by to survive. I think around 50 percent of the population strongly supported Chavez because it was clear he supported those who were previously excluded from economic/political life and decision making. Perhaps 20 percent of the population supports the opposition because it represents them. The rest either fluctuate, are not interested in politics, or support the government in some things, but not in all. ● Things aren’t as “tense” internally as foreigners are often led to believe. Where I’m living, there is one very pro-opposition person, one student who supports some aspects of socialism but votes in the opposition, two students who aren’t that interested in politics, and one religious woman who supports alternative causes (such as gay rights, alternative education, women’s right to choose) and dislikes both Chavez and the opposition. Then, of course, there is me, who is wholeheartedly a revolutionary. I support the government, but not without criticism. ● The political polarization has broken families, lifetime friendships, and so on. Some people prefer to stay away from the conflict. Those people don’t support the government, but they don’t support the Revolution either. They are called the “ni-ni’s.” They aren’t liked by any extreme group, but are a key decisive group when it comes to elections. ● The infrastructure, daily life, language, and customs of urban Venezuela is, as far as I know, diametrically opposed to that of the rural areas. Jokes about countryside people are very popular.

COLOMBIA

The relationship between Venezuela and Colombia is complicated by a number of issues, including the Colombian guerrilla settlements in Venezuela, which prove there are ties between the Colombian paramilitary forces and the Venezuelan government. Some of these Colombian groups, including the ELN and FARC, are described by Chavez as “Bolivarian forces” in line with Bolivarian ideals. In Colombia they are described as “terrorists.” This is further complicated by the U.S. military bases and support in Colombia, which has significantly increased tensions with Venezuela. ● The image I had of Colombia as a kid was a country at war, filled with drugs and crime. Thankfully, this has changed. Colombia is still at war, but we look at the country and feel a bit envious of their economy, tourism, and even security, while we go backwards. Venezuelan girls—at least my friends and I—love Colombian accents, especially those from the coastal areas, and the Colombian clothes are in high demand because of their quality. As for the rest, we feel very connected. We eat similar things and listen to similar music. We are next door. We are brothers after all.

CONFLICT KITCHEN

CONFLICT KITCHEN is a take-out restaurant that only serves cuisine from countries with which the United States is in conflict. Our current version focuses on the food, culture, and politics of Venezuela. The restaurant rotates identities in response to current geopolitical events.

The text on this wrapper is taken directly from interviews we conducted with Venezuelans living in both Venezuela and the United States. Each section highlights the perspectives of multiple people.

www.conflictkitchen.org

PERCEPTION OF U.S. GOVERNMENT

A large percentage of people in Venezuela and Latin America perceive the U.S. as an imperialist country that tries to take advantage of other countries. At the same time, Venezuela is one of the countries that is emotionally closest to the U.S. An American would be well-received here. ● The U.S. economy is supported by revenues of war and construction in the countries they devastate. I could not trust a government which talks about peace and nuclear disarmament while invading other territories and imposing its point of view on the world. ● I think Obama is a very important result of the fight for civil rights, and it’s remarkable that in a short time you have a black American president. It’s something. A change. Maybe not a change that a lot of people want, but one that you can see. ● Everybody feels like the U.S. is the vampire ready to suck your blood. But then we also look up to the U.S. and define ourselves as friends of the American people. So, in one sense there’s admiration, and in another sense we feel we have to be careful because if you let them, they will exploit you with the excuse that they are going to help you. I mean, the U.S. has taken down democratically elected governments and put in dictators because the dictator was friendly toward them. ● Chavez was very happy about Bush’s government because it allowed him to blame all the troubles in the world on “The Imperio,” as Chavez called him. I think Chavez expected to have a better relationship with Obama because (and this was Chavez’s thinking, not my own) Obama was black. Somehow he was going to relate to him or something. I think the best thing for Obama was to keep Chavez happy, so he didn’t wake up one day and decide not to sell any more of his oil.

PERCEPTION OF U.S. CITIZENS

U.S. television and news paint a pretty poor picture of their citizens. They seem arrogant, materialistic, selfish, naïve, racist, and superficial. But we know many U.S. activists have come to Venezuela to learn about what is going on here, to document it, or to help out. They have all been incredibly hard-working, gentle, kind, and respectful people. We know there is a third-world within the U.S., and ultimately we know that the people of the U.S. are our brothers and sisters. ● In general, U.S. people are peaceful but isolated from the rest of the world. In some ways they seem a little numb to many issues of global importance, possibly due to the way their media handles this information. ● A word that describes almost every American is “practical.” And I would say Americans love comfort, and they work hard to get it. All cultures have their myths. Myths work as a mirror. American myths come from the future instead of the past. ● The U.S. has loads of cultural influence in Venezuela, especially in food and entertainment. Most of the movies we see here are Hollywood ones, and most of our cable channels are of U.S. origin. Really, this war against the “empire” only exists in our president’s head. We eat burgers, watch CSI, hate Justin Bieber, and save up for a Tommy Hilfiger t-shirt. ● I imagined that everybody in the U.S. was somehow smart and well traveled. But when you meet people in the U.S., they don’t fit that impression. I come from a large city, and my cultural horizons were broader than 80 percent of the people I met in the U.S. ● When I go to the U.S., people ask me where I am from, and then they’re completely clueless when I tell them. I say, “Venezuela’s the country right beneath you that sells you most of your oil.”

CHAVEZ

The “Venezuelan government” was a euphemism for Chavez. Politicians around him were placed there to obey him, which they did without doubt. Some of them may have been afraid, but most of them are just taking advantage of the situation. Chavez was very clever. He divided society, created an anarchic environment, and established a dictatorship. It seems that he applied two maxims: “Divide and conquer” and “It’s good fishing in troubled waters.” ● I think Chavez was a messianic leader who imposed his political-ideological project very skillfully and without scruples of any kind. The investment made by the state propaganda is large and the message and image of Chavez was disseminated through all available media: television, radio, print, billboards, etc. I applaud some of the government’s social programs, but overall, I think that it is authoritarian, corrupt, and incapable. ● Chavez was a human being and, as such, had flaws. He was constantly learning and growing. But he was a president who literally dedicated his life—every hour of it—to his country and to its poorest people (which are the great majority). On a global level, he was one of the few presidents who had the guts to stand up and say what needed to be said to countries like the U.S. The Venezuelan government is complicated, and its members range from revolutionary to “soft left,” with many opportunists in it. On the whole, though, it’s focused on policies that benefit the people and makes a serious effort to involve the people in decision, policy, and law-making. ● When Chavez came to government, we lost our capacity to think freely. We have a very great muralist painter, Pedro Leon Zapata, who is with the Sandinista revolution. He questioned Chavez’s politics in a newspaper illustration. Chavez had a television show every day, and on this show he governed the culture. He called out Zapata for this illustration on his show and, from that moment on, all the murals of Zapata in the city had to be destroyed. ● The Cuban revolution was born from intellectuals. Chavez’s revolution had one peculiarity: most of the intellectual people and students don’t support it. It’s a very rare revolution, very militaristic. ● Without Chavez, what would be of us? He brought the awakening of a people that were dominated and acculturated by the U.S. In every sense, he rescued our values. He taught us dignity, and we must spread that word. We needed a new model in which to live where we are all accepted. This was Chavez’s idea of 21st century socialism, the model which will replace the dying model of capitalism. ● Chavez had an emotional link with his supporters because he used the television and poured his feelings out like it was a soap opera—he cried, he talked about his stomachache, he went to the bathroom. He did everything on television, told you everything, even the process in the bathroom. And after that he talked about his kitchen. And after that he talked about the macro economy. Chavez was like the Venezuelan storytellers in the plains: for everything he made a story. Chavez was like me. ● Under Chavez, life changed completely. You will never have enough space in your arepas wrapper to describe it. Before Chavez, you could find anything you wanted in the supermarket. Now, hundreds of products, including cooking oil and meat, are hard to find. If you want to travel, you are only allowed to spend a certain amount of money each year, depending on your destination (for example, Colombia only gets \$300, U.S. and Europe get \$2500), and you have to apply to be allowed to spend that money. Before Chavez, we had a lot of TV channels that showed different political tendencies. We still have many channels, but only one that does not support the government. Most importantly, our general feeling of fear has increased. People not only feared Chavez’s actions, but also the incredible economic inflation and lack of personal security. ● Chavez was the first president who had thought about the poor majority. Especially in the last hundred years, we have been predominantly under the “gringo” boot. He implemented, with many difficulties, the right to self-determination, and this angered the multinational corporations and governments in the North.

RACE/CLASS

Don’t forget that Venezuelans are mixed. It’s rare to find a Venezuelan who is totally white or totally black. Most of us are “light brown” or “dark brown.” If you’re lighter, like me, it is likely that people will make fun of you, saying you haven’t seen the beach for a while. Being a bit darker is more attractive. ● Our class structure has its roots in the Colonial Period (1492 until Independence). There was a caste system based on the color of you and your ancestors’ skin. Some people were allowed to buy their social status and “wash” their skin. Higher status belonged to the whites—mostly European descendants. The lowest status was that of the slaves brought from Africa, but, this system started to vanish when Independence came and slavery ended. Today it is true that most rich people in Venezuela are white ones, but the people don’t get “darker” as their social status gets lower. I know many poor white people and many rich dark people. Our class structure today, instead of depending on race, depends on your income and the place you live. If you live in a nice neighborhood or an apartment in a safe area (remember Venezuela is a very dangerous country right now), your status is higher. Class structure exists even inside poor areas (shanty towns) called Barrios. Those who live near the highway hold the highest status; those who live up in the mountain hold the lowest. ● In Venezuela no one will ever, in your entire life, ask your race. If someone were to ask your race on a form, it would be considered offensive, and we would not know what to write. It was a shock, something that I couldn’t understand, when I saw that segregation actually happens in the U.S. It didn’t make sense to me. I mean, you’re in one of the most diverse areas of the world. How does this happen? ● When people in Pittsburgh find out that I’m from Venezuela, I sometimes face stereotyping. It’s more about being Latino than Venezuelan: “How could a Latino have a PhD?” They don’t expect you to be educated. Somebody said to me when I first moved to Cranberry, “Oh, so you’re going to live like a white person?”



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