

NPR's Kitchen Sisters uncover lost culinary -- and family -- lore

– Amanda Berne, Chronicle Staff Writer
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When Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson, National Public Radio's Kitchen Sisters, asked listeners to share stories about their cooking traditions, they had one caveat: Leave out tales about moms and grandmothers -- those are much too obvious.

Silva and Nelson are known for reaching way beyond the obvious and delving into the nooks and crannies of out-of-the-way kitchens and cooks on their NPR program "Hidden Kitchens." Since 2004, the Kitchen Sisters have explored the communities of "lost" kitchens everywhere, from the tradition of making burgoo in Kentucky to profiling personalities like Angelo Garro, a San Francisco urban forager.

More than 800 people from around the nation called in immediately, and keep calling in, with stories about everything from homeless friends huddling around a George Foreman Grill, to a fundraiser for a volunteer fire department revolving around ramps (wild leeks), to NASCAR cooking to ham balls. But, despite Silva and Nelson's admonition, the bulk of the stories hinted of mother or grandmother.

"Of course they did; they couldn't help themselves," says Silva. "In almost every message, every story, a mother or a grandmother entered in at some point. It's just so ingrained."

Mother's Day tribute

On Friday, the Kitchen Sisters will broadcast "Hidden Kitchen Mama," a Mother's Day special with four stories from listeners interwoven with music and messages, and compressed into just seven minutes.

The stories, collected over two years from phone calls, interviews and tips, range from beautifully mundane, focusing on minute details woven together, to true hidden treasures obtained from brief conversations or phone call teases.

And though they specifically wanted to keep matriarchs out of it, their own mother stories are as compelling as many of the messages left.

Silva remembers her mother's wonderful cooking, simple, but good. Her mother worked long hours, but there was a full meal every night, with more extravagant ones on the weekends. Guests were always welcome and family gatherings and celebrations were always held at their house. Until Alzheimer's struck.

"My mom just started to retreat; she got sick and pulled away," says Silva. Her mom eventually moved into assisted living. Her dad, who had taken over much of the cooking in later years, moved into the commune where Silva has lived since college.

On weekends, the family would gather and cook meals together. "Even when she had Alzheimer's, we could work in the kitchen," says Silva. "Her hands never forgot the basic kitchen skills, or how to wash vegetables. It was this wonderful calming thing in the kitchen that seemed normal and real, and it didn't matter that she couldn't remember anything."

Nelson's story is also bittersweet. Her mother, who died when Nelson was 5, didn't shape her love of food -- she gives a nod to her Brownie troop for that -- but partly inspired her passion to document other's lives.

Twenty years after her mom's death, Nelson found a stack of old tape reels with labels such as "Davia's first words." As she listened to her own gurgles, she also heard her mother's voice.



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It was a powerful moment to hear her after so many years. Nelson believes that the image of her dad capturing their voices with a tape recorder could have affected her own passion to document other people's stories and memories.

Santa Cruz beginnings

It's this same passion that brought the two women together. They found each other after college in Santa Cruz in the 1970s, and almost immediately began a partnership in radio, with a show called "Every Wrinkle Tells a Story" on the Central Coast's KUSP.

They've always been storytellers, weaving into each piece music, art, culture and time, and now with the 2-year-old "Hidden Kitchens" project, food.

"Our first question is always: What did you eat for breakfast?" says Silva. "Everyone can answer that question, and talking about food warms them up, gets the conversation moving."

Once the conversation starts to flow, they discover that Americans "have somehow gotten convinced that we should be afraid of food and that cooking is inconvenient," says Nelson. "People are longing for the closeness and intimacy that's found in kitchens." "Hidden Kitchens" helps fill the void.

"Mothers and kitchens and grandmothers and kitchens are so obvious, but, right now, looking at the program, you can see how absent they are," Nelson says.

"At Mother's Day, there is a romantic, glamorized, sanitized view of motherhood that creates longing and disappointment; our mother stories are offbeat and off-center."

Each segment -- there are four in this episode -- starts with two hours or so of interviewing. They pick up ambient sounds on location.

While the smells don't translate over the air, the Kitchen Sisters use their microphone to capture the sounds of food, like meat sizzling on the grill for example. They select music to harmonize with the emotions in each interview. In the sunny-but-small corner studio in the landmark Sentinel Building at Kearny and Columbus in San Francisco, Nelson, Silva and sound engineer Jim McKee lock themselves in a mixing room, one with a large, faded burgundy rug covering the white and green tiled floor.

Shoes are kicked off, as McKee stretches his toes while playing and replaying recordings, whittling a tree-size interview to a toothpick sliver. Despite listening to track after track about food, they seem to have forgotten about lunch, until after 2 p.m. when someone orders bowls of steaming miso and udon.

The editing flow

Back at work, the women coax out bits of the interviews they like, pulling out the essentials until there is a nugget -- a two-minute story for the seven-minute piece. McKee helps them smooth it over.

Nelson typically chooses the music by going through existing archives, friends' collections or flipping through discs at Amoeba Music, in Berkeley and the Upper Haight. While trying out different tunes, they look for something that acts as a theme to the main character. The music is fit in when the piece is nearly finished, making sure the drums sound at appropriate points, or that the guitar twang never overtakes the story.

Nelson explains that the end product, itself, is like a piece of music, flowing just right. "We want the person to sound the best that they absolutely can," she says.

"It'll be hard, and we'll cry and we'll weep and we'll fight," says Silva. They spend about five days in the studio with McKee, and this doesn't take into account the first take at whittling down the story, or the hours they spend in the field and traveling.

The collaboration has also produced "Lost and Found Sound," a program created around recovered audio recordings, and "The Sonic Memorial Project," which sought to preserve audio artifacts of the World Trade Center and its neighborhood after Sept. 11. Now they're making a foray into podcasting for the NPR Web site, which will afford them more time to share stories.

Last November, they released "Hidden Kitchens" (Rodale, 265 pages, \$27.50), a companion book with more stories, recipes, pictures, and excerpts from phone calls. The paperback is scheduled to be released in August.

The Kitchen Sisters say their storytelling is a way of gently moving people toward change. "Hopefully they'll decide to talk to their mother," says Silva. "Learn how to make things before they say, 'Whoops, my kids don't have any food memories.' "

Where to hear the Kitchen Sisters

"Hidden Kitchen Mama," 5:50 a.m. and 7:50 a.m. on KQED-FM's "Morning Edition" Friday. 88.5 & 89.3.

Also on "Morning Edition" 6:51-6:59 a.m. and 8:51- 8:59 a.m. Friday on KALWFM's "Morning Edition. 91.7.

To hear the programs, visit NPR.org or kitchensisters.org/radio_series1.htm.