

DYNAMIC DUO: Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva.

10 Things You Should Know About **The Kitchen Sisters**

Davia Nelson, one half of the award-winning Kitchen Sisters, is calling me from the road, where she and her longtime collaborator, Nikki Silva, have been conducting interviews for their latest National Public Radio program, *Hidden Kitchens* (with producer Jay Allison). "What people should know about the Kitchen Sisters," she says, having just discovered that their flight has been canceled due to fog, "is that we're stranded in Fargo, North Dakota, right now with a bagful of buffalo sausage, burgoo and wild rice. That's what!"

Based in San Francisco in a teensy office in the historic Niebaum-Coppola building, the two have been working together since 1979, and despite the name,

their award-winning programs (including *Lost and Found Sound* and *The Sonic Memorial Project*) have never been about food—until now. "Once we tried cooking on the air," Nelson admits. "We had a bowl and an egg. That's about as far as we got."

Hidden Kitchens, which is airing on *Morning Edition* through December, explores everything from street food to jail food, delving into the largely undocumented—and behind-the-scenes—side of American food culture and tradition. "I had no idea when we started this project what we were getting into—the depth and the power," says Nelson. "You can change the world through the kitchen. I don't think I realized that." —Sara Deseran

1 Day break. As to one trick in conducting interviews, Silva says, "Food is a way to get inside stories. To make people relax, ask them what they had for breakfast."

2 Generation gap. One of the *Hidden Kitchens* stories was told by a college-age woman in Boston who cooked weekly for an 80-year-old man. "He'd meet her on campus, and they'd walk to his neighborhood grocery while he talked to her of John Cage music, philosophy and architecture. She told us she feels sad that people from different generations don't sit across from each other anymore."

3 Prison food. "Another woman called to tell us about a man who had done 27 years in Louisiana's Angola prison. When he was in solitary, he created a makeshift stove from Coke cans and toilet paper rolls and started making pralines. When he got out of jail, they became his business and he now calls them 'freelines.'"

4 Trashed. "For a long time we called it *Lost and Found Food* [instead of *Hidden Kitchens*]. But too many people thought it sounded like dumpster diving."

5 Story time. Although their radio programs may be what they're most known for, Nelson says, "Nikki also does museum exhibits and I'm a casting director, write screenplays and produce movies. It's really all storytelling."

6 Bay watch. Lou Marcelli, the 76-year-old caretaker of SF's Dolphin Club, is fondly known as Lou the Glue, because he keeps members together by cooking a community meal at the day's end. "He convinced me to swim the Bay for the first time," says Nelson. "He said 'You look it in the eye and go.'"

7 Flower power. As part of their research, Nelson and Silva observed a cooking class for incarcerated women at the SF county jail led by NextCourse (a nonprofit group headed by local chefs). "We were blown away by the women's enthusiasm. The food was like sprinkling water on flowers. The women just came to life. A lot of them were saying that cooking hadn't happened in their homes forever."

8 Night kitchen. Nelson, who doesn't like to drive, always asks taxi drivers where they're from and discovered that more than 400 Yellow Cab drivers in SF are from the same small town in Brazil. They tipped her off to "this woman who used to have a little rolling night kitchen by the cab yard. She'd make black beans, these big Brazilian salads, grilled chicken. A lot of times when we'd be there, people would be singing. She was just nourishing them on every level."

9 The fighter. One woman called in to say that for people without their own kitchens, the ultimate tool is the George Foreman grill. Being able to tell this to George Foreman, who grew up poor and hungry himself, was one of "the high-lights of our life.... He told us a hungry kid is an angry kid and it led him to fight."

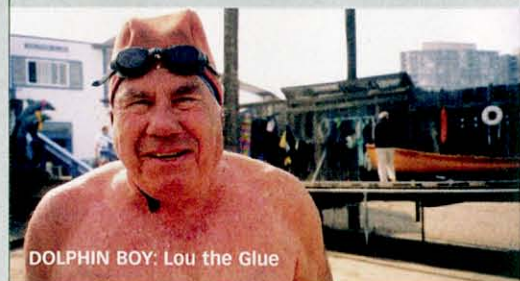
10 Feed the world. What's the hardest part of their job on a daily basis? "For me," says Silva of the illegal nature of much street food, "it's that hidden kitchens keep getting busted. The reality is that people are just trying to find a way to feed their communities, feed themselves."



BY GEORGE:
The ultimate hidden kitchen.



MR. CAB DRIVER:
Taxis and the taste of Brazil.



DOLPHIN BOY: Lou the Glue