

Elsy
Small food business owner
Elsy's house, March 2nd, 2023

Translation:

Sofia:
Could you repeat your full name, your occupation, and your nationality as well?

Elsy:
Thank you, my name is Elsy, and my nationality is, I'm from El Salvador, and today I'm going to talk about the preparation of the pupusa. The pupusa is a very typical food in El Salvador and is very popular, and I'm going to explain this to Sofia, who wants to know how they are prepared because she likes them very much. So that's what I'll talk about right now.

Sofia:
Could I ask you how and when you learned to make pupusas?

Elsy:
Ah well, since I'm from El Salvador, I was born there... so El Salvador is where the pupusa is from, and I learned because my mother made it while we were growing up, and now I'm an adult and now I know how to make them well...

Sofia:
Could you also tell me the story of how you started your business, how you grew your business?

Elsy:
Well, my business really isn't a big business, because, ah, its very small (it's very little) but, but yes thanks to God I always-well about how I started or why I started, it was like because of this: When the pandemic started in the year 2020, I was still working at my normal job but-

Sofia:
Could I ask you what you worked in before?

Elsy:
I worked in restaurants.

Sofia:
Ah, did you work cooking in the restaurant?

Elsy:
No, I was a prep chef, but not Salvadorian restaurant, some other restaurant type... Yes, I was a prep cook there, and then, when the pandemic started, work started to go down: less hours, less and less hours. So I decided better to stop, I didn't, I didn't continue working, but since I have a lot of friends

and I shared with them this as we were talking together and one of them gave me the idea of the pupusas, she told me, "Elsy", she told me, "Your food is really good, why don't you, why don't you go and try to sell your food?". And that's how I started. But I started in 2020, in December of 2020 I started to make my pupusas. And yeah, I started between friends and so, we spread the word, and that's how I sold really, really a lot. And that's how I've kept going, because the same customers always buy from me and they talk about me to their friends and so, but I always am selling, sometimes not that much but always at least a little.

Sofia:

So it is only you who makes the pupusas right? Do you have someone that helps you?

Elsy:

No, no, just me.

Sofia:

Just you... wow!

Elsy:

It is really really busy and really demanding. I have to be fast, and well, sometimes there are moments when I wish I had someone to help me, but then no, I don't have someone, no, because what I sell is not enough. That's why it's just me who makes them, and I just get them out.

Sofia:

I would like to ask you if you could tell me your favorite aspects, or the enjoyable parts of having this business...

Elsy:

Oh, I love cooking, and I love exploring, I always think and say, "Oh, I'm going to try to make this and see how it turns out, see how making it and how it's coming out, and every time I make it better, better and better." That's why I really love making the pupusas and I like doing this business.

Sofia:

You really are a true chef!

Elsy:

Haha, yes, so that's how it is, because it's not easy doing this, it looks like it doesn't amount to that much, but that's how my business. When one knows what they're doing, you get used to this business and you find success.

Sofia:

Could you also tell me some of the difficulties that you encounter having a small business like this, especially as an immigrant, or problems that you have had to resolve, things like that.

Elsy:

Ah well, first of all, because we are not of this country and we come, it's really difficult to build a business because first of all, the work we do does not reach beyond middle class. It's very difficult to start a very big business... Ah well it isn't.. Well, it isn't easy, but it's not that difficult because I feel like if I tell myself or want to do it, I feel like I can do it. And well, that's it, that because one is not from here, one comes here but is not from here, you don't earn much. I mean, you do earn money, but not that much, only enough to cover basic necessities like rent, and that's where all the money goes, in rent and bills, and those kinds of things. But yes, thanks to God I feel like it hasn't gone badly for me here at all in this country. That has gone well, I feel like I'm a good person, I have all I need here where I live, being where I am. I only keep fighting for a future in which I have a little bit more

Sofia:

Well, I would also like to ask: what does authentic food mean to you?

Elsy:

Authentic, authentic... Something authentic is some thing good, something that does-something that is authentic because it is unique, because it's not a comparison, or-or a copy of something or of someone. That isn't good. Something authentic is just me.

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Sofia:

So for you, food is authentic when it is unique, when it comes from within oneself.

Elsy:

Like the pupusas that I make, I know that I prepared them, they come from myself. I know that I make them with all my heart, with all my power, with everything I like. I know I am sure of what I do and I make sure that everything is good, that everything is fresh, everything that is the best. I know that I am sure of what I have, of what I do, of what I offer to my customers.

Sofia:

On the same note of authentic food, I know that in this country it can be very difficult to find ingredients from foreign countries to make food that isn't from the US, food that is really, that one feels, is true and real.

Elsy:

Food that has the original flavor.

Sofia:

Exactly! The original flavor.

Elsy:

Yes... but actually no, no, not really, because if you know how to cook, and you know which ingredients to use, the ones that you use in one's original country it's okay because they do sell a lot of ingredients of all countries here in the supermarkets. Well, not all the supermarkets, but there are

a lot of supermarkets that bring the ingredients from El Salvador, like the beans, things like that, condiments... Well, condiments no, I don't really buy condiments... But yes the zucchini here is the same as over there. I don't feel like that part is too hard. But what is difficult to prepare is the chicharrón, people don't know how to prepare it like it's supposed to be, and they don't create the flavor they need to, the original flavor. But since I know how to make it like they do over there, that's why the flavor stays the same. But no, no I don't think they make pupusas over there and then bring them to sell here, everything in the US is made in restaurants here.

Sofia:

Really? You've seen pupusas in-

Elsy:

I don't remember, someone told me that they were buying pupusas at Costco, but I don't know if they make them in restaurants locally or if they import them. But no, I don't think this [authenticity] is difficult for me because no, I feel like the flavor of the pupusa that I make is the same flavor as over there. There's even more flavor, like in the zucchini or in the cheese. The Loroco is the only thing that isn't quite as fresh, fresh like over there when they sell them in the mercado. Over there you buy everything in the center of the city, over there it is very fresh, the flowers of the zucchini too, but everything is the same here.

Else:

No, I don't feel like the ingredients aren't the same, it's only how you prepare them that the flavor changes. Here everything is the same, the beans, the cheese-well the cheese you buy here is always in bags, but over there in my country, you buy everything from the farms. The only difference for the cheese is that it has to be chewy, like the cheese for pizza.

Sofia:

Could you quickly go over where you get your ingredients- or if there are ingredients that you have had to modify or change from the original recipe?

Elsy:

No, no I haven't changed much, I don't add chile to the sauce, only jalapeños to the curtido because that's how you make it, but I don't add chile to the sauce because a lot of mothers buy from me and they don't want spicy food for their children. I do sometimes add jalapeños to the pupusas because they [Mexican people who buy from me] ask me sometimes to add it to the cheese pupusas. But no, I don't change anything, it's just as if you went to my country and got a pupusa there.

Sofia:

Then, have you felt like you have had to change your recipes to imitate more popular flavors, like the things you buy in supermarkets? Have you felt that in order to expand your business you have had to change your recipe?

Elsy:

No, I don't need to change it because the pupusa is always very popular, everyone always asks for it. I also make other foods, stew and that kind of thing, but people always ask for more pupusas. But maybe in the future, I could add many more dishes, many more things. Maybe I would like to make pupusas but with dough made of spinach, or pupusas with carrots and meat, I already make some with meat, but I would like to make some with less fat, with less salt. I feel like that would end up very good. But for now, I'll just keep making the same things as always because it's what people always ask for.

Sofia:

Have you felt like food has helped you preserve your culture or has helped you create a space inside the US where you feel you are at home? In other words, how do you think food helps preserve culture?

Elsy:

Well I feel like the pupusa is and has always been Salvadorian, but now it is not only for Salvadorians, it is everywhere. There are a lot of people, people coming from many different countries that like it. It has become very popular, it has become a symbol for a nationality, and I feel like it helps expand my culture to more and more people, building my client base that by helping them learn about what Salvadorian food tastes like and what the culture is like.

Sofia:

In other words, for you, food is a way of expanding one's culture to many people of different countries and different cultures, to create connections. And do you think that we will see more of this in the future? More of different types of foods and cultures mixing and becoming more popular? Do you think that in the future people will accept more or want more these foods from different cultures?

Elsy:

Yes, of course. Yes, people will like it a lot. Well, take me, first of all. I like to eat all the foods from here, of all the restaurants. I think everyone is like that as well. Like for example, if they opened a Peruvian restaurant here, I will go there to try the food, and if I like it, then I will start eating that food more and more. And if people start selling more and more different foods like, tacos, quesadillas, birria, all that mixed up, I think that would be a good thing.

Sofia:

And do you think that with all the diversity of this food, do you think this will be good? Do you think that people from different cultures will be brought together more or understand each other more through these different foods? Like, for example, you can give an example from your life, have you had an experience where you understood more or connected with a group of people through food?

Elsy:

Ah yes, yes people always make comments. Like for example if people who didn't know about pupusas, they come and buy from me, they tell me that it is very good, that they didn't know. And if I

go to a restaurant of a type of food that is not from my country or of my people, while I am eating I make comments and talk about the food, and there we are communicating with a different culture, with different people. Mhm.

Sofia:

So, are you saying that through food one can have the experience of various cultures and through that have the experience of various peoples?

Elsy:

When talking to them, well yes, yes.

Sofia:

Ah, another question. So you mentioned that you had heard that in Costco they are selling pupusas. Have you seen other instances, maybe not only of pupusas, but of other foods of other countries being sold in popular stores, foods that are maybe not authentic or that are created in ways that have deviated a lot from the traditional recipes?

Elsy:

I have seen these things, because here there are some stores that I know that also sell things from my country, they have tamales, fresh corn tamales (sweet), or things that we call Niguas that are tortillas that you eat with milk or cream, and well in the Costco also mexican tamales too no? Well, I don't think it really matters, they sell these things and people buy them.

Sofia:

So then you don't think that consuming food that has deviated from the original recipe in order to be popular with a certain group of people like white people, for example, you don't think that affects the way that person views that group of people? Does that make sense...?

Elsy:

How? Like the people who buy-What do you mean?

Sofia:

Ehm, let's say that I am someone that buys a pupusa, but what I buy has nothing to do with a real pupusa, doesn't taste like it at all. And then I start to think that that's what they actually taste like. Do you think you would be affected by this?

Elsy:

Em, maybe some people yes... The person who buys this thing, maybe they will taste it and they won't like it at all.. But no, well one thing I do think is that if Costco had pupusas, I think people would buy from me and not from there anyways, because people prefer fresh food over frozen food no?

Sofia:

Mm, I see. I see. Ah, my last question is that you have mentioned many times that you have an idea of what you would like to do in the future, something about expanding your business that bring you a lot of passion. Could you explain more in detail your plans or what you are excited about?

Elsy:

Ah, well maybe, not very soon, but yes in the future I think I would like to be ome more independent, make my business bigger, to make it so that I have a space where people come and sit down to eat, where they can enjoy pupusas more, talking with each other and that. I hope in some future I will be able to make this, but right now no, no.

Sofia:

So you want to make a space where people can really enjoy- That's a great dream!

Sofia:

Could you tell me something that you think is important that people know about having a small business- or, I'll put it a different way, could you tell me a value that you think is very important to have when you have a small business making food, an important value or belief.

Elsy:

I think the first thing is to just start, to start, and also to know how to cook, to know how to do your own thing, to know what you will be about or what you will have. That's the first step. After that, it's just- well, I'll come back to the same thing, that if one loves what one does or what one has or knows what they are doing, that the most important thing, doing things with one's everything even if it is something small. And if you are a big business, you have to make things the way you are supposed to, showing and representing something completely and wholly. Because otherwise it won't work, people won't come to buy from you, because you're not making things the way you are supposed to.

End of Interview