

FMLL Rene Valenzuela

Dalia: [00:00:00] Hey, it's Dalia, and I spent my summer vacation catching up with some past Zest guests. I couldn't wait to share the updates with my friends at Florida Matters: Live and Local. Have a listen.

Sky: Welcome back to Florida Matters Live and Local. I'm Sky Lebron in for Matthew Peddie. This interview was recorded last week with Matthew and WUSF's Dalia Colon.

Matthew: Tampa Bay has a thriving culinary scene with chefs and food influencers doing original creative things with food.

And my colleague Dalia Colon has shared many of their stories on The Zest, WUSF's podcast about food and culture. And this summer we're gonna check in with some past guests on The Zest and find out what they're up to now. Rene Valenzuela is the founder and former owner of the popular local chain Taco Bus.

Chef Rene moved to the United States in 1995 from his native Monterrey, Mexico, and in 2020 he talked to The Zest, then host Robin Sussingham, about starting a food truck here.

Rene: I immigrated to United States in 1995. I had few re- Mexican restaurants [00:01:00] in Mexico before I came here, but when I got here, it was too expensive to open a real r- restaurant because here y- you know, you had to have exhaust hoods and, and, um, grease traps, and ADA compliance restrooms and before you know it, it's a lot of money.

Matthew: And then in 2018, disaster struck. Chef Rene got badly burned in a gas explosion at his food truck.

Rene: I almost died. You know, the people tell me, "Oh, that was close." No, that was not close. I knock on the door, I touched the door of death, and I refused to go in. That's how bad it was.

Matthew: We'll flash forward to June of this year and The Zest, Dalia Colon, caught up with Chef Rene at his food trailer on Tampa's bustling Nebraska Avenue, and Dalia joins us now for an update.

Thank you so much for being here.

Dalia: Happy to be here.

Matthew: Okay, so why did Chef Rene sell his owner's share of the Taco Bus?

Dalia: You know, this all happened around the time of the fire, and then we had the pandemic. Life is short, and he had always [00:02:00] wanted to share the cuisine of his native Monterrey, Mexico, and this pushed him over the edge.

He said, "That's it. I'm gonna do it."

Matthew: Mm-hmm. So what are some of the hallmarks of traditional Mexican food? 'Cause that's what he's focused on now, right?

Dalia: Absolutely, and of course, Mexico's a huge country with millions of people. There's not just... It's like saying, "What's American food?" You know? Mm-hmm. But a lot of the things we think of as Mexican are actually Tex-Mex.

So Mexican is soft corn tortillas. It's a variety of meats. It's spices, very spicy. And what we would consider Mexican is actually Tex-Mex. Those are things like ground beef, cumin, chili powder, yellow cheeses, and flour tortillas.

Matthew: Okay, so he's kinda going back to his roots in some way.

Dalia: Exactly.

Matthew: So what is on Rene's, uh, menu these days then?

Dalia: Man, even when I came to interview him, the line kept getting longer and longer because you can't get this food anywhere else. It's things like tacos with ribeye, oyster mushrooms, butternut squash, and even octopus.

Matthew: [00:03:00] Oh, wow.

Dalia: He- yeah. He also teaches cooking classes. He holds community dinners, including an annual vegan dinner.

Matthew: Oh, wow, okay. So he's really kind of broadened out since the, uh, Taco Bus days.

Dalia: Absolutely.

Matthew: Well, you talked in detail about Rene's Mexican kitchen. Let's take a listen to your interview with Chef Rene.

Dalia: Okay, so when we last caught up with you, you- Had pretty much recovered, I suppose- Right. Yeah ... because there was a, a fire-

Rene: Right

Dalia: in your, uh, mobile kitchen.

Rene: Yes.

Dalia: And you were hospitalized for how long?

Rene: Well, it was, uh, six months that I was in the hospital, and then another six months at home that I had to go back to surgeries. You know, every time you feel a little better, then it's time to go for another surgery. So I was out of commission for a full year, and even after that, it was very existential for me.

Because all of the sudden, I realized that there is only so much time that you have to do the work and the craft that you're meant to do, that you want to do, that you [00:04:00] wanna bring out from your soul, from your heart. And something that I always wanted to do, I wanted to have a, a Mexican steakhouse.

Because in the north where we're from, th- there is a, a lot of steakhouses with really nice tacos, with serving really good proteins, high quality, you know, the best that the Mexico has to offer, and Mexico's a huge country. We are the fifth-largest cattle grower in the world, and we, we export all the best ones that we have, uh, a- a- a lot to United States, and Europe, and Japan.

And, and then sometimes we only get the version of the cheap taco, which is okay. It's really tasty and, and, and there is a, there is a space for that, too, because not every day you, you want the same thing. And then you said that-

Dalia: I, I do want tacos

Rene: every day. Yeah, but there, but there are many different things, you know?

True. So there, there are the ones that are cheap and, and greasy and, and fast, and, and then there's the ones that all of the sudden you have a rib eye taco like the ones that we [00:05:00] do. Um, because I said, "You know what? Uh, I, I'm gonna do it."

Dalia: Okay. The first time I went to Mexico, I realized that I thought I loved Mexican food- Right

but what I actually loved was Tex-Mex. Ah. And I do love Mexican food- Yes ... but what I had been eating-

Rene: Right ...

Dalia: was Tex-Mex. So what are some of the differences between- Hmm ... Tex-Mex and real Mexican?

Rene: Well, you know what? You will be surprised because, uh, like I'm telling you, we're from the north, so we're two hours from Laredo, Texas.

And my wife is from Chihuahua, my father is from Sonora, so we're all d- the- in these border towns. Some of the food that you have to share with Texas kind of bleeds into Mexico, and a lot of the food from Mexico also bleeds into Texas, and then so we got a lot of things in common. You know, like the smoke and the grilling, uh, all of that i- is, is a common element.

So having said that, the, the Mexican food is, is, is not one monoblock. So first, right now we talk about [00:06:00] this food based on different ingredients or based also on how cheap you wanna make it, the different regions. But also, you can divide the Mexican food on, on the different epochs. You know, do you wanna try food that's from pre-Columbus, or, or do you wanna eat something from the colonial times?

Something from the Revolution? Something from, uh, the 1950s, or just something from the '90s? That's, you know, that's when we started making tacos, and the food had changed so much. Or the food that is ev- evolving right now? Using sous vide and other techniques, y- you know, to use the new technologies to make and enhance the proteins to make a superb taco.

So there's so many different things just right there, not going into every region of Mexico that has so many different cuisines, right?

Dalia: Right. That's a fair point. That's like asking American food. Is it New York pizza? Is it pot roast from the Midwest? It could be literally anything. Oh my gosh, I just got another whiff of whatever is going on.[00:07:00]

And, and since we sat down- Yes ... probably five carloads of people have pulled up and are now waiting in line for this food. Yes. Oh my gosh. Yes. So what are some of the other menu items you have that we might not expect?

Rene: Okay. So we have this, uh, chile relleno that's i- a little tiny jalapeno that we open, that we deseed it, and then we, uh, we treat it with, uh, a little bit of piloncillo, vinegar, and, and water to take some of the heat out.

A little bit. N- not all of it, but just so that it's not so spicy. And then we fill it up with picadillo, and then we do, um, this batter with, it's called egg batter. And then so it's in chile relleno. Capeado, we call it. It's, um, it's, it's a technique from the 1800s. But it's not like you have to have this huge, big chile relleno, and then you're committed to this big plate.

So it's just one taco, and it comes into a tortilla that has been smoothed with a little bit of beans on the bottom, and a little bit of pico de gallo, and then you put your green salsa. I mean, it's, it's heaven. So you might, you might wanna try that one.

Dalia: Stop it. Man. What did I have the last time I was here?

I'm a [00:08:00] vegetarian- Right. Okay ... so something plant-based, but I can't remember.

Rene: Oh, you're vegetar- You know what? We have this event co- We do it every year. So we got this event coming up, and it's a six-course, uh, vegan event, and, and it's, it's, it's a dinner. And the, the most fun part of it for me is that we're not veganizing our things, you know?

It's based on very traditional recipes from millennium, that they just happen to be vegan because they are, not because we tried. It's just, you know, it's just like, "Oh, did you veganize the chips and salsa?" It's like, "No, they were always vegan," you

Dalia: know? Yeah. People say, "I hate vegan food." Vegan food. "Oh, do you?"

Rene: Yeah.

Dalia: What's an example?

Rene: So, for example, we're gonna do a tostada with pioppini, uh, mushrooms. In, in Mexico we call them clavitos, because they look like little nails. So every time there is a, there's a rainy seasons, and people gather them from the mountains. You know, this is something unique, an experience, and, and something to, to be special.

You know? To, to have something different.

Dalia: I love that. [00:09:00] You mentioned something different. Do you have any advice for people who are thinking of starting a food truck? I mean, you've had Taco Bus. You were the founder and owner of Taco Bus. Yes. And people might think, "I'm not ready to open a restaurant. I'll just- Mm-hmm

I'll just-

Rene: Uh-huh, uh-huh ...

Dalia: start a, a food cart or a mobile kitchen." Yeah,

Rene: yeah.

Dalia: But that's a lot of work.

Rene: Yes.

Dalia: So, so what advice do you have? When did you start this, and then what advice do you have for people? Well,

Rene: you know, in, in Mexico I started doing these little tiny things that where we sell tacos. Uh, they look like hotdog stands but they're taco stands.

And then eventually I graduated to brick-and-mortar. And when I came to United States, I had to go back to the, to the, the food truck, because obviously I didn't have any money. And, and so, and then I came here, and it was so different. In Mexico, if you wanna start a business, all you gotta do is put a grill out, you know, in the front, some tables and chairs, and you're in business.

But if there's one thing that I want you to understand is that a food truck is twice the work than a regular restaurant. [00:10:00] Because you cook your food

somewhere else, or you prep it, and then you put it in truck, so you gotta load your truck. And then you drive, and then you set up everything, and then you start selling.

And when you're done, then it's all, everything in reverse. So now you pack everything. Then you drive back, and then you bring everything down from the truck. And then you gotta clean the truck, but you also gotta clean the place where, that you're commissary where you were doing the f- So it's twice as much as work.

But it's a, it's a, it's a work of love. But hey, this has gotta be a business too. So my advice to anyone who's gonna start a business, you know, start like on the flea market every Saturday- Like a- And see how you like it ...

Dalia: side hustle.

Rene: Yes. So don't, don't just like quit, uh, your, your day job and then put everything on the, on the risk.

Dalia: Yeah. No, that's a very good point because making tacos in your house for four people, it's not easy to scale that up.

Rene: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Dalia: And, and like you said, there's a lot more to consider once you do start to scale it up. Yes. Okay, so last question, what's new? What are you working [00:11:00] on?

Rene: Well, w- we do a lot of weddings, and I think a lot of people don't do that, don't, don't know that.

Dalia: Oh my gosh.

Rene: Yeah, so we've been growing the, the wedding business every year, every year. Of course, it's only Mexican. It's, it's, that's what we do. We got a taco station. We got a ceviche station. It marries perfectly because Mexican food is celebration. Mexican food is hospitality, is abundance and generosity.

So when you combine all those things together, it, you know, it's, you embrace not just the food, but this whole philosophy that's behind it, you know, to, to wanna please your, your, your guest and, and embrace them as family.

Dalia: That's beautiful. Well, thank you. My pleasure. This

Rene: was

Dalia: fun.

Rene: That was fun. Thank you.

Sky: That was WUSF's Dalia Colon, host of The Zest podcast, talking with Chef Rene Valenzuela outside his Tampa restaurant, Rene's Mexican Kitchen. And Dalia will be back with more highlights from Tampa Bay's culinary scene over the summer, so watch out for that. And that's our [00:12:00] show for today.

Dalia: Don't you just love a good where are they now update?

Thanks so much to our friends at Florida Matters: Live and Local, which you can listen to Monday through Thursday from noon to 1:00 PM on WUSF 89.7. You can listen on wusf.org, or you can even watch the show on YouTube. How fun is that? I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron.

The Zest is a production of WUSF. Copyright 2026, part of the NPR network.