DOMINICA RICE-CISNEROS

IN HER OWN WORDS

I sat down with Dominica at her restaurant Cosecha to talk about life, food and what's top of mind for her. Here is what she said.

I'm from SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, BORN and RAISED.

At that time, it was the ERA of RIOTS and REAGANOMICS but it was ALSO a TIME of high-end FOOD, SUSHI and WOLFGANG PUCK.

I was BORN in CHINATOWN and and GREW UP in EAGLE ROCK. It's a VERY DIVERSE neighborhood:

CHINESE, FILIPINO, VIETNAMESE, CHICANO
CALIFORNIA to MEXICO

MY GRANDPARENTS came to CALIFORNIA 100 YEARS AGO.
WE come from NORTHERN MEXICO families, DESERT families.
THEY used LOTS of DRIED CHILES, MEAT, DRIED BEANS and CORN.

IN my 20s I SPENT two YEARS in MEXICO CITY.
THAT CHANGED how I THINK of MEXICAN COOKING.
IT'S NOT about the DRIED STUFF.

IT'S a LOT of fresh HARVEST BEANS, fresh MOREL MUSHROOMS, fresh CHILES and A TON of fresh HERBS.
Mole Verde

In Mexico City, I realized there were herbs you couldn't find in the store. They were traded between grandmas. I was able to reconnect with these herbs.

At Cosecha, we try to reconnect every day with that freshness. And now, back here, we make a mole verde to celebrate these herbs.

It's a love letter to Mexico City.

There are five types of fresh herbs, three types of fresh chiles and a ton of vegetables. There's not one dried ingredient in it.

It's all green, fresh and vibrant.
EVERYONE told ME not to INVEST; THEY said I was CRAZY.

And I WAS like, "NO I'M just going TO go FOR IT" and it's AMAZING. This SPACE USED to EMPLOY like 10 PEOPLE and NOW there are OVER 100 JOBS here.

the FIRST few YEARS at COSECHA were A LOT about FIGURING OUT WHO the COMMUNITY is.

ASKING the QUESTION: DOES the NEIGHBORHOOD even NEED US? ARE we RELEVANT?

In the END, WE just PAID ATTENTION. WE made A MENU OFF of WHAT people WANTED.

the WHOLE part ABOUT LETTING GO is true. 'CAUSE then YOU can FIND THE JOY in it.
Here, at COSECHA, there's NO CONTROL. The whole idea of SWAN'S MARKET, the MERCADO, there's NO CONTROL.

You never know who's going to come in. We treat everyone the same here, whether they bought a cookie or a whole bottle of prosecco.

I'm proud to say that we keep a kind of OAKLAND AESTHETIC. People always ask me, what part of Mexico does your food come from?

And I say, OAKLAND and L.A. 'Cause CALIFORNIA used to be part of MEXICO.

So really, this is YEARS and YEARS of CHICANO COOKING.
IT'S ALWAYS A LEARNING PROCESS. EVERYDAY.

Millenials, I LOVE them. they've CHANGED the WAY WE TALK about FOOD. BUT I fear THAT they're FORGETTING THAT it's all ABOUT the APPRENTICESHIP. LEARNING, LEARNING, LEARNING.

because ONCE you BECOME an EXECUTIVE CHEF IT'S ALL about TEACHING.

I HAVE a TIGHT-KNIT skilled TEAM but STILL, it's like EVERY YEAR I TALK about HOW to FIND a GOOD PERSIMMON or HOW to NOT KILL a POMEGRANATE or LIKE an AVOCADO, how HARD I WORK to GET EVERY one is PRECIOUS. and VERY EXPENSIVE.
ONE thing I'VE LEARNED, is the FOOD INDUSTRY and MOST INDUSTRIES are not WELCOMING to WOMEN, YOUNG PEOPLE or NEW MOMS. It's still PRETTY BRUTAL.

but HERE we TRY to do WHAT we CAN, in our OWN small WAY. WE HIRE a lot OF MOMS and help MAKE it WORK. we're FLEXIBLE and MAKE TIME.
Recently, I've been asking the question: how does a chef retire?

I haven't really seen that happen, and I can feel it now, in my knees. It's 30 years of working on the line as a cook. It takes its toll, like a beat-up athlete.

I'm not looking for the typical route that chefs have taken. Because I don't see success there. I see a lot of suicides, alcoholism, heart attacks.

I'm hoping I can learn something from mentors and chefs in the Bay Area and beyond.

And eventually have something to share with people.
I'd say I'm an aggressive person, but there are still times in my life where I feel intimidated or where I feel like I shouldn't be asking for this. Cause I was raised to not really ask for anything or to believe that I deserve things.

So now, more and more, I try to find my voice, a little bit more every year.

Dominica Rice-Cisneros

By Kaitlin Strange