

Pati Jinich on Food Culture at the Mexican Border

From a career as a political analyst to becoming a James Beard Award winner, Pati Jinich has brought her heritage to millions through a series of cookbooks and her Emmy-nominated PBS program *Pati's Mexican Table*. On today's episode of *Homemade*, host Sabrina Medora welcomes Pati to discuss *La Frontera*, a new PBS docuseries where she educates viewers on the many cultures, legends, and food traditions that exist on the U.S./Mexico border, which go far beyond just Tex-Mex cuisine. She also shares which spices are most important to her cooking, some tips on how to best start cooking rich and unique Mexican food at home, and her adoration for the diverse nature of soup!

SABRINA MEDORA: Hey, food fans! I'm food writer and culinary entrepreneur, Sabrina Medora, and you're listening to *Homemade* by Allrecipes. Each week, we bring you talented home cooks, authors, chefs, and celebrities to discuss the memories and traditions behind their favorite foods along with discussions on what's happening in food culture today.

Over the past few years, we've heard a lot about 'the border' and its political fraughtness. But we've heard little to none about the people and neighborhoods that happen to be on the United States and Mexico borders. The ones that have been going about daily life amidst what we can only assume is sometimes chaos based on the news. Former political analyst and now Emmy-nominated chef Pati Jinich took it upon herself to find out more about the people who live where countries and cultures collide. Here's a clip from her new docuseries, *La Frontera*, which is out now on PBS.

Chef Pati Jinich has been celebrated as one of the most important voices in food. She showcases food as an act of diplomacy. She's the host of three-time James Beard Award-winning PBS television series *Pati's Mexican Table*. She's the resident chef at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, D.C., and her newest cookbook — *Treasures of the Mexican Table* — is coming out on November 23, but you can pre-order it online. We have so much to talk about so let's get right to it with the lovely Pati Jinich!

Pati, it is so good to have you here on *Homemade* today. How are you?

PATI JINICH: It is so good to be here with you today, Sabrina. I love everything homemade, so I inherently love your podcast.

SABRINA: Oh, that makes my day. Yeah, we're going to get into talking about some excellent home cooking and homemade recipes. I can't wait. Your career is such an interesting one. I mean, you've had quite the journey from being a political analyst to teaching people how to cook Mexican food, going back into politics, and then somehow along the way, deciding to become a James Beard award-winning TV chef. I mean, this is fantastic. How do you feel about this whole journey?

PATI: I mean, I wouldn't change a thing now, you know, of where I am. I love everything that I do. I love the content. I love meeting the people. I love delving into substantial themes and just

exploring and learning every day. It's just so incredibly humbling. And then at the end of the day, you get to eat your research — it's really phenomenal. But looking back, nothing makes sense. I mean, my career was a complete zig zagging all along, and I think it will continue to be. You know, you think you're planning something, but life is really taking you somewhere else and you're wanting to do something else.

I've come full circle because I was a political analyst/historian. Then I worked at a Think Tank for a long time and wanted to do academic research. Then I went into cooking and wanted to do nothing but food and the stories behind food. And now with my latest project of *La Frontera*, which is this primetime special docuseries on PBS, I'm really honing in on both the food aspect and not the politics because I am not a political person, but really digging in into the substantial themes of a region and a people and it's kind of food journalistic experience that I'm having and I love it.

SABRINA: It is a beautiful representation of food journalism, because really you are digging into the humanity behind stories and recipes and culture, and it all comes together just as it should. I mean, you cannot separate food from people

PATI: Exactly.

SABRINA: You should not separate food from people.

PATI: Exactly. You can't separate food from people, and you can't separate food from stories. And I think in that sense, food helps us understand ourselves, and food helps us connect and communicate. And many times, when people can't understand each other, it is only by way of food that you can open a little door and say, 'OK, you don't get me, but you like my food, you know? And this you can understand.' And through food, you can explain where it comes from, how it got to be there, and it's also a beautiful way to show how stories and reach each other, you know? And so, in that way, focusing on Mexican food, which is what I've done, done most of my cooking life. And it's a way for Mexicans to understand ourselves and to help other people understand us and show how we can enrich, you know, not one country, but two.

SABRINA: I thought something you just said was really powerful. You said you don't get me, but you love my food. And that is, that is something that is happening a lot nowadays, kind of all over the world. You know, thinking back to our historian days, you can think of the British and India. You can think of Mexicans and the United States and even right now. Tell us a little bit about the work that you're doing with *La Frontera*.

PATI: Absolutely. So in *La Frontera*, what we did was go into the border — we really wanted to do all the borderlands, I wanted to do the entire border from Tijuana to Brownsville, you know, the whole stretch. But because of the pandemic and filming restrictions at the time, we decided that we were going to do two hours and to do justice to the themes that we were trying to grapple with. We were going to do just the Texas-Mexico border. But just that merits, like 100 hours of TV really. And what we did was just go in and by using food just cut a slice of the pie of what life is at the border.

So, without any agenda, without any politics, really, it was just let's come in and we reached out to people and will you invite us to join you in your daily life and in what you do? And here's a microphone. Share who you are, and I want to learn. So that was the approach, we did a lot of the research and interviews, and I read every possible book and watched every possible documentary and movie and show. And it's really not until you get there that you can understand La Frontera. I mean, it is a place that defies categorization, but that is severely and narrowly categorized and labeled. And when you get there, you understand that it's not the U.S., it's not Mexico. In this place where the U.S. and Mexico are rubbing each other 24-7. There's these like new dimension that opens up where there's new possibilities that exist, that cannot exist either in the U.S. or Mexico, but that can only happen at the border. They say the grass is greener on the other side. But I say, what happens when you're right on the fence? When you have this continuous access or at least grasp of two cultures, two cuisines, two languages, two sets of rules of law, and it's very fluid, but that doesn't mean that it's ambiguously undefined. It's very defined. People from La Frontera, have this openness of heart, this generous spirit. They're incredibly hardworking and they rely on each other on both sides, no matter what.

As a Mexican, I used to not understand Tex-Mex. You know? I grew up eating phenomenal Mexican food from all different regions. And when I first moved with my husband to the U.S., we moved to Texas. We were there for two years. I didn't get Tex-Mex. You know, like, what is this? Is this trying to be Mexican? Now I completely understand that Tex-Mex is its own beast. It's its own regional cuisine that has beautifully evolved in different ways and it's absolutely delicious. You know? But you have to realize and recognize that it is its own thing with its own history, its own evolution, and it continues to evolve.

So anyway, people think about the border. It's just Mexico and the U.S. People trying to cross the border, but people don't realize that the Mexico U.S. border has Japanese-Americans, Syrian-Lebanese, Haitians, Cubans, Asians of other places. There's people from all religions, there's Catholic, there's Pentecostal, there's Jews, there's Muslims. The way that people exist in La Frontera is very different from other places. people hold on to who they are very strongly because you're rubbing against the other country all the time. But at the same time, they're breaking the mold because they have the freedom. So, these new things happen all the time at the border anyway it was just fascinating, and I hope that people who watch it will be just as inspired and will realize how misjudged and mislabeled that a part of the world is.

SABRINA: I'm brimming with questions just based on what you said. But it strikes me You had mentioned earlier that you went in without a political angle. You removed politics from the equation, and one of my questions was going to be how is it possible to do that? But just by hearing your description of all of these ethnicities and cultures living together, existing together, and therefore having to work together. I can understand it a little bit.

PATI: You know, I got there and I just wanted to eat, to walk, to talk, to experience the art, the music. I wanted to experience life at the border. And I wasn't there to pass judgment on U.S. policies, Mexico policies. Being a Mexican immigrant woman in the U.S., of course, you have different feelings, you know what people say about Mexicans in the U.S., you know? I have a thing where I really want to shine a light on how Mexicans enrich the world wherever we may

be. I think that's the only thing that I always carry with me. You know, shining a light on how cultures enrich each other.

But, when we were there, it had nothing to do with policies, politics. In part of episode one, we were there, like, looking at the wall and it just looking at the wall, you know? It is what it is and it's asking people, you know, how does this impact your life? Because of course, it impacts life. But we weren't passing judgment on, is this good? We're just hearing people. What do they feel? You know, we'd hear the helicopters in the sky and you see the Border Patrol, and some people would say, you know, 'we don't like it. We feel like we're being observed all the time.' And other people would say, you know, 'it makes me feel really safe. It makes me feel like we're being watched over.' So, the gist of the show was really living life there, eating the food, exploring the art, the culture, the sports, the entrepreneurial spirit everything that people experience on a day-to-day.

SABRINA: So, let's talk about the food. When people hear Tex-Mex, the first kind of assumption is, 'oh, it's Americans trying and usually failing on reproducing good Mexican food,' right? That's just kind of the — that's kind of how we think about it. It's like the fast-food version of Mexican sometimes. And sometimes it's just we're trying with other ingredients. But it sounds like you were really blown away. Tell us some of the dishes that you experienced in La Frontera.

PATI: I was so blown away. We had from all different kinds of burritos, you know, in El Paso, in Ciudad Juarez, and exquisite burritos with phenomenal flour tortillas. And on the U.S. side, we went to La Colonial and had brisket burritos with a queso sauce, like, very American Velveeta cream cheese kind of a mash-up, which was incredible brisket, delicious burrito. And then we cross the border to Ciudad Juarez, and it was the homemade flour tortillas with fresh ranch, unpasteurized cheese, which you couldn't get in the U.S., bumper. And then you get like the poblano rajas with the potatoes and the cream. Or the tongue stew. You realize what an iconic dish it is and how it takes different personalities. You know, just a few miles from each other. And people will cross to get their brisket burrito from the South to the North, and the people in the North will cross to the South to get the poblano rajas and potatoes. And they're so different and so delicious. And at the same time, these burritos are so different from the burritos you get really north of the border, like California, where you get like the gigantic burritos with, like, everything but the sink in them. You know, there is something to be said about the true burrito from the border, which has one or two really exquisite fillings. And they're very thin burritos.

Then we ate at Palenque in the Laredo's, which was — you know, it's fast-casual but absolutely delicious. We had the panchos, which is like the nachos, but with fajita with brisket, with guacamole, with pickled jalapeños. And then we were in the Rio Grande Valley, and we met with chef Larry Delgado, who is a wonderful chef and has restaurants that aren't Mexican or Tex-Mex, but he likes to cook Tex-Mex food for his family. And he loves it, and he will fight you if you say anything bad about it. And he invited us to their friend's ranch. He and his wife's friends — this is a family of Japanese Americans the dad was from a Mexican family. The kinds of Mexican families that the border crossed them like five or six generations ago. And now they're raising Akaushi beef which is Wagyu beef. So you get this Japanese American family raising the most incredible Wagyu beef. Meat like tasted I've in no other place, and they're using

these incredible Wagyu beef for some extraordinary fajitas. And you know, so it was really one incredible story after another. And this Japanese-American family comes from a long line of Japanese immigrants to America, who are migrant farmers and lost everything after Pearl Harbor. And then they moved to Texas, and they moved from being migrant farmers to cattle ranchers. And now they proudly grow Akaushi beef, you know, connecting to their heritage to their roots while enriching these countries. So, they're not Mexican. Like, not everyone at the border is Mexican or American. There's all sorts of people at the border. So, we met with all kinds of people. And it was really a fascinating journey.

SABRINA: You're listening to *Homemade*. When we return, Pati will dive deep on Mexican soups, and how she had to make the tough decision of cutting 70 recipes from her hefty new cookbook. All that and more, after the break.

Thanks for listening to *Homemade*! I'm Sabrina Medora and my guest this week is James Beard award winner and influential Mexican chef, Pati Jinich.

PATI: So, I have here, you know, my upcoming cookbook, which is *Treasures of the Mexican Table*. It's coming out in November, and these are classic Mexican recipes from microregions or regions, recipes that I think will enrich anyone's tables and have stood the test of time in our family heirlooms. Approachable, adaptable, repurposable. You know? And trying to break down the myths of what Mexican food is with this cookbook. But when I was in *La Frontera*, you know, if you think that Mexican people and Mexican food are mislabeled, misjudged — I mean, the people at the border, to an extreme.

SABRINA: Right.

PATI: And they have so much to offer, so much to give. They work so hard. They have such fabulous content and values and I choked up like 20 times in two weeks. I think I cried like five times my oldest son came with us because he's a photographer, and I invited him to help us capture images. You know, he's 22 and he's just like his brothers. They've lived with me through my career changes and the twists and turns and having to fundraise for *Pati's Mexican Table*. And really fight for this *La Frontera* project. And they've seen me struggle. But I don't think he's ever seen me cry so much or be as tense as when we were at the border. When we came back, I even apologized. And he was like, Ma, it's life, it's OK. You don't have to be happy all the time. It's fine. It was intense, you know? I can't describe it. It's like a magnet of emotions, a magnet of activities, a magnet of tension. It's a really fascinating, beautiful, really deeply intense place.

SABRINA: And you mentioned that your actual new book is coming out, and it's called *Treasures of the Mexican Table*, so it is barely out, and it is already being hailed by *Food & Wine* and *Eater* as one of the best cookbooks of the fall. So, congratulations.

PATI: Oh, thank you. It was like four years in the making. I'm a slow writer.

SABRINA: Well, I mean, it is clocking in at over 400 pages, so I can imagine that.

PATI: Yeah, it is like 150 recipes, and I think I love every single recipe in there and with every recipe, you're going to learn a little bit about Mexico, you're going to learn a little bit about the people behind the recipe. And you're going to have a recipe that you can try, but most importantly, that you can make your own and adapt.

SABRINA: And how did you go about choosing these recipes? I mean, it's your third cookbook, you've already done two spectacular ones and now you have 150 more to give the world. How did you choose these?

PATI: OK, I want to tell you something

SABRINA: OK.

PATI: I delivered like 220 recipes. I got so excited with the cookbook.

SABRINA: Wow.

PATI: And I just couldn't choose, and I kept on researching and trying and testing. And I thought the publisher was going to be so happy like 'hey, here you go, 70 more recipes,' you know, more bang for your buck. And they were like, 'nope, you got to cut 70,' you know? And I was like, what? It was so hard to cut the recipes you know; it just makes it for a better book because we did extra editing on it. But I mean, I could do a hundred more books, you know? Like just like these recipes, it's not only that there are so many classic recipes that, even between Mexicans, we don't know.

The people from the Yucatan are not familiar with the food from the North. And you know, I'm from Mexico City. I— it wasn't until I went to film to Sinaloa in Sonora that I learned about the Norteño food in the carne asada and the flour tortillas and the roasted and charred salsas. And I'm a Mexican that dedicates her life to Mexican food, you know? So, it's really incredible how not only do we not know about the richness of our country, but here in the U.S., everybody's so hungry for Mexican food. So many terms of Mexican cuisine are part of the American lingo, where you have Taco Tuesday, you have taco night. People know how to make five or six or seven or eight, you know, Mexican recipes. Maybe they have a tortilla soup under their sleeve or a guacamole? Well, you know, everybody's ready. Everybody wants more. So, here's 150 more recipes, you know, that you can now choose from. And just you wait because more people are going to show you more.

It's just you go back to learn and try all these classic recipes and you realize that there is new classics that just, you know, surfaced. I went to Mexico, and we went to eat tortas ahogadas, you know, which is such a classic. And in the same torta ahogadas stands now, there's a destrozado, which is a new classic where they break a deep-fried corn tortilla quesadilla stuffed with mashed potatoes. They cover it with carnitas. They dress it with a rich, salsa roja, then like a little slaw. And that's the new classic. So, you know, every time I go back to Mexico, there's something new. It's such a thriving cuisine that the classics continue to be treasured and passed on, while new classics just jump to the fore. It's really extraordinary. And that's just the border. And we

haven't even talked about the evolution of Mexican food in the U.S. You know, there's Mexicans and non-Mexicans, who are making extraordinary Mexican food in the U.S.

SABRINA: I feel like I need maybe 10 more podcast episodes just to talk about this book alone.

PATI: I know, I know. I think you're going to really like it because each recipe is going to enrich your life so much. It's you're going to have something that you can repurpose a thousand times. I have a salsa macha in there that you can make, put in your fridge. It holds for months. You can put it on avocado toast, you can put it on yogurt, you can put it on a pound cake, you can tuck it in a taco, and that really exemplifies the Mexican character. I think the book is just very flexible that way, but it's not me. It's the cuisine. Mexican food is that way.

SABRINA: Right. Tell me if you had to give advice to someone who's never cooked Mexican food before, or maybe they just have the one, you know, Taco Tuesday recipe, or now and then they'll do like, smash up an avocado for guacamole. What is some advice on learning to really dig into Mexican food at home?

PATI: I mean, I think a lot of people don't know about the depth, richness, and diversity of Mexican soups. As we're heading into the fall. You know, people know guacamole, know salsa, know tacos. There's, of course, a universe there to explore. But Mexican soups are quite extraordinary, and I have a full chapter there in my book from Awajio mushroom soup, that's like forestry and nurturing and so fall-like to a creamy pinto bean soup with masa dumplings to a cracked corn and tomato and cheese soup that's like a melted queso party. I mean, people don't think about Mexican when they think about soups, and I think we have a universe there to offer. You know, like, there's Taco Tuesday. Maybe there could be sopa Monday. You know? Or sopa Wednesday. So, I think soups are a great place to start. I have dressed up Mexican soup in there, which I think is a great place to start because you can garnish however you want. I give you my suggestions, but soups are easy and not easy to mess up, so I think that's one good way to go in.

SABRINA: That's actually great advice because I'm always looking to make hearty soups because soups are so easy.

PATI: Yeah.

SABRINA: You just put everything in a pot and let it sit, and then all of a sudden your house just smells like magic and every sip nourishes your soul. It's great. I love soups.

PATI: I love soups, too. And the great thing about Mexican soups, is that we love dressing them up, you know? So you're— you can customize, too. You can make that big batch of either the pinto, the tomato, the cracked corn, whatever it is, you bring it to the table, and you bring garnishes. Easy. You know, some diced avocado, some queso, some crema, some lettuce, and people feel empowered because they can customize to their taste. And if you don't want to add any toppings, you don't have to you know? So it's an easy way in. It's a good way to start playing, I think.

SABRINA: What would you say would be some key spices that we need to stock in our pantry if we're going to cook Mexican food?

PATI: That's a great question. And my number one is chipotles in adobo sauce. I cannot live without it. It's fresh, ripe chipotles that are picked when red, not when green. So super ripe. And then they're dried and they bask in the sun. And then they're marinated in a rich adobo sauce with tomatoes and vinegar and spices. And then the end result is savory, sweet, smoky, spicy, and you can eat it as a garnish, or you can use it to make chipotle mayo, tortilla soup. You know so I would say chipotles in adobo is my number one go-to.

SABRINA: That's so funny that you said that because I have cans and cans and cans of it in my pantry and I'm always adding it to dishes.

PATI: Yeah!

SABRINA: Because it just brings that depth. I mean, I made a chili the other day and I thought, OK, I'm just going to put a can of chipotle adobo in there. And then I made a brisket, and I pressure cooked my brisket with chipotles adobo in there. And the flavor it was, like, tangy and slightly vinegary, and I added some Worcestershire sauce in there. And I just let it all, you know, pressure cook for an hour. And that came out stunning. So yes, plus one to having to chipotle adobo in your pantry.

PATI: Yeah, I mean, I love it so much. We go through cans and cans and cans. And of course, you can make it at home. I even have a [recipe on my website](#). It's laborious to make. But once you find a brand that you love? Like we have La Costeña at home and we get cans and cans and cans. And I think we use one a day. My husband, like, eats the chile chipotles, like, by the spoonful. We add it to beans. We add it to soups, like chipotle mashed potatoes to, you know, pasta seca to fideo. it's like the Mexicans kind of sriracha kind of a thing.

SABRINA: But it's not spicy.

PATI: No, it's not spicy.

SABRINA: Yeah.

PATI: And it has so much depth. And, of course, I love it more than sriracha but she's also Mexican, but I think that's how you can compare it to something. You know? It's a condiment that goes with everything, but it can be easily incorporated more than other condiments into, as you're saying, brisket and stews and soups and, you know, crab cakes and shrimp stews and all sorts of things.

SABRINA: Yeah, yeah. It's really beautiful and it's not at all spicy. The chipotle chiles themselves almost have this, like, tangy sweetness to them sometimes. Yeah, it's great. Highly recommended if you don't have any yet. OK? Other spices, other key spices?

PATI: So dried chiles, I always have anchos, which are like, slightly bittersweet, chocolaty. I have guajillos which are just crowd-pleasing, happy chiles. Chile de arbol, which are rustic, smoky, more spicy. If you can get your hand on some chiltepin chiles? Oh my god, they have so much flavor and they're more spicy. So dry chiles are essential and they will last forever and you can use them for so many things. Of course, I always have black beans. And rice. My kids love white rice. Jasmine Rice, I'm going, lately, much more for brown rice. And then in my refrigerator, you know, there's always fresh jalapeños and serranos.

And I always have a bowl in my kitchen with tomatoes that are continuing to ripen, and avocados that are continuing to ripen. I always have white onion. So tomatoes, white onion, fresh chiles, always. The same as avocados. And as far as fruits? We're big fans of bananas here. I would say your essential pantry, you know, for Mexican cooking. I mean, I think it has to include to chipotles in adobo, dried chiles, one kind of a bean, or another. Some rice, the tomato, chili, onion, avocado — corn tortillas, of course. Some melty cheese, and I think, you know, that's one way to get started.

SABRINA: That's a great way to get started. And you've actually just named a good section of my pantry.

PATI: Good.

SABRINA: So I'm ready. I'm ready for your cookbook.

PATI: Good.

SABRINA: Well, thank you so much for joining us today, Pati. There's so much more we could talk about, but we look forward to watching your shows *La Frontera* and *Pati's Mexican Table* and digging into your cookbooks, especially this new cookbook, and I will be on the lookout for the next 70 recipes and the next and the next.

PATI: Thank you so much. It's been so lovely to connect.

SABRINA: Visit PatiJinich.com to keep up with everything she's working on, or just search her name on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to give her a follow. Pati's latest book *Treasures of the Mexican Table: Classic Recipes, Local Secrets* comes out November 23 so be sure to pre-order it now. You can find *La Frontera*, the incredible docuseries we discussed at length today, on your local PBS station or by searching for Pati on PBS.org.

Next week on *Homemade*, we're getting into the holiday spirit with all the guests from season two. Tune in to hear their favorite holiday tips, tricks, and favorite treats right here on *Homemade*.

DORIAN HUNTER: I always tell people when they take my baking classes, I always say, look, at the end of this, I know that everybody here is not a professional. Some of you have never baked a cake. But the object is for you to be able to eat whatever it is you make. And if you can eat it, it's OK if it doesn't look like mine or it doesn't quite, you know, fit that picture-perfect

idea. But it's yours. You did it and you can be proud of it. Do not wait until Thanksgiving, Christmas, those special holidays to try something new, do it several times. So then by the time you get to that holiday, you have it perfected.

SABRINA: It's going to be a fun one so be sure to follow Homemade on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen.

This podcast was produced by AllRecipes with Digital Content Director Jason Burnett. Thanks to our production team of Rachael King, Matt Sav, Danielle Roth, Jim Hanke, Maya Kroth, and Andy Bosnak at Pod People.

This is Homemade, I'm Sabrina Medora, and remember: Cook with love, eat with joy.