

Arroz con Leche

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One cannot say they've tasted velvet until they've had a spoonful of my abuela's arroz con leche. Having been a traditional Spanish recipe passed down in our families for generations before me, I was obviously intimidated when she called me into her "forbidden kitchen" which none of us kids were supposed to step foot in without permission. Terrified of failure but eager to learn, I grabbed la leche and began slowly mixing it into the already cooked rice the way I had seen her do it so many times before. Milk in hand and anxious to please her, I only released air when I poured, the rest of the time I held it in as I could feel hawk her eyes on me, watching my every move. But then again, one does not want to disappoint those who are older than themselves—especially not in Spain.

Every summer I'd sit on the marbled floors licking a lemon popsicle watching her intertwine the cinnamon milk rice mixture that perfumated the lemon-tiled walls leaving the whole kitchen smelling like you were swimming in that very same pot for two weeks—at least.

Most grandmothers clean the house, coat it in bleach, put out the special bedsheets, and fluff all of the couch pillows but my abuela drowns the entire flat with milk and cinnamon clouds. She doesn't wear perfume, she wears the pride of a chef. Whenever I would come, arroz con leche would arrive, and that's when summer would really start.

Bike riding down the cobbled streets of Granada with my closest friends, los vecinos, we would spend our time exploring up and down the city. They were small in width but held more meaning to me than the giant plazas in Madrid ever would. The small cafes would always call out my name (because in that town everyone knows who everybody is), offering me different snacks, meriendas if you will, but my abuela taught me that nothing fills a hungry belly than a peach colored bowl filled with milky rice treasure.

My abuela always knew how to handle situations. She always had the right way of saying things and most of the time, her cooking was her vocal chords. Her arroz con leche was passed down from many generations in our abundant family tree, although she always claimed hers was the best: "Cuanto más experiencia tengas, mejor te saldrá" (the more experience you have, the better it'll turn out). Like I said: my abuela always knew the right thing to say.

So then, what was the secret part of the recipe she shared with me on that scorching summer day? Rice is one of the oldest and hardest things to cook, but humans have been eating it for years. The secret is patience, she told me as her hands carefully washed the rice over the shiny white sink. I never understood what that truly meant until I had to teach one of my friends how to make the dish.