



Still from [Cocina al minuto](#) (Unión Radio Televisión, 1948).

“We Have No Recipes For the Foods of the Future”

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“Good evening, television friends. With you again, as always, *Cooking By the Minute* with quick and easy recipes.” That isn’t my greeting and it isn’t from this talk. It’s from the opening of a long-running show on Cuban television. Nitza Villapol spoke those words. Having said them, I can now wish you a good evening, and thank you for being here. And thanks, once again, to the King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center for giving me the opportunity to talk to you.

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In 1997, the publication of a book allowed me to travel for the first time from Havana to Miami. My book was about Cuban gastronomy, but its examples went beyond the national scene to include societies experiencing shortages and food rationing, countries at war or in its aftermath. It didn't trade exclusively in the nation's secrets, because in Cuba, under the revolutionary regime, we had reached the same state of preparedness as those during the Siege of Paris in the Franco-Prussian War or in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. Scarcity in Cuba had its parallels in examples given by Virginia Woolf in her diaries during the Blitz or in notes made by the Italian poet Eugenio Montale about a store window in London during post-war rationing.

Meaning to Eat (Las comidas profundas) was a slender book about eating in the Cuban imagination, about the imagination placed in dire straits when ingredients are missing. It wasn't a recipe book (although there are instructions on how to prepare "Mop Steak"); instead it told tales of foraging, of clandestine deals, about the substitutions Cubans make in order to eat—tales about how they replace impossible-to-find ingredients with others, about how things are made by close approximation.

Published by the artist Ramón Alejandro and accompanied by his illustrations, its pages contain a nostalgia and a craving for lost dishes—that's the first thing noticed by friends and acquaintances I met along the way. I was showered with invitations to Miami restaurants and diners, not only because of the book's subject, but also because I had arrived from Cuba, and people thought it was necessary to satisfy my hunger by any means.

And so we set out, my old and new friends and I, on anthropological excursions that included even *malanga* fritters or *anón* shakes. At lunch one day I found myself on a rustic bench in the shade of some trees, near a house that looked like a shack but was called "El Palacio de los Jugos" ("The Juice Palace"). That palace stood next to a highway, and in between the trees you could make out the domes of a Russian Orthodox Church. That palace, with all those intersecting themes, seemed transported from a dream or from a paragraph of a

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Severo Sarduy novel. So many lines of Cuban history crossed there: the huts of the first settlers, the idea of a US god—the highway—and that of another god, Slavic, to whom those onion-shaped domes appealed.

All those intersections had created one densely concentrated point where you could find all or almost all the dishes we had given up as lost. There they were, a hundred miles or so from the country: the dishes Cubans on the island dreamed of. Exile was, among other things, a gastronomic preserve: the land of rescued ingredients, of recipes that will never be forgotten.

In Miami, among Cubans, any visitor would have been treated to the same hospitality, even more so if he or she had authored a book devoted to the national cuisine. And since our table talk revolved around dishes and even went into the finer points of their preparation, the name of Nitza Villapol, who had cooked in front of TV cameras before and after 1959, in times of abundance and of scarcity, was quick to surface. And in many homes I had pointed out to me, between the spice jars or on top of the fridge, a treasured copy of *Cocina al minuto* (Cooking by the Minute).



With those copies of Nitza Villapol's cookbook, you could establish when each one of those friends and acquaintances had gone into exile. It's not that they carried the book like Aeneas carried Anchises and the Penates on fleeing from Troy, but that now at a distance from Troy, they endeavored to find a copy that would be exactly the same as the one that had guided them. You see, for more than four decades Nitza had published her recipes under that same title, and while some cooks used the first edition of the book, which was meticulous in its specificities, others used the less demanding later editions.

Every Cuban taking a turn in the kitchen had his or her own Nitza Villapol. Those copies were, for the most part, pirated editions or simple photocopies. Just as we made substitutions to eat inside the country, recipes were photocopied in exile. Cuban cooking was saved, thanks to

substitution and photocopies.

Nitza Carmen María Villapol Andiarena owed her first name to a river in the Ural Mountains, a tributary of the Tura and navigable for its entire length: the Nitsa. Her father, Francisco Villapol, a communist and admirer of the 1917 Revolution, believed that the spelling of that name was faithful to the Russian language. Despite the fact that, as it was written, with the “s” replaced by a “z,” it doesn’t exist in Russian. In Hebrew, it means flower bud. In Greek, it’s a variant of Helen.

The paternal branch of the family had emigrated to Cienfuegos from the town of Villapol, in the Galician province of Lugo. The surname of Nitza’s mother, Juana María Andiarena, originated in Navarra or Guipúzcoa. Nitza Villapol Andiarena was born in New York on 20 November 1923. Her mother was educated by Dominican nuns in Texas. Her father had left Cuba for political reasons, some said to escape the notice of Gerardo Machado, the Interior Minister under President José Miguel Gómez. Nonetheless, two of her brothers were close advisers to President Machado: they were his personal secretary and the palace majordomo, respectively. (The archives of Gerardo Machado y Morales contain several letters dated after 1933 between the ex-dictator and her brothers, and also between the two brothers, Manuel and Fernando Villapol.)

Juana María Andiarena and Francisco Villapol met each other here, in New York. Nitza was baptized Catholic in the Church of the Annunciation at the corner of Convent Avenue and 131st Street. On her baptismal certificate, Francisco appears as Frank. Juana María is Jane, a name used even by her Cuban friends. Nitza’s oldest memories were of Washington Heights, of 137th Street. Her first gastronomical memory was of US-brand ice cream and candies.

The Villapol Andiarena family returned to Cuba in July 1933, only a few weeks before the end of the Machado dictatorship. They sailed on the Orizaba. A year earlier, the poet Hart Crane had jumped from that same ship and disappeared into the waters of the Gulf. Nitza was nine years old when she arrived in Havana. Her father wept when the Orizaba entered the bay.

Nitza Villapol’s résumé differs depending on the sources one consults, but they don’t contradict each other and all might be true. According to some accounts, she graduated from the Escuela del Hogar in 1940 and received a doctorate in Education in Havana in 1948. Other sources affirm that she studied Diet and Nutrition at the University of London at the start of that decade, presumably not during the war. In any case, whatever the date, British food shortages may have taught her the art of preparing menus with only a few ingredients. (Similarly, a delicious writer on culinary themes, M. F. K. Fisher, called one of

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her books, “*How To Cook a Wolf.*”) And it’s almost certain that in 1955 Nitza took courses at Harvard and M.I.T.

The habit of collecting recipes, of copying kitchen secrets by hand, and of clipping newspaper and magazine recipes must have led her, sooner or later, to create her own cookbook. For forty-four years she had a TV show in which she taught cooking. The show changed networks and frequency (for a long time it was broadcast daily, then three times a week and finally only on Sundays), but its name—which was also the title of her most widely-circulated book, with over forty editions, *Cooking By the Minute*—never changed.

That title has its origin in a disease—poliomyelitis—and in a group of Cubans in New York, among them the writer Pablo de la Torriente Brau. Nitza contracted polio at age twenty-two. The effects of the disease on her left leg led the doctors to prescribe the purchase of a car. And that medical order coincided with a call for a new cooking show by Gaspar Pumarejo, the owner of Unión Radio Televisión, who inaugurated Cuban TV in 1950 and introduced color TV in 1958.

Pumarejo was known for the bonds he created between television and food. He used to hand out cold cuts to studio audiences, and as a result was popularly known as “The Sausage Man.” Nitza, who worked as a teacher and had just started her summer vacation, decided to audition at Unión Radio Television, figuring that it would be a summer job for the sake of buying a car.

On 3 July 1951, nine months after the first TV broadcast in the country, Unión Radio Televisión broadcast the initial episode of *Cooking By the Minute*. Nitza’s mother suggested the title, which came from their New York days and what Cuban friends used to say on their visits: “Janet cooks by the minute.” Pablo de la Torriente Brau, the best known of the group, may have been the source. There’s a letter from him to Nitza’s father in which he speaks of the Villapol Andiarena hospitality. “Keep ‘our room’ in good shape. If we’re in luck, we can go there to sleep, read, and write. And even to eat Janet’s delicious and lightning-fast meals.”

Lightning-fast meals: cooked by the minute. What was intended as a summer job stretched out to decades. The daughter of Jane or Janet or Juana María Andiarena cooked dishes before the cameras for forty-four years. Those who have written about her treat her trajectory with a competitive zeal, voicing their disappointment that the show’s longevity hasn’t been entered into the Guinness Book of World Records. The journalist Ciro Bianchi Ross has calculated that, in its day, only NBC’s “Meet the Press” surpassed *Cooking By the Minute*. And according to Bianchi Ross, no one comes close to Nitza in terms of her longevity as series host. Her nearest rival, the journalist Lawrence E. Spivak, lasted only twenty-seven years, compared to her more than forty.

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Cooking shows proliferated on other TV channels. There was no shortage of cookbook authors. I've read some of these cookbooks, and haven't been able to locate others, but I can't help but mention a few of their sonorous names: Ana Dolores Gómez, Nena Cuenco de Prieto, Carmencita San Miguel, María Radelat de Fontanills, María Antonieta de los Reyes Gavilán and María Teresa Cotta de Cal, who wrote a cookbook for pressure cookers. None of them, however, has enjoyed a destiny as enduring as Nitza Villapol's. And a destiny like hers can be explained by the political decision she made.

Because, unlike her competitors, when the entire television industry was taken over by the revolutionary regime, and the owner and managers of the channel where she worked left the country, she stayed put. The companies that advertised their products on her program and in the pages of her cookbooks were eventually expropriated, and she had to come to terms with a new and exclusive sponsor: the state. And when ingredients started to go missing, she learned how to adjust to scarcity.

"Things started to disappear," she recalled in *Satisfied by Pure Magic* (Con pura magia satisfechos). This documentary, directed by Constante Diego, Adriano Moreno, Iván Arcocha, and others, was made in 1983. Before the decade was over, Nitza Villapol would learn not to speak of shortages in the past tense and would once again experience disappearances. "Things started to disappear": those could be the opening words of a horror story, a ghost story. "Some things disappeared immediately," she said, "and others little by little. The first thing, the first important thing, to disappear was lard, fat."

Staying in Cuba made her unique. Her competitors vanished: each one of those stories should be told. "I wouldn't trade the privilege of having worked these last twenty-two years for anything in the world," she admitted in 1983. As a writer, director, scriptwriter, and TV host, she found herself in a stripped down, frugal, unornamented kitchen. She attempted to put together, with the most basic of elements, the tastiest grub.

Three-quarters of Nitza Villapol's professional career was spent in a wasteland. She was austere, but also imaginative. She advocated a diet of substitutions, was given to metaphors, and practiced an art made of shortcuts and tricks. The new times made her change her working methods. "I simply inverted the terms," she confessed. "Instead of asking myself which ingredients were missing from this or that recipe, I began to ask myself which recipes I could make with the products that were available."

She created a cuisine that many chefs recommend today: a seasonal menu. Though in her case, with the caveat that only one, endless season existed, not summer or spring, or fall or winter, but the season of crisis.

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Besides the centralized state economy, she had to put up with Cuban prejudices regarding food. Which were plentiful, as many foreign visitors have acknowledged and as one can read, for example, in a book by Ernesto Cardenal written after his 1970 visit to Cuba. The Nicaraguan poet and priest noticed all the fruit that was being wasted because it wasn't considered fit for humans. Even as the country was going through food crises, much of what was eaten in neighboring lands wasn't considered edible by Cubans.

Cooking By the Minute showed TV viewers what other Latin American cuisines do with a plantain peel: a kind of vegetarian *ropa vieja* or a fake crispy beef. She introduced novelties of aquaculture, such as tilapia. She resorted to making *sofrito* with water instead of fat, to *picadillo* with cornmeal, not meat, to fried eggs in water or milk or tomato. She insisted on making an omelette with yogurt because there was nothing else to add to the beaten eggs. But it isn't true that Nitza Villapol showed how to make "Mop Steak," and the pizza recipe with melted condoms instead of cheese isn't hers, either. The peculiarities of her cooking, if she had them, didn't include what was indigestible.

Rumors were that she was on the commission that established the number of servings in ration books. The accusation—and it's only an accusation—has a basis in fact: as a nutritionist, Nitza might well have been consulted. She would have considered rationing a fair solution: food shortages wouldn't exacerbate social inequalities, and by making a common effort, the prosperity promised by the classic texts of Marxism would be achieved.

For most of her professional life, she was suspected of strengthening the revolutionary regime and of justifying it while preparing her dishes. A conformist (as is every cook who goes by the seasons), she was said to be complicit with food shortages. On this last point, however, she handled herself more responsibly than political leaders.

It's true that she shared the optimism of official propaganda, but her intention was not to deceive. Anyone who wanted an exact idea of the country's economy in those years would have benefitted more by paying close attention to *Cooking By the Minute* than by watching TV news shows and newsreels. While the latter showed triumphant harvests that only doubtfully reached the markets, Nitza wouldn't put anything on the burners that her assistant Margot Bacallao hadn't seen being unloaded from distribution trucks.

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Juana Margarita Bacallao Villaverde (no relation to the extravagant musical star Juana Bacallao), known more familiarly as Margot Bacallao, was an assistant on *Cooking By the Minute* for forty-one years, three months, and five days. She had almost no voice before the cameras, and was only visible when Nitza asked for a cooking tool or a plate. She enjoyed a Frenchified treatment, of a certain refinement: Margot for Juana Margarita. All the work done off camera was hers: setting everything up, preparing a parallel dish for the benefit of the final credits, cleaning the pots and pans.

Nitza would face the camera, she would address the TV audience, and off camera Margot toiled away. She was the barely perceptible Martha in the background of an Old Masters painting, while in the foreground Mary listened to Christ. But popular opinion rewarded her, giving her credit for inventiveness, and turning Nitza into no less than a usurper. In that version of the legend, Nitza Villapol was in front of the cameras because she had a degree and was well-spoken, but the one who really knew her way around the kitchen was Margot.

They weren't a musical duo harmonizing their voices, they weren't a comedy team in which the gracefulness of one compensated for the clumsiness of the other, they weren't even a pair of news anchors taking turns: they were Nitza and Margot, the oddest couple on Cuban television. Odd because in the midst of the egalitarianism imposed by the new regime, the roles of the white woman employer and the black domestic employee endured. The silent Margot was like one of those US-made kitchen appliances that had premiered with the program and had remained in front of the cameras for decades, even when stores carried only Soviet stoves and pressure cookers made in Santa Clara.

Just like Nitza, she had landed on TV because of medical circumstances. She had lost a daughter at the end of the 1940s, and to fight off depression, her doctor recommended that she go to work and spoke on her behalf to Gaspar Pumarejo. Margot first worked as Dulce María Mestre's kitchen assistant on the TV series *Telehogar* ("TV Home") and was later sent to *Cooking By the Minute*, when Nitza debuted the program.

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In 2009, at age 88, she was interviewed by *Juventud Rebelde*. Nitza had died eleven years earlier. If she had still been alive, no one would have interviewed her assistant. Margot's statements confirmed popular suspicions. "Nitza didn't like to cook," she confessed, "the one doing the cooking was me." And because I already mentioned paintings by the Old Masters, I can now say, after a more rigorous scrutiny, that the work we once attributed to Nitza Villapol was actually from the workshop of Nitza Villapol.

According to Margot, Nitza would phone her and ask what they were going to cook, what was at the markets. Margot would prepare the dish and then, half an hour before the program was broadcast, the two of them would meet and talk. Nitza tasted the food and put the final touches on it, adjusting some ingredients. An expert well-versed in diet and nutrition, she would justify the dish with a lecture. Her reasons would roll over that dish much like the show's closing credits.

In that 2009 interview Margot Bacallao pointed out that on certain occasions, when Nitza was traveling, she would host the show. That must be true, but despite my efforts, I haven't found anyone who remembers when that occurred.

A Nitza Villapol who was certain that the worst moments had passed spoke in 1983 of shortages in general and used the past tense. Nonetheless, six years later, poverty would return and any optimism was unsustainable, except for that of the official ideology. For it was the same imagination that had created the food ration book and the swath of coffee plantations around Havana and the statue of the record-breaking, solitary dairy cow—I'm speaking of *Ubre Blanca*, "White Udder," whose prodigious milk production earned her accolades—that decreed the arrival of the Special Period in Times of Peace. Everything or just about everything in that phrase was false. There was no "peace," but rather a sharper repression. There was nothing "special" or unique about the increase in general poverty. More accurately, the increase in poverty was due to the politics of the state, given the injunctions against private initiative and the inefficiencies of the centralized economy. It had nothing to do with a "period," nor could it be called "times"; it was, instead, the eternity to which every dictatorship aspires. The only believable thing about the new calendar were the prepositions: "in," "of."

"In," "of," language pared down to what was credible. Language from a work by Samuel Beckett.

Everything or just about everything disappeared. At the end of the 1980s or at the beginning of the 1990s, an anonymous Cuban poet wrote a sonnet called *Ode to the Dietary*

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Plan. Some now speculate that the official poet Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera was its possible author. He denied it, thus passing up the chance to salvage part of his mediocre work.

The Dietary Plan was one more attempt to solve the problem of food by centralized planning. Implemented in the mid-1980s, it reached its peak in September 1990. It sought to achieve national autonomy in food production and could be summarized by three main points: the expansion of farmlands; the mechanization of agriculture; and the mobilization of tens of thousands of the urban workers to labor on farms.

By then, indigenous fruits and vegetables that a few years earlier could be found in private farmers markets (*mercados libres*) had disappeared. The official discourse, which already had the magnificent excuse of the US blockade or embargo, could now avail itself of another explanation for any disaster that occurred: the disappearance of Soviet patronage. The anonymous sonneteer placed the blame for the disappearance of fruits and vegetables on that same cause, and implicated several countries within the Soviet orbit.

Here's the sonnet:

The yucca, from Lithuania,
the mango, sweet fruit of Cracow,
the ñame, native to Warsaw,
and coffee, planted in Germany.

The yellow malanga of Romania,
the Moldovan boniato and its sweetness,
from Siberia, mamey, with its texture,
and the green plantain of Ukraine.

It's all missing, and we're not to blame.
In order to achieve the Dietary Plan
a rough, intense battle has been waged,

and we now have the first proof
that the necessary effort is being made:
there is food on TV, and in the papers.

Whether or not it's a work by Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera, the sonnet is doubly absurd. The official absurdity of boasting of goods that would never reach anyone, compounded by the absurdity of transplanting the tropical cornucopia—yucca, mango, ñame, malanga, boniato, plantains—to lands such as Siberia or Warsaw. The satire exposed the absurdity of the official excuse: if the lack of plantains or sweet potatoes was due to recent political changes in Moscow, why not declare that plantains and sweet potatoes were native to those faraway

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lands?

The Dietary Plan, one more variant of the economic failure of the Cuban revolutionary regime, was discontinued in 1993. That same year the managers of state TV decided to cancel *Cooking By the Minute*. Margot had already retired. The cancellation must have been a huge blow to Nitza. A short time later the managerial staff changed (or the same managers changed their mind) and they asked her to return. But she was no longer in condition to go before the cameras.

Few people attended her burial in 1998.

It's interesting to compare the different editions of the book *Cooking by the Minute*. To compare, for example, a pre-revolutionary edition to one published after 1959. What one immediately notices is that the new regime's economy simplifies or makes impossible previous techniques. From one edition to another, the specificities, the brands, and the sponsors disappear. The eggs called for in the recipes are no longer "La Dichosa," the rice is no longer "Gallo," cooking oil will no longer be from "El Cocinero." A few years after 1959 there is no more than one producer and one brand: the state. Eggs, rice, and cooking oil attain the status of an archetype. And, given their unavailability, the quality of a Platonic archetype.

Judging from the language used, in this new era no product, it seemed, could be obtained by buying and selling. It was given through a ration book. It was given: it wasn't something for sale, but rather a benevolent donation. *Viene a la bodega*, it's coming to the store, as if the item traveled on its own. The new economy managed to elevate food to the realm of the miraculous. A liter of cooking oil became something like a fair-haired god descending to earth. The country seemed to get its provisions at a time when there was no cash economy. It was by following the socialist model that the brigades would create food: by working without compensation—volunteering—that's how socialism would be built.

After 1959, many ingredients of those first editions of *Cooking By the Minute* seemed taken from a dead, indecipherable language. Nitza must have freed herself from them as if they were extraneous details, the nonsense of culinary erudition. She took them out, so that the new editions could be prepared. And she added an ingredient that hadn't appeared before: political ideology. The space for ads was now taken up by state propaganda. And she included as an epigraph this phrase by Friedrich Engels: "the ghostly traditions, which haunt the minds of men."

It's an oblique Engels, far from canonical, an almost Brothers Grimm Friedrich Engels, who

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speaks of domestic spirits. But the important thing (as everyone knew) was to evoke, for whatever reason, a heavy-duty authority. Engels's phrase was like the imprimatur of Kim Il Sung on the book's jacket cover. Whoever went into that kitchen would notice the name inscribed on the entrance. To which one would have to add the political declarations contained in the cookbook's prologue.

The pre-revolutionary editions of *Cooking By the Minute* open with pages of commercial ads. There are drawings by Raúl Martínez, who would later translate the revolutionary iconography into pop art, cultivating a *sui generis* pop in which serial portraits of Fidel Castro or Ernesto Guevara loom large. In these pre-1959 editions, the introduction overflows with advice on putting a meal together and offers sample menus for two weeks.

The 1980 edition keeps that introduction, though it's preceded by a longer, historical one, and the sample menus are removed. Evidently, by the start of the third decade of the revolutionary era, it becomes risky to offer economic forecasts for even a few weeks. And a list of menus would make poverty and the reigning monotony apparent. Having thrown out the sample menus and ads, it would also get rid of Raúl Martínez's drawings between the recipes. Cooking and eating had become a serious activity, a severe one.

Cookbooks make an attempt, no matter when they're published, to seduce the senses. They promise delicacies, whet the appetite, push one toward consumption. If a euphemism calls erotic literature "one-handed books," cookbooks could be called "books with multiple doors." Because paging through them prompts you to open cabinets, cupboards, pantries, refrigerators, freezers, ovens, and microwaves.

From the very start, Nitza Villapol showed little interest in what gave pleasure. "Simple and fast," she would say about her recipes when each show began. Not "appetizing," not "delicious." Not one adjective appealed to the appetite. The formulas of *Cooking By the Minute* valued speed and practicality. As if her initial motive, the need to buy a car, imposed those conditions. As if her annoyance at having to cook made her go faster and leave as soon as she could.

Even the pre-revolutionary editions of her cookbook were not meant to promote a life of pleasure, but rather a life of proper nutrition. Nitza left behind hardly any written evidence of her enthusiasm for food. If there was any joy, it came from having balanced vitamins rather than from the food's texture or flavor. She was a severe teacher, and showed hardly any zest. In her introductions and recipes one only finds simple, functional prose: Nitza Villapol is no M. F. K. Fisher.

Based on the foregoing, one could surmise that she fell into political sermonizing with no great difficulty. In the 1980 edition, she adds historical reasons to the nutritional ones. A new introduction spans the national history of food. It begins by affirming that

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the country's first inhabitants had attained an elevated food culture, a culture that the Spanish conquerors were unable to appreciate. *Cooking By the Minute* was turning, as it were, anti-colonialist. While blaming the Spanish Empire, the author invented for Cuba the refinements of the Aztec or Inca empires. So that the enormous arrogance of the conquerors could be seen, she ascribed to Siboneys and Taínos a culture they never possessed.

Cooking By the Minute became anti-imperialist as it described the evils of trading with the United States. The “Yankee” pork industry (that’s what Nitza Villapol called it) kept the meat and byproducts for the US market, and sent the lard to Cuba. “Those people,” Nitza said about the US, “who knew pork was a good source of protein and vitamin B1, sold to Cubans, an almost illiterate people, and for that reason unaware of nutritional issues—and its leaders-of-the-moment could have cared less about public health—most of the lard it didn’t consume. So, without realizing it, Cubans helped their exploiters consume pork and its byproducts such as hot dogs, ham, cold cuts, et cetera.”

In this rendition of history, Cubans, like house slaves, ate the leftovers, and the US economy invaded the country with pig fat, as if it were Agent Orange. Nitza Villapol blamed the US blockade (i.e. embargo) for every shortage that existed in Cuba.

Cooking By the Minute became anti-imperialist, though it knew how to distinguish between empires. It condemned the Spaniard and the US American, but sang the praises of wheat and of Soviet friendship. “A symbol of food since man began cultivating cereals, for us it is also part of the eternal debt of gratitude to the people of the Soviet Union and to other countries in the socialist community that in the most difficult moments stretched out a helping hand.”

Everyone who’s used a cookbook knows that, for the most part, they’re organized like a menu, starting with appetizers and entrées and ending with desserts and liqueurs. It’s the same as a restaurant menu, though more varied. *Cooking By the Minute*, which in its first few editions could be read like a menu, would have a very different order later on. It would begin, not with appetizers, but with recipes for rice, the basic dish of Cuban cuisine, and would end, not with desserts, but with different recipes for *ajjaco*. It’s a very peculiar dinner, at which a stew comes immediately after a sweet.

These transformations are explained by that new ingredient in Nitza Villapol’s cooking—ideology. Friedrich Engels, praise for the Soviets, Third-World discourse, and the national teleology. *Ajjaco*, a centerpiece in the national discourse, comes from a 1939 lecture by Fernando Ortiz entitled “The Human Factors of *Cubanidad*.” In it, Ortiz maintained that Cuba was, as a nation, an *ajjaco*:

The image of the *ajjaco criollo* best symbolizes for us how the Cuban people were formed. Let’s continue with that metaphor. Before anything else, you need an open pot. That’s Cuba, the island, with the pot placed over a tropical flame. ... A unique pot, the

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one from our land, just like our *ajiaco*, and it must be made of clay and be very open. Next, a high flame, and then a low, slow flame, to divide the cooking in two. ... And into it go substances of the most diverse kinds and origins. The Indians gave us corn, potatoes, malanga, boniato, yucca, the chili that seasons it, and white cassava bread. ... The Castilians cast aside those indigenous meats and imposed their own. They brought, along with squash and turnips, the fresh meat of the cow, beef jerky, smoked meats, and ham. Alongside the whites from Europe came the blacks from Africa, who brought bananas, plantains, yams, and their cooking techniques. And then, the Asians, with their mysterious spices from the Orient. ... From it all our *ajiaco* has been made.... A *mestizaje* of cuisines, *mestizaje* of races, *mestizaje* of cultures. A thick stew of civilization bubbling on the fire.

After making this observation, Nitza Villapol places the birth of Cuban cuisine at the moment that traditional Spanish stew lost the garbanzo bean and became *ajiaco*. Fernando Ortiz proposes a metaphor, and Nitza dates it historically. According to her, there has been a Cuban cuisine ever since *ajiaco* came into existence, when Spanish stew gave up the garbanzo. *Ajiaco*, on the fire, is the Cuban cry of independence at La Demajagua.

Cooking By the Minute gives a place of pride to *ajiaco* because it's a cookbook interested in justifying nationalism, not in planning simple dinners. In its post-1959 incarnations, Nitza Villapol's book attempts a teleology not much different from that of *Cien años de lucha*, (*One Hundred Years of Struggle*), the speech Fidel Castro gave on 10 October 1968. A teleology not much different from that of *Ese sol del mundo moral* (*That Sun of a Moral World*), the book in which Cintio Vitier would historicize the ethics of a nation.

Ajiaco is at the center of the three stories that the screenwriter and director Arturo Infante gathers in his short film *Gozar, comer, partir* (Enjoy, Eat, Leave), filmed in Havana in 2006. Three women begin to eat the *ajiaco* one of them has made. The woman who cooked it and her friend taste the first spoonfuls and exchange gastronomical news. The cook's elderly mother doesn't touch her food, but instead stares at a glass sitting in front of her. An empty glass.

"Ay, this *ajiaco* is missing something," the cook says.

The friend asks if she added cumin. Cumin, garlic, onion, chili, a small piece of pork, yesterday's chicken legs: all of it went into the pot.

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“And even a whole chorizo,” the cook confirms.

“Chorizo?” the friend raises her voice as if she can’t believe it. “Real chorizo or fake chorizo?”

Because in a world of substitutes you have to make sure who you’re dealing with. The cook confirms it’s real chorizo, and then they go on to list the other ingredients: corn, boniato, malanga, yucca, a few slices of plantain, squash.

“Well,” the friend concludes, “it has everything.”

The old woman doesn’t take part in the conversation, but says something when she hears them talk about what they like.

“I love chorizo,” she says to no one. And she keeps her eye on the empty glass.

“Do you remember, Yolanda, those chorizos they used to sell before,” the invited friend asks.

“Before? Before when?”

“Before.”

“Before before or before?”

Because it’s necessary to establish the historical era of which one speaks. “Before” could be before the so-called Special Period in Times of Peace, but still during the revolutionary era. Or “before” could be before before: before the Special Period in Times of Peace, and also before the triumph of the revolution in 1959.

“Before,” the friend explains. “Before, before, before.”

The effort to remember something so long ago or the strength of the *ajjaco* makes her gag. Cardiac arrest is prevented by a glass of water and by taking off her coat. At that moment the old woman attacks the glass: she chomps on it, leaves half of it.

The visitor is horrified.

“It’s the third glass she’s eaten this month,” the daughter says.

The visitor asks why. Is it hunger? The daughter denies it: in that house, they’ve never wanted for food. Protein, she says. I mean, meat.

At that moment, the old lady, whose daughter has just grabbed what’s left of the glass,

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declares: “What I have isn’t hunger. It’s *roeritis*.”

The daughter recounts how, a few mornings ago, she was woken up by a noise in the living room. There she found her mother, gnawing away at an ornamental Buddha. One of those smiling, big-bellied figures of the god of good fortune, a Chinese Buddha.

The friend suggests an aluminum glass for the mother, and says that the same thing happened to one of her daughters. But the matter requires an immediate solution, and the daughter struggles with her mother until she takes away her lower dentures.

“I’ll give them back to you tomorrow morning, at breakfast,” she promises.

And she tells her friend, “That’s what I have to do, because if I don’t, she’ll wake up early and eat me out of house and home. Any day now she’ll chomp on me.”

They return to the subject of the *ajjaco*.

“Ay, *chica*, I feel something’s missing,” the cook insists.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, something.”

Two themes have sat down at the table of Arturo Infante’s story. An ingredient is missing from the *ajjaco*, and an old lady isn’t hungry, but has *roeritis*. What does that mean?

The term seems to be related to the Latin “*rodere*,” to gnaw, and apart from the different species of rodents who gnaw their food, it refers to a “grave and continuous state that torments and eats at whomever it afflicts.”

That explains the old woman’s tormented gaze at the glass that she devours the moment her daughter is distracted.. It isn’t hunger, because that could be placated by her dish of *ajjaco* and by whatever’s left in the pot sitting on the table. What afflicts her goes beyond that: it’s a withering away, a form of consumption. The source of her malady is related to that era of chorizos recalled by her daughter’s friend. To the before, before, before. The before, before, before, where the ingredient missing from this restoration *ajjaco* has passed into oblivion.

It doesn’t matter if you follow the original recipe exactly, as illustrated by the case of the daughter: something will always seem missing. Something we can’t identify, though yes, we realize it’s beyond recovery. There’s something missing from the dish, an absence that disturbs any lunch or dinner. An anxiety for the flavor that’s missing.

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It doesn't matter how much food there is, as illustrated by the case of the elderly mother: it's not an issue of food. Instead, it's the lack of trust in food. Of a lack of faith in everything that (as that novelist of the fantastic Nitza Villapol would say) started to disappear at a certain point. It's about the impossibilities of a life that takes place in an after, after, after.

Arturo Infante chose, not at all innocently, *ajjaco*. Thus it's the Cuban nationality that's always missing something; it's the Cuban nationality that isn't sustained when it's not a question of hunger, but *roeritis*.

In 1989 or 1990, the US reporter Tom Miller visited Nitza Villapol at her Vedado apartment. He spoke to her for hours and wrote about his visit in *Trading with the Enemy* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1992). Nitza looked disheveled, her hair needed to be dyed, and in a few years she would turn seventy. She seemed tired. Three or four years later her TV show would be canceled. She was taking care of her mother, now in her nineties and unable to speak or walk. She had no other family, and had no friends.

"Ten million people think they know me," she complained. "But in my personal life I'm not happy. I'm alone. I do all the housework. I clean the goddamn house and I wash the dishes. That's what I do. I hate washing the dishes."¹

In the sink, as Miller confirmed when she offered him a glass of freshly-squeezed grapefruit juice, there was a week of dirty dishes. Around the sink were dirty pots and pans, open cans, leftover food. Nitza announced that she did everything on the weekends, and spoke of her plans to hire someone who would take care of things.

Her life's work was not much different from the state of that kitchen or her personal life. For more than forty years she had preached in the desert, had ploughed the sea.

"Cubans ruin their food. I don't give a damn. All they want is pork, fried plantains, and rice. People won't change their food habits. They eat what they like, not for their health. It's very frustrating: I used to think I could change those habits."

She affirmed, nonetheless, that she loved her work on TV. She liked communicating with the public, she liked teaching. She was, in the end, a teacher. Tom Miller glanced at the books on her shelves—cookbooks, nutritional studies, works of literature—and she called his attention to two books published in the United States at the end of the fifties: *Elena's Secrets of Mexican Cooking* by Elena Zelayeta and *Love and Knishes* by Sara Kasdan.

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A Remington typewriter sat on a table. Their conversation had passed from Spanish to English and then back to Spanish. Nitza spoke the fluent, unaccented English of her New York childhood. There was a radio in her bedroom where she would listen to the BBC and a few shortwave stations from Canada and the English-speaking Caribbean. Through the windows one could see the gardens of the building next door, the headquarters of the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC).

“UNEAC is shit,” she exclaimed. “And I have to see that building every day of my life. I’ve done radio, I’ve done TV, movies, for forty years. I’ve written more than one book and countless articles. And when I applied for membership, they turned me down. They said: you’re a TV personality, not a writer.”

In his book Miller swears that, had the window been open, she would have spit at the garden.

For the scrupulous UNEAC, Nitza Villapol was neither an artist nor a writer. Nevertheless, her most famous book was continuously in print outside of Cuba in pirated editions; she was the only author in the country who could boast of that dubious honor. So in the same way that a state publishing house published *El Monte* by the exiled Lydia Cabrera, violating copyright laws and the author’s will, *Cooking By the Minute* was re-edited and translated into English (under the title *The Cuban Flavor*) without Nitza’s consent.

“Those people have stolen my works,” she complained. “I haven’t received a penny for those books. I don’t like people who leave Cuba. With a few exceptions, they’re *mezquinos*, stingy. The petite bourgeoisie in the Miami community—they have my books and they follow my recipes. I resent that. I hate them.”

At one point in their conversation, she asked if he thought she was a political fanatic. She made it clear that she wasn’t a militant in the Communist Party, but that she identified with it. And with Fidel Castro, of course. And with the true path Cuba had taken, despite all the difficulties of the past and those to come.

Some time earlier she’d been told that in a few weeks, at the start of the year, there would be no more detergent on the market. The country would no longer import it. But you could wash dishes with soap; she remembered the days when dishes were washed with soap. And if by chance there was no soap, the maguey leaf could be used; it secreted a soapy liquid and its fibers were like a scouring pad. The maguey was a tree that gave, at once, both detergent and bristles.

In the midst of her dirty, cluttered kitchen (a kitchen without Margot), Nitza Villapol kept on playing the substitution game, devising moves like a veteran chess player.

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The phrase I used as the title of this talk—“We have no recipes for the foods of the future”—was written by Karl Marx. Who wasn’t, of course, speaking about the kitchen. Lenin wasn’t either when he pointed out that you can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. Neither was the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm when he attributed the flight of East Germans to the West to their not being able to stand the heat of the kitchen.

Fidel Castro wasn’t speaking about food when in 1953 he wrote from his cozy prison cell: “Because I’m a cook, every now and then I pass the time making some *pisto*. Not long ago I cooked a steak with guava jelly. Today the boys sent me some pineapple slices in syrup. And tomorrow I’ll eat ham with pineapple. I’ll also cook some spaghetti or a cheese omelette. I’ll brew some delicious coffee, as well.”

There’s nothing culinary, either, about the personal recipe for lobster Castro himself offered to a foreign interviewer. Because it’s not about lobster in its sauce, but rather about power in its sauce, thickening. The power of inventing a *pisto* or a steak with guava jelly while in prison. The power to cook lobster while the masses are forced to substitute and make do with garbage.

An unverified story (his biographer denies it, but David Priestland claims it is true in his political and cultural history of Communism) recounts that Ho Chi Minh, as a young kitchen helper, worked at the Hotel Carlton in London alongside Auguste Escoffier. The great chef noticed his work and offered to sponsor him under the condition that he would abandon his revolutionary ideas. Ho Chi Minh agreed to learn the art of pastry making, which for him (I paraphrase Von Clausewitz) would be the continuation of the revolution by other means.

Marx, Lenin, Hobsbawm, Castro, and Minh weren’t talking about food when they talked about food. But the black man, beside himself, who appears in a video filmed on 1 May 2009 in Havana was indeed talking about food. Pánfilo, he was called. His name was Juan Carlos González. He was far gone, drunk, it was alcohol talking, otherwise he wouldn’t have dared. Pánfilo interrupted an interview about music being conducted in the street to look straight into the camera and speak his mind:

“*Jama, jama, aquí lo que hace falta es jama.*” “Food, food, what’s missing here is food.” He raised his right hand to his mouth to make himself clear wherever the video would be seen. The scene was replayed many times. It went viral. The Cuban political police wanted to know the source of that provocation. They sentenced him to two years in prison; they interned him in a psychiatric hospital. The last time I read something about him, a few months ago, Juan Carlos González was planning to leave for Miami, under the protection of a program for political refugees.

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Translated from Spanish by Margaret Carson.

Antonio José Ponte (Matanzas, Cuba, 1964) Poet, essayist, and narrator. He has published, among other titles, *Las comidas profundas* (Deleatur, Angers, 1997), *Asiento en las ruinas* (Renacimiento, Savilla, 2005), *In the Cold of the Malecón & Other Stories* (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2000), *Cuentos de todas partes del Imperio* (Deleatur, Angers, 2000), *Un seguidor de Montaigne mira La Habana/Las comidas profundas* (Verbum, Madrid, 2001), *Contrabando de sombras* (Mondadori, Barcelona, 2002), *El libro perdido de los origenistas* (Renacimiento, Sevilla, 2004), *Un arte de hacer ruinas y otros cuentos* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 2005), *La fiesta vigilada* (Anagrama, Barcelona, 2007), and *Villa Marista en plata. Artes, política, nuevas tecnologías* (Colibrí, Madrid, 2010). In 2013 he held the Andrés Bello Chair of the King Juan Carlos Center at New York University. And today he is the Writer in Residence at the University of California, Berkeley. He lives in Madrid, where his is the vice-director of the online journal *Diario de Cuba* (www.diariodecuba.com).

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Notes

¹ Nitza Villapol's dialogue is taken from Tom Miller's *Trading with the Enemy*—Tr.