



PAELLA FOR THE PEOPLE

Paco Lopez opened his local paella stand, I Love Paella USA, to fulfill his love for the dish and serve authentic Spanish cuisine in the heart of Columbia, South Carolina.

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An aroma of sizzling Spanish spices, vegetables, rice and meats wafts through the air. Paco Lopez, owner of the food stand I Love Paella USA, proudly serves his city authentic paella as he shares stories and cheerful conversation about the dish.

Lopez was first introduced to paella, a dish native to Valencia, Spain, by a friend who inspired him to practice perfecting the meal.

"Paella is not just a dish. It's a big community. It's more than just rice and meats, rice and shrimp. There's a lot of things behind it," Lopez said.

After 17 years in the United States, following his move from Veracruz, Mexico, Lopez developed a desire to contribute to the food scene of Columbia, South Carolina -- the community that he had come to call his own.

"For him, what is rewarding about the business is just serving the people. A lot of people don't know what paella is, so he's bringing it to the center and showing people what it is," Lopez's sister-in-law and employee Mariela Landaverde said. "Even though he's not from Spain, it's interesting to see someone take an interest in it. I think definitely the people are excited to see what's going on."

Behind his charming smile is a story many are unfamiliar with. After Lopez's move to the United States, he faced numerous struggles as he transitioned to his new life.

Rather than attending American school as a teenager, Lopez immediately began working in order to provide for himself financially.

"I started working, but my mom kicked me out of my house when I was 13 years old. So, I become homeless," Lopez said. "I had to go through so many things. I started doing drugs when I was about 15 years old. I had two overdoses. But that was bad people that I used to get with, that I used to hang with."

After all he's gone through, paella has been a light in Lopez's life.

"(Paella) is everything. It's my daily thing. I wake up every day and I think about new recipes on paella. But like I say, right here I'm giving people the original," Lopez said.

After spending years on the move, working odd jobs and struggling to make ends meet, Lopez decided he wanted his hobby to become his career. He founded his own paella business in Columbia in March 2018.

"He's really progressed. At the beginning, we tasted his first few samples and they were great, but now it's completely transformed to a bigger thing," Landaverde said. "He's definitely a hard worker. He puts 100 percent into it. It's nice to see him grow and it's definitely a proud moment for him (to have his own stand)."

Paella consists of vegetables, meats, seafood and bomba rice, which absorbs the dish's exotic flavors and seasonings. Lopez is intentional about including both local and Spanish-imported ingredients, and believes this adds to the quality of the recipe.

"It tastes like a dream. We use original saffron and we cook it the traditional way so it makes it an authentic paella," Lopez said. "If you go to Spain, you're gonna have the same thing over there."

Lopez works as a welder most days of the week, but the food stand is what motivates him to work hard and advance his career.

"He likes it like this, (working out of a food stand), but I think the goal is to open his own business -- have his own place to call home," Lan-

averde said. "But for now, he's liking this. It's open, it's Main Street, a lot of people (are) coming, but definitely, the goal is to open his own place."

Lopez's love of paella shines through in the dish. Topped with a small Spanish flag, each bowl brings a smile to people's faces. For Lopez, this makes it all worth it.

"I don't play video games, I don't do sports -- I cook. It's my passion to see people that love my dishes."

**-- PACO LOPEZ
owner, I Love Paella USA**

Opposite: PAELLA PASSION: Paco Lopez, owner of the food stand I Love Paella USA, stands with his pans of paella on March 2 at the Columbia Main Street Market. Lopez loves cooking paella and providing customers with authentic Spanish cuisine. "I just love the way it cooks. I mean, I love it," Lopez said. "It's actually my hobby, but it started becoming more than just a hobby. It's part of my life already." Photo by Audrey Enghauser

Right: RICE RECOGNITION: Paco Lopez pours in rice to his signature paella dish at his food stand on March 2. Lopez is committed to the authenticity of his paella, in which Spanish bomba rice is a vital ingredient. "The good thing about this rice is it doesn't come apart. It doesn't become a paste," Lopez said. Photo by Elena Gilbertson Hall



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