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The Columbia Restaurant Spanish Cookbook by Adela Hernandez
Gonzmart and Ferdie Pacheco

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Columbia Restaurant Spanish Cookbook. By Adela Hernandez Gonzmart and Ferdie Pacheco. Gainesville. University Press of Florida. 1995. Illustrations. Glossary. Index. xv, 294 pp. Cloth – \$24.95.

The Columbia Restaurant Spanish Cookbook is much more than just an ordinary cookbook. Its pages contain not only meticulous instructions for how to prepare a myriad of succulent Spanish, Cuban and Columbia-original recipes but also the real story behind the recipes, the restaurant and the family that has been at its helm since 1905. Featured in this culinary masterpiece of literary non-fiction is “The Gem of All Spanish Restaurants” – the Columbia – an Ybor City legacy born of the immigrant dream of Casimiro Hernandez I in 1905 and today the flagship of a six-restaurant dynasty. Adela Hernandez Gonzmart, granddaughter of the restaurant's founder, and Ferdie Pacheco, Tampa native son turned “Fight Doctor,” writer and painter, have woven a delightful tale of immigrant *chutzpah* and entrepreneurship. They bridge spaces, such as those between chapters like “Eggs and Omelettes,” “Fish and Seafood,” “Bean and Rice Dishes” and “Desserts,” with stories of how the restaurant grew from one small room to a whole city block, of who ran the place and filled it and of how a five-generation family business goes about raising children, saying goodbye to beloved parents and grandparents, pursuing musical careers and remaining as a beacon to all Tampa Latins and non-Latins alike, through thick and thin.

This “Gem” has survived the 1929 crash, the Depression, wars and 1960s urban renewal, and through it all, prize fighters and politicians, movie stars and foreign dignitaries, great musical artists and architects have graced its tables. Nestled between chapters on “Drinks/Bebidas” and “Meats/Carnes” is the story of the “Columbia family” – the chefs, waiters and others – in whom the Columbia inspired life-long devotion and sacrifice. These are people who have spent forty or fifty years working in the same place – people such as Gregorio Martinez (“El Rey”), who upon realizing that the owner was about to shut the place down during the Depression, immediately withdrew his life savings from the bank and handed them to a dumbfounded Casimiro, telling him, “Don’t close the place” (94). In the chapter “Golden Years,” Pacheco tells the story of Mess Sergeant di Bona, who with shipments of Cuban coffee and other ingredients sent by his Ybor City grandmother, set up his chow tent on Le Shima Island during world War II and called it “Columbia Restaurant, The Gem of All Spanish Restaurants, Pacific Division.” The chapter entitled “When the Violin Chases the Piano” relates the story of the handsome and talented Cesar Gonzmart who through gallantry and persistence captured the crown jewel of the “Gem of All Spanish Restaurants,” the lovely and talented Adela Hernandez. Cesar went from violin virtuoso to restaurateur and brought the Columbia to dizzying heights of elegance, sophistication and world-reknown.

Adela Hernandez Gonzmart and Ferdie Pacheco have written a delightful book whose utility far surpasses that of its mouthwatering recipes, which by the way are magnificent. Once you have read the personal history of the Columbia, of the people who have made and continue to make it what it is, the food you prepare from this cookbook can only taste better. *The Columbia Restaurant Spanish Cookbook*, through its anecdotes and photographs, takes on a life of its own,



Adela and Cesar Gonzmart in 1946.

Photograph from *The Columbia Restaurant Spanish Cookbook*.

which “The Gem of All Spanish Restaurants” indeed has. The only way to improve upon reading the book is to go to the Ybor City location itself and experience it first-hand.

Kenya C. Dworkin y Mendez

Pioneer Family: Life on Florida’s 20th-Century Frontier. By Michel Oesterreicher. Foreword by Daniel L. Schafer. Tuscaloosa, Alabama. University of Alabama Press. 1996. xiii, 174 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Paper – \$24.95.

By the end of the 1890s, the existence of an American frontier slowly slipped into the realm of history and myth. However, the southern-most frontier in Florida remained intact well into the new century. Michel Oesterreicher offers a telling glimpse of this era in *Pioneer Family: Life On Florida’s Twentieth Century Frontier*. Her account is based mainly on oral interviews with her parents Huger (“Hugie”) and Oleta Brown Oesterreicher, and is an entertaining story of a Florida lifestyle all but gone.