

To make Chef Aarón's favorite recipes at home, go to [thelatinkitchen.com/aaron](http://thelatinkitchen.com/aaron).

# NO EXCUSES

CHEF **AARÓN SÁNCHEZ** DOESN'T LIKE IT WHEN YOU COMPLAIN. HIS MOM, MEXICAN FOOD PIONEER ZARELA MARTINEZ, NEVER DID AND NEITHER DO THE WOMEN HE WORKS WITH. HERE, THE *SIMPLE FOOD, BIG FLAVOR* AUTHOR TALKS ABOUT LATINA CHEFS SHATTERING INDUSTRY GLASS CEILINGS AND WHY THEY'RE SOME OF THE TOUGHEST IN THE BIZ.

BY AMANDA CARGILL

## TRAILBLAZER. TACO KING.

**JOKER.** Genius. Chef Aarón Sánchez, host of the Emmy-nominated *Taco Trip*, author of *Simple Food, Big Flavor: Unforgettable Mexican-Inspired Recipes from My Kitchen to Yours*, part owner of three Johnny Sánchez restaurants, and arguably the most recognizable face on Food Network's *Chopped*, has been called a lot of things.

But before the fame, awards, and accolades, Sánchez was called something else: *mijo*, by his mom, legendary TV host, cookbook author, and restaurateur Zarela Martinez, whom he credits with paving the way for today's Latina chefs.

"I'd be lying to you if I said that when I started doing this 20 years ago there were a lot of women chefs. Even more absent were Latina chefs."

"But," he adds, "my mom didn't complain, and if my mom had complained about [lack of] opportunity and unfair treatment, we wouldn't be where we are today."

Discovered by Chef Paul Prudhomme in a New Orleans cooking class in 1979, Martinez is credited with introducing regional Mexican cuisine to New Yorkers through her work at renowned

Manhattan restaurants Café Marimba and Zarela. Sánchez cut his culinary teeth in his mother's kitchens, surrounded by women who wowed him.

"The ladies are working on the hot line, working their asses off, sweating just like the boys, and they hold their own. In fact, a lot of times, they're quicker than the men," he says.

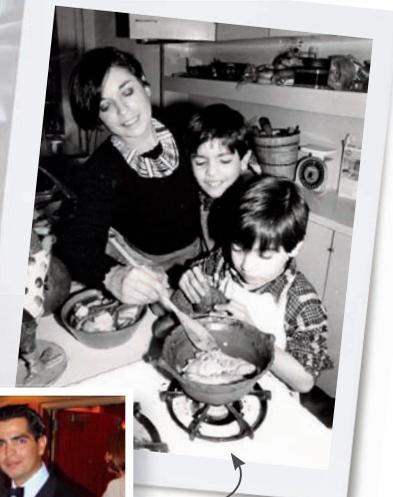
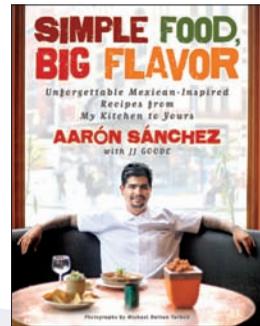
Sánchez points out that women—"not all of them, but some"—have characteristics that make them better equipped to deal with the difficulties of working in restaurant kitchens.

"Women are used to handling more stuff, more challenges, all at once," he says. "They have more composure."

As to the increasing number of professional Latina chefs, Sánchez offers two explanations: First, "opportunities for Latinas in the kitchen have grown exponentially because of access and the role models who paved the way, like my mom"; and second, because the "chefs doing the hiring at restaurants think, 'Oh you're of Latin descent, cool. I can trust that you're going to work hard and be honest and come to work every day.' It's some stereotyping, I guess, but it's also almost always true."

For Sánchez, what's also always true is the need for respect. "That's key," he says, "and it also goes along with being Latino. We're proud people and we have to command respect and be respectful of each other too. Both women and men."

To future Latina chefs, his advice is simple: "No excuses. Just go for it."



Chef Zarela Martinez brought her twin sons, Aarón and Rodrigo, into the kitchen at an early age.



Chef Aarón attending a gala with his mom at the beginning of his career.



Elevated Mexican food (above) and modern murals depicting traditional iconography (below) are signature Johnny Sánchez.

