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Nitza Villapol: Cuba's Julia Child, a Cooking Icon Who Adapted to Revolution ===== Nitza Villapol hosted Cocina al Minuto, a popular cooking show in Cuba, for decades. Her adaptation of her cooking after Fidel Castro took power taught Cubans how to make do without certain ingredients while instructing them in new ways. Villapol call her Cuban homemaker's resource "The first thing I think about is, 'What does the Cuban homemaker have and what can be done with it?'. She thought that they were not starving here. Her first book, Cocina Criollo, was published soon after her show went on the air. She followed up in 1950 with Cocina al Minuto, named after her popular TV show, which became an instant best-seller. Cocina al Minuto came out at a time when America was a primary trading partner. Early recipes called for both Cuban and American ingredients — the latter were often easily available, sent via daily cargo ships from the U.S. in exchange for keeping much of Cuba's farmland dedicated to sugar cane. Villapol cited the basic format of a meal: "appetizer, plate of protein, plate of starches, veggies, raw or cooked, bread and butter, dessert, coffee." Villapol's cookbooks became sacred texts of traditional Cuban cuisine — though they also offered guidance on making fashionable foreign dishes of the era. Within a few years of their publication, however, there came vast political and economic change, as Castro rose to power. Many who opposed his government left the country with copies of Villapol's cookbooks in their luggage. Those who remained in Cuba faced a more dire reality. "Certain ingredients began to disappear," Villapol recalled. "Some disappeared all of a sudden, others disappeared little by little." Staples like pork, bread and milk were often scarce or expensive, making it difficult to prepare some traditional dishes. So, Villapol got creative. On her show, she began to cook with what was available that morning in the market, with the help of her longtime assistant Margot Bacallao. She taught Cubans how to make do without certain ingredients while instructing them on how to use once-eschewed produce and cuts of meat in new ways. And to reflect the reality of life amid chronic shortages, she continuously revised Cocina al Minuto. She simplified recipes that called for expensive or hard-to-find foods and deleted large sections of chapters. She erased the "Sandwiches and Snacks" chapter altogether, cutting the line: "Sometimes we have a piece of meat or fish or other food and one or two days pass in the refrigerator without eating it; after it is dry and old, and we just throw it out." Nitza Villapol's Cocina al Minuto revolutionized Cuban cooking by introducing root vegetables in desserts and encouraging the use of native produce, such as cassava. The cookbook simplified recipes to include cheaper ingredients like meat and oil, which were rationed during the Cuban Revolution. Villapol revised the cookbook dozens of times, adapting her recipes to reflect the changing realities of life under the communist state. Over the years, Villapol's cookbook became a staple in Cuban cuisine, with new editions incorporating veiled signs of solidarity with the communist state. Updated nutrition information urged Cubans to consume more carbohydrates and vegetables. After the Soviet Union collapsed, food security in Cuba worsened, but Villapol continued to innovate, even teaching viewers how to use plantain peels as a meat substitute. Villapol's legacy extends beyond her recipes, inspiring Cuban cooks to be bold and inventive in their cooking. Her cookbook has become a standard-bearer of Cuban cuisine, with chef Ricardo Barreras crediting it as his first culinary reference. Anthropologist Hanna Garth notes that Villapol inspired Cubans to reinvent themselves through food, adapting to changes in availability. Villapol's impact on Cuban cuisine is undeniable, and her cookbook remains a treasured resource for cooks around the world.