

Folk Tales Podcast

Episode 7: Foodways

Audio Transcript

[00:00] **Intro (spoken by several consecutive voices over upbeat music):** Every summer, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival brings voices together, honoring the traditions we carry forward. This podcast is the un-hosted open mic for the Festival's tradition bearers, creatives, and storytellers. Culture isn't preserved in glass cases—it's lived, breathed, and passed forward. Here's the story.

[00:34] **Lirit Gilmore:** When we talk about foodways, it's always meant the patterns of food and how they, like, intersect with the culture of the Festival. How do the musicians cook, and how do the dancers cook, And how do the artisans cook? That's how I visualize foodways.

We get a little bit of everybody, so to see it directly, like, relate to each other on stage is such an important connection, I think, for people to see. We all eat, and so it is all a part of our identity, and it's all a part of our art in some kind of way.

My name is Lirit Gilmore. I'm the foodways program coordinator for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. I actually started as an intern here. I was a foodways intern, and I came back last year, and I was a foodways assistant, and I've just, like, had a really, like, strong relationship with the foodways program at the Center.

As it continues to grow and change, it's been really important that we have consistent people working on it. I stepped into the coordinator position this year, which has been really lovely and wonderful, which involves working with the curators on coordinating the food that is already within what participants have instead of other programs where we might have—and we did have some of this year—like, chefs who come in, and they're just here for food, and they're just here to create food, and that's their profession. Most of our participants are made up of people who are just home cooks or people who wanna share their recipes or people who make something with their family member, and so I coordinate that with the curators and their participants.

Something really cool about the Folklife Festival is, because it's been here for so long, you can look at the programs and see how they've grown, and, like, foodways, if you go back and look at the photos of when they started foodways programs, I think the first one was basically, like, juicing things in front of people, like saying, "This is how a juicer works." We weren't building a whole kitchen at this point. These pictures—it's an ice cooler full of some

food, a lot of volunteers, maybe there's, like, a butcher block somewhere, and then people are crowding around, and they're watching some demonstration.

To look at where we are now, we do have a very intentional space where we have a range that's out front, and then we have a range in the back. We have a full kitchen in the back with a large commercial fridge. We have islands and baker's racks and multiple, like, sinks for dish washing and all of these things.

It's very cool to, like, see that we've gotten to this point because I know that it hasn't always been like that. The stage in the front especially is, like, being built out. We've started putting plants on the wall that people really like with herbs that, like, are often used in the demonstration. Not a lot of people can always notice that because you can't come on stage and look at them, but sometimes a chef will walk around, and they'll be like, "Oh, I need rosemary," and they'll just take it off of the herbs right behind them.

It is such an intentional space. There's definitely a lot of chaos that, like, goes into, like, building that, which I think is probably the heaviest lift of our job. Once we get going, once we have grocery shopping done, we move pretty quickly. It's like forty-five minutes every hour on the hour.

Getting this kitchen set up is, like, such a labor of love. We unpack everything from the warehouse, which is, like, where we store it. We keep everything, so we talk to supply and we say, "Listen, we need you to bring out the large extra deep fryer for this demonstration," and they have to, like, dig through stuff and find it, and then we unpack it, and we find a place for it. We clean it. Sometimes, there's mold sometimes, and we have to replace stuff. Everything has to be checked on. We work with supply a lot on sourcing Instant Pots or Crock-Pots or deep fryers or whatever the tool may be.

We'll have tools and materials that are, like, really significant to them. Maybe they wanna have them shipped in. Maybe they don't even really want to use what we have. "This is my wooden spoon, and this is how I make my grits with it." People request also dishware, serving wear. Someone might say, "I'd like to serve my soup in this kind of pot. This is how it's served." So, we have to, like, source that kind of pot or find it at our warehouse, bring it in, make sure that it's set up and ready to go.

We have to get an actual recipe; we have to get ingredients, measurements; we have to, like, plan all of those things. We also publish the recipes online. People come, and they wanna know how something is made, and they say, like, "Hey, can I have the recipe?" People are so willing to give it to them, but it's kind of like, "Oh, the recipe's in my head." So, we publish the recipes.

It is not always about what I wanna do; it's more about what the participants wanna make. We come to them, and we say, "What is a story that you have about food?" Whether that be, like, a recipe that holds a lot of significance because it's something that you remember and you make it all the time, or it could also just be that maybe you have a memory, like a distinct memory of "I used to make churros with my grandmother, and this is how we made them." So we trace that memory.

The food that holds memory is often, like, big meals, holiday meals, traditional long stews and gumbos and things. So people will say, like, "I wanna make gumbo," but gumbo takes a long time. You get a forty-five-minute demonstration. I tell them, like, "Don't let that hold you back, because we do a lot of kitchen magic backstage. We have a really incredible kitchen team."

I'll just let them riff off what it is that they like to make. Let's say we already have some people who are gonna make salad, and then this person mentioned salad but they also mentioned, "Oh, I make really great pot roast." We'll say, "Okay, talk to me about the pot roast. Tell me what's going on there. Tell me the story."

Then, we see how it, like, relates to the programming. Like, this year it was *Youth and the Future of Culture*. A lot of people were talking about intergenerational meals and the meals that they make with their children or that they made as a child, so we wanna highlight the meals that have like the significance there, that you're gonna be able to pull that memory out when you're talking about it and when you're cooking it and when you share the recipe and when we make content for it.

[06:40] **(Mariachi Tesoro de San Fernando performing at the Festival)**

[06:51] **Checo Alonso (speaking on Foodways stage):** I mentioned the other day the idea of food and the culinary arts of Mexico. Gorditas is part of the culinary landscape in Mexico, especially in states like San Luis Potosi, where my mom is from, her grandma, her great-grandma, my grandma.

Anyways, that's what we're gonna be doing today, some gorditas. You can stuff them with all kinds of stuff, but today we're gonna focus on chile verde. That's my grandma's dish.

[07:16] **Gilmore:** We had a mariachi group this year, and there was a father and daughter within the mariachi group, so Checo Alonso and Ada Alonso. They came to our stage, and they made gorditas.

[07:28] **Alonso (on stage):** In Mexico, a lot of the foods really resonate with its Indigenous past. The cultivation of corn was really foundational to a lot of the food that was produced that was eaten throughout the country. Gorditas is one of the many.

Gorditas is basically a stuffed tortilla within that region of San Luis Potosi. I'll definitely mention it's not only to the state of San Luis Potosi, you find them in different parts of the country, but it's just definitely the state of San Luis Potosi that you find them everywhere.

[07:54] **Gilmore:** They had been making gorditas for months before this actually, like in pursuit of preserving the tradition.

I had a conversation with Checo when we talked about what he might wanna make, and he immediately was like, "I need to make gorditas." He said, "I grew up, and my grandmother was making gorditas." He got older, and he was like, "If I don't teach my daughter how to make gorditas, and we don't learn together, how does it stay alive?" Like, how does that tradition stay alive?

[08:18] **Alonso (on stage):** As you're growing up, a lot of times you don't have the understanding or deeper meaning as to how or why the things you do within your family are part of a bigger tradition, a bigger cultural practice. So, going to Grandma's house, you just knew that you would go eat gorditas, and that was that.

It isn't until later, as you start getting older, that you learn how basically what grandma's making at home, it's what they do in their hometown. She's from a town called Cerritos. But as so often happens, you're immersed in culture, and you don't know what the significance is until you get older, you could appreciate it more, you understand it a little bit better.

She doesn't cook as much anymore, my grandma, but nonetheless, her tradition is what carries on. And that ultimately is, I guess, what this Festival is all about.

[08:56] **Gilmore:** As musicians, they came to the Festival originally to, like, show mariachi and show how do we keep mariachi tradition among the youth and what does it mean to the youth to, like, learn how to do these traditions and learn how to make this music.

He talked a lot on stage about how those two things are so, like, connected for him.

[09:13] **Alonso:** Ada, for example, she plays jazz saxophone. She plays violin in her school symphony orchestra, but she also does mariachi music. I play mariachi music, but I also like different regional music of Mexico—*son jarocho*, *son huasteco*.

The food at home, it resonates with our cultural identity as straddling different foods, different music. I'm fascinated by the cooking part because it's one that I don't understand as well as the music, of course, being a musician. But nonetheless, I think it's precisely because I don't understand it as well that I'm really intrigued by it. And of course, among the food, the gorditas is prominently figured there because, because it aligns with my family.

I recorded my first album about 2010 and, trying to think of what to include in the liner notes to really speak about my culture, I wanted to include this recipe. I wanted to learn how to make them so I can write about them, so I can have it there, documented in my first language.

[10:08] **Gilmore:** The mariachi and the gorditas, they almost go hand in hand because these are two traditions that he's sharing with his daughter, and he's passing them down. That's what's so important about foodways is people coming and hearing him say that, visually seeing, like, "I can go over there and watch them make music in a couple of sessions from now, but right now they're making gorditas," and, like, what does it mean for, like, us to physically hop from stage to stage and share tradition from tradition, how they intersect?

The way that he preserves this food is the same way that he preserves this music, and how important it is for us at foodways and for the foodways program to exist because everyone has a story like that and a meal like that.

[10:50] **Alonso (on stage):** When the food that we eat aligns with our cultural traditions, our families and such, it really gives you a deeper appreciation, not only for the food that you're eating but just all your traditions, all your customs, your heritage. I have beautiful memories eating family dishes, like this opportunity that arose because of this particular event. I probably wouldn't have experienced it otherwise. This gave me an opportunity to have this moment with my mom at home, with my family.

[11:26] **(Sounds of kneading dough)**

[11:28] **Ava Delgado (on stage):** Hi, my name is Ava. This is my sister, Lila, and that's our dad, and we're gonna be teaching you how to make homemade flour tortillas and use those to make "jammies," which are basically like a Mexican version of a crepe.

Before we started, we went back there and washed our hands, put our hair up. Did you put your hair up?

[11:44] **Manuel Delgado (who is bald):** I did. **(Laughs with audience.)**

[11:47] **Ava Delgado:** Thank you.

[11:48] **Gilmore:** This was like one of my favorite curating stories of this year. We talked to the Delgados about what they wanted to make, and he was like, “I’m trying to raise my daughters to know how to cook and feel confident in the kitchen. We do a lot of cooking together as a family.” He was like, “We can make anything.” I said, “Tell me about things that are special to you.” We talked a little bit about carne asada, but what we landed on was tortilla because he said, “I don’t actually know how to make tortilla, but my two daughters, they definitely do.”

[12:15] **Manuel Delgado (on stage):** Honestly, I’ve never learned how to do the tortillas. I did ‘em when I was a kid, but now that the girls make ‘em, I don’t even need to learn how to make ‘em.

[12:23] **Gilmore:** He was like, “What if we go on stage, and we switch, like I’m here making it with my daughters. They’re gonna teach *me* how to make tortilla.”

[12:29] **Ava Delgado (on stage):** So we’re gonna take it out, and we’re gonna knead it, basically to get it to the consistency that we want before we let it rest. We’re gonna grab the sides and push it in. You’ll see the dough come together and get smoothed out. This is why I go to the gym—so I can make food.

[12:45] **Manuel Delgado (on stage):** One of the things that I learned from my dad was the best way to learn is to teach. It’s the same thing with the girls. Whenever they have the chance to teach me, it’s trying to take the dad hat off and just be a good student.

[12:58] **Gilmore:** It became something that I don’t think that we’ve really done that much on the Foodways stage but I would love to see more of is, like, someone learning. They were showing him, and they were, like, doing it together, sharing a tradition with their father, like he’s been eating the tortilla his whole life but maybe he hasn’t been learning how to cook it.

He was on stage literally being like, “I think this is how you make tortillas.” He was basically like, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

[13:21] **Ava Delgado (on stage):** The rolling technique that my grandma taught me was that you roll it up, down, and hopefully it doesn’t stick to the rolling pin. So up, down, and then you turn it just a little bit counterclockwise, and you keep doing that until you’ve got a circle. If it doesn’t look like a circle, then that’s okay because your stomach won’t care.

[13:41] **Manuel Delgado (on stage):** I was saying yesterday that, when I was their age and my mom would teach me, that they look more like the different states from the United States, like one would look like Tennessee, one would look like Florida, one would be Idaho.

[13:53] **Gilmore:** That's also an important conversation that they were like, "Yeah, you know, like, we did this with our grandmother. We're learning right now how to make tortilla because it's a staple in our community and in our family, and to share that with our father is meaningful."

[14:06] **Ava Delgado (on stage):** Our grandma was born in Mexico. She moved to the U.S. when she was about twelve years old. She used to live in California, and she'd come and visit us.

[14:14] **Manuel Delgado (on stage):** I have videos from when Ava was like three years old, and she would grab the dough and just go *bam!* and slam it down on the counter when my mom would come visit before she moved, uh, to Nashville to be close to us.

[14:27] **Ava Delgado (on stage):** I remember, at a really young age, we would always make tortillas together in our kitchen, and then later that night, I'd sneak down at like one in the morning, and we'd eat the rest of the tortillas that we had made and watch *telenovelas*.

[14:40] **(Dialogue in Spanish from a TV show)**

[14:51] **Manuel Delgado (on stage):** She teaches the girls a lot of different recipes. My mom doesn't care if they trash the kitchen, leave dough flour wherever. She just loves having them there. It's nice to go to my mom's house where they can have a little bit more freedom. As the dad, one of my favorite things is to be the assistant when they're doing something, and I just get to help, sit in here and like wanting to step in and say, "Oh, no," about the stove or whatever, but I just like, "Nope. Cállate. Be quiet."

[15:17] **Ava Delgado (on stage):** We do always joke when we're making tortillas with our abuela that we're gonna open up a tortillaria or, like, a taco truck or something like that. But I just do this for fun as a pastime and as a way to embrace my culture.

[15:31] **Gilmore:** They took it one step further, and they made something called "jammies," which is basically like a little breakfast dessert tradition that they have where they take the hot tortilla, they spread jam on it, they roll it up, and then they do, like, powdered sugar on top and other toppings.

When we first, like, started talking about it, I was like, “Is this too simple of a recipe? It’s just jam and tortillas and sugar.” When I tell you, not only did so many people come up at the end being like “Can I have some of that?” but people in the back were fighting over it. This was just like the most fresh, delicious family tradition that I could have seen.

They were, like, hopping all around the Festival, but they came every single time so excited for foodways and so excited to have those conversations with us. Actually just got a note from them saying how meaningful the experience was. This created a lasting memory for them, just being in the kitchen.

[16:22] **(Sounds of water droplets, squeaking, and then scratching on a turntable)**

[16:27] **DJ Special Berriez (speaking on stage):** How’s it going everyone? My name is Special Berriez. I’m gonna be the producer today for “Beats + Eats.” Shout out to Chef Kim. You know, we both going to cook something up.

[16:36] **Kim Akers Thomas (on stage):** Today, we’ll be making shrimp and grits. So, it’s about building flavors and layering those flavors like Special Berriez layers his beats, okay?

[16:50] **Special Berriez (on stage):** You from New Orleans?

[16:51] **Thomas (on stage):** I’m not from New Orleans, but I can kick it like I am. Okay?

[16:55] **Gilmore:** Okay, so this is a collaboration with Words Beats & Life out of Washington, D.C., and Mazi, the director, he came to Michelle Banks, our lead curator, and they were, like, already working on some poetry and some other things with the youth, and he had mentioned, “Oh, do you guys do food? I have this thing; it’s called ‘Eats + Beats.’”

Really the concept is that someone makes an “eat” and someone makes a “beat,” and so you get two demonstrations in one, and those are, like, in accordance with each other. So, you might say, like, “I’m gonna make salsa, and then here’s, like, a salsa beat.” Like, “This is what I think paella sounds like.”

[17:31] **Thomas:** My favorite part about participating in the Folklife Festival is collaborating with these wonderful DJs. Everything has been very organic. It hasn’t been rehearsed.

[17:42] **Special Berriez:** I wasn’t sure how to feel about this approach to this event because hip-hop producers or producers in general, we’re used to being a little isolated.

[17:52] **Gilmore:** The chef and the DJ work together, and I think hip-hop and food are actually a really strong link that I don't think that people always see. I feel like so much of hip-hop is about creative exploration and so much of cooking is that also—so much of a chef's persona and what they choose to make and what they choose to serve has to do with their creative interests and where they come from and, in this case, their cultural identity.

"Eats + Beats" is a direct reflection of that. People came, and they not only enjoyed the music, but they got to see a recipe, and they got to see two kinds of culture intersect in a really important way.

[18:28] **Special Berriez (on stage):** It's all about what you feeling 'cause music, at the end of the day, just like cooking, you know, our moms didn't have no, uh, what you call it, measuring cups.

[18:36] **Thomas (on stage):** Oh no, they just cooked from the soul. No measuring spoons. No measuring cups. They just cook from the soul.

[18:44] **Special Berriez (on stage):** There you go. So that's how we gonna do it today.

[18:46] **Thomas (on stage):** Absolutely.

[18:47] **Gilmore:** The importance of having Kim Akers Thomas is, like, she's a professional chef. She does this for a living.

[18:52] **Thomas:** It's my passion. It's something that's instilled in me, and I try to treasure that. Every time that I make a recipe, I feel like it connects me to my family. My dad, he's deceased. My grandma's deceased, but my dad, he didn't cook as much as my grandma. But he loved seafood. He loved exploring different restaurants, and my grandma, she knew how to whip up a recipe without any really measuring cups or measuring spoons. It was just from the heart. You can always feel that and taste that through her food, and that's just my goal and mission in life.

[19:27] **Gilmore:** To see her practice is, like, relevant to foodways. That's just as relevant as people who are making food at home, making food with their kids. It's also as relevant to say, "How does someone make a career out of this? What's the significance of the type of food that she makes and how she makes it and who she makes it for?"

[19:43] **Thomas:** I chose this dish because you can build a lot of flavor in the way that you cook your gravy, right? How deep do you want your gravy? How dark do you want the

gravy? How thick do you want the gravy? It's embedded in a lot of culture, just like this Festival.

[20:00] **Gilmore:** We have to see preparing food as labor because it is. And I think that there's a lot of invisible labor that goes on when we're cooking at home. Then also, how does that invisible labor show in the professional world, and how are we not seeing the real, intentional work that chefs are putting in to make their lives their livelihood?

[20:17] **Thomas:** It's about adding and educating the audience on the different ingredients and why I'm using those ingredients. You can build flavors, and it gave a chance for the DJ—while I'm stirring and whipping up my grits, he's stirring and whipping up his beat. **[Sounds of whisking and beat machine.]**

[20:37] **Special Berriez:** When I was on stage, what I was thinking of was just thinking to my process but also trying to stay engaged with the audience, trying to stay engaged with Chef Kim.

[20:46] **Gilmore:** Special Berriez, he actually only went one time. His demonstration, he did it with Kim Akers Thomas on the last day, and they worked really well together. They riffed off each other. He just did a really wonderful job.

[20:59] **Special Berriez:** Expression can be a great confidence builder. You can stay in your basement, makin' beats, but it's limited. What you can do with that is you can go out, you can take your art to different places, different people, and that'll build your confidence on another level. You just gotta be willing to take steps beyond your own personal space.

[21:27] **Manuel Delgado (on stage):** With our youth, I think adults tend to put restrictions on them. They're capable of doing far more than we give them credit for.

[21:36] **Special Berriez:** Youth, especially in 2025, they get a bad rap, understandably. They don't have a lot of resources. They don't have a lot of activities catered to them. Once you get to know them, once you show that you care, whether they're doing the right thing or not, they'll grow to care for you.

I think folks are just a little scared of the youth. They're a little scared of what might happen if they were open up to them. That's the human experience. Somebody like me might be scared to open up, but it's gotta be done to make progress.

[22:08] **Gilmore:** When we started having conversations, especially with MoCAT, the youngest people who were there, a lot of it was about, like, TikTok. They were like, "Let's

talk about TikTok food and why is food viral on TikTok and what food is viral on TikTok and why? What's the significance?"

I remember being a teenager at times where it was like rainbow bagels and it was freak shakes and things. Like, there are food trends that pass throughout the youth. I think there's youth food in a way that's ever changing. That's, like, one component of it, like having the opportunity to talk about what is the youth obsessed with right now. Like, why are we all whipping coffee at home, and what was the context of that? It's reflective of the time that we're in and what the youth are doing.

It's twofold in the same way where it's what does foodway tradition mean to the youth? How do they wanna see it move forward, and how do they want to preserve it? If I'm making gorditas with my dad, do I want this tradition to exist with me forever? How do I pass it on? What's my interpretation? Am I gonna change it up a little bit? Am I gonna add something extra? Am I gonna take something away?

I feel like everyone has an experience of, like, eating something that their family may have made, and you're like, "I never liked the way you put the peanuts in the cookies. I'm gonna take 'em out. I'm not putting nuts in my cookies." That's, like, their story, and that's how things change, so by the time you get a recipe and you say, "Oh, this is my family's recipe for gumbo," by the time that it gets to you, how many people changed that before it got to you? How many people made a little change? How many people added something or took something away?

The evolution of a recipe and a story is so important, and I think that's important to the youth right now as well. I think we're having more conversations than ever as young people about how our voices are gonna get to be heard. How do things like cultural appropriation and how do things like cultural appreciation, like, factor into the identity and to the traditions that we have? What are we doing, and what are we saying?

Food is no different. It's the same thing as dance or art or music, where we're finding new ways to express ourselves. Everyone can say, "You know what I wanna do? I wanna learn how to make puff pastry. I'm gonna learn that." Where does that go generations from now? Is that, like, why someone has a really good puff pastry recipe? Because I decided to watch a YouTube video?

[24:14] **Thomas:** When I think about the new generation, I think about creativity. I think about them being fearless. I think about them having no boundaries in a good way. For me, that's exciting, right? Because different cuisines that wasn't celebrated back then are now being celebrated.

Now, we have a very diverse foodways. So, I'm just looking forward to the future, and I'm looking forward to what these young chefs cook up.

[24:45] **Gilmore:** Youth are so influential as to what we are going to see in the future. That is, like, what we're doing, and that's the future of culture.

[25:12] **Shauri Thacker:** *Folk Tales: Youth and the Future of Culture* is a production of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Elise Jeffries, Shauri Thacker, and Nakanlaya "Por" Tupsamphan produced this episode.

The Delgado family isn't quite done with their Festival time, so if you enjoyed what they cooked up, join us next episode for how they and other families and community groups work together to pass on their traditions.