

It's Like a Continuum

Ines Brito, fifty-five, lives in Hanson, Massachusetts, with her family.

Nezi, as she prefers to be called, came to the United States from Cape Verde in 1996 and teaches English as a Second Language at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Boston.



THERE IS NOTHING QUIET ABOUT Nezi's kitchen. In the midst of four chattering parakeets in a cage by the window and the whimpering of Kiki the dog begging for scraps, Nezi's nine-year-old grandson, RJ, break-dances past the stove. His older sister, Maura, calls out over the onions frying and the coffee brewing that she'll answer the phone. When Layla, Nezi's daughter, opens the fridge to show us some of the ingredients they use in their cooking, RJ warns, "Whatever you do, don't eat that blood sausage. You'll end up in the hospital!" His eyes are smiling as he awaits our reaction before running into another room. It's a warm, friendly place, and Nezi and Layla offer food to us throughout the morning while they prepare *katxupa*, the classic Cape Verdean stew, which needs to simmer for hours before it's ready to be eaten. The women relay some of their favorite family memories while they chop vegetables, stir the pot, and keep up with the dishes. Maura, who eats her breakfast at the kitchen table, occasionally interrupts with her own take on a particular story.

The myriad scents of pork, corn, and yucca boiling away on the stove begin to fill this kitchen, which looks out onto pine woods that were once farmland. Nezi's husband grew up here; his parents emigrated from Cape

Opposite: Nezi and George with *katxupa* for Mother's Day.

Verde years ago and worked the land for decades, selling vegetables at a little stand down on the main road. Although she's lived here for only a short time, the house very much seems like Nezi's now, the kitchen filled with the pots and plates she's brought with her from Cape Verde and Portugal, her books that line the walls, and all her family members who have made an appearance this morning.

Just when it seems we must have met everyone, a young man in jeans and a blue bandana slips quietly through the door. It's George, her nephew, who lives downstairs. He's carrying a bouquet of flowers for Mother's Day and passes it to his aunt with a shy smile. He slips quickly out of the room before she can say anything. "The first time we clone something, it's going to be George," Layla tells us when he's gone.

Nezi nods, explaining that nothing ever bothers him. "He helps me calm down when I'm stressed about things," she adds, and then turns toward her daughter and says, "I'm all done. You can finish it," pointing toward the stove. The *katsupa* is a combined effort: Nezi started cooking the cracked corn at six this morning, added the beans at around nine, and chopped some of the vegetables—sweet potatoes, butternut squash, and yucca—and marinated the pork so that Layla could add everything later.

"Me finish? No way!" Layla jokes, walking toward the refrigerator to get the *linguica* and chorizo sausage that she will brown and add just before serving. Layla is good with a knife and quickly chops the sausage while she talks about her part-time catering job, her love of cooking, and the many different ways *katsupa* is prepared in Cape Verde. "We have an open door policy when we make it," she tells us. "Whoever stops by gets some." When I look into the two huge pots cooking on the stove and ask her how long they'll be eating leftovers this week, she laughs, "You don't make plans for *katsupa*. It will be gone by tomorrow."

Kiki the dog, drawn to the sausage Layla is chopping, begins to jump in the air, trying to reach the counter. Nezi claps at her to stop from across the room. "She's Creole, like me—part chihuahua and who knows what else," she smiles as she gathers scraps of sweet potato skins to add to the compost bin. Outside, she shows us around her yard, pointing out the gardens she's been working on since she moved in with her husband and the small pool for fish George has been helping her build. "I'm trying to give life to something abandoned," she explains, gesturing around the place. She bends down to pull some weeds by her feet, and the hem of her multicolored African dress flutters in the cool breeze. "Every single day this spring I came to check on these," she tells us, pointing proudly to all of the tulips blooming around her.

We linger in the May sunshine and talk about her mother's beautiful gardens in Cape Verde, while inside, Nezi and Layla's version of *katxupa* simmers. It proves to be delicious when we sit down to eat it later, and in the end Layla was right: the pot was nearly empty by the time we left, after Nezi's friends from down the street stopped in when they heard what was on the menu today.



When I was young, I didn't pay much attention to cooking. I was very outgoing, wanted to be independent, and was more interested in politics. It wasn't until I came to America that I had a desire to learn. And that was because I had to. I think I surprised my friends when they found out I was doing all this cooking. They'd say, "Who made this food? Wow, finally you learned to cook!"

My intention wasn't to immigrate here but to help my son. He was in eleventh grade then and came to live with my ex-husband. I wanted to give him some support during my vacation, but, when I was getting ready to [return to Cape Verde], I saw that he was not settled, and that was heartbreaking to me. I decided to stay right then, and I've been here ever since. I had a nice, settled life in Cape Verde, with a very good job: I was running an institute that worked with unions to train workers. I had never considered leaving. For me, the U.S. was a place to visit, not to live. Yes, some people from my country immigrated here, but that was not in my plan.

So I stayed. I didn't tell my son I was here for him, because he wouldn't want me to do that, but I felt that if I did stay, he'd always have someone. And he's doing well now: he went to college and got his master's. He's in California, but everyone else lives with me: my daughter, who came after I did, and her family, my husband, my niece and nephew. We all cook together, especially on Sundays, and that's when we make the *katxupa*. We can put it on the stove and then do the cleaning and errands, because it takes a long time to cook. My grandkids don't like all the Cape Verdean dishes, but they do love this, especially the *katxupa rafugadu*—or *katxupa gizode*; that's what they call it on another island, but it's the same thing—when you take the leftover *katxupa* from the night before and cook it in butter or oil so that it gets thick and really dry. You serve it with *linguica* and fried eggs. It's delicious. They love to do this with me. We put on the aprons, and they help on Sunday mornings.




Nezi (seated on the left) enjoys *katxupa* with George, Layla, and Maura (seated on the right).

But when I was growing up, this was something I ate every single day. And you know, I didn't get sick of it!

So we love the food, and I find when we don't have it, we miss it. At one family gathering, I think it was last Thanksgiving, I didn't bring the *doce de leite*—that's a custard I do that I learned from my mother—and everybody was feeling like they didn't have dessert. And there were many things there! It's like there still was a space that was waiting to be filled.

I think I learned things from my mother when I was a kid that, at the time, I didn't even realize I was absorbing, like this desire to have certain foods. It's the same with my garden. My mother had the most beautiful garden on my island, Fogo. When I was young, I didn't think much about the garden; I just enjoyed it. Now, I am gardening. I read everything I can and talk to people. When I garden, I feel as though I am celebrating my parents' lives. You know when you are young and your parents




tell you something, it's like you are not really listening. But everything stays! I know that, because I can hear my mother when I'm gardening. People used to ask her, "Why are your plants so beautiful?" And she used to say, "I talk to them. I look at them. They are like friends." Now I'm the same. When I'm in my yard here, there's a movie running in my head of my mother's garden in Cape Verde. It's like a continuum. The food, too. Because now I'm cooking what my mother cooked, like the *doce di leite* and the *katxupa*.

If you go to Cape Verde, you can find *katxupa* in all the restaurants. It's a dish that everyone eats, but in the past, it was traditionally something that only poor people made. We have poor *katxupa* and rich *katxupa*. Poor *katxupa* is the real *katxupa*—no meat, just the corn and beans. You can find both kinds everywhere now, but this is not the way it used to be. Before, we would never think of serving something like *katxupa* to guests, and you'd never find it in restaurants. You'd only see European—especially Portuguese—food. That has all changed: independence taught us to value what is ours, but before, many of us only valued the Portuguese culture. Now, I see there is a great pride in things that are Cape Verdean.

And I feel this, too, although I try not to think of my culture as a special culture. There is no such thing as a special culture. Cape Verdean culture is just special to me maybe. But actually, if you look closely, a lot of things about different cultures are actually similar. For instance, I find when I talk with Caribbeans or Latinos, they make the same food we make—maybe slightly different—but it's still beans and rice. I remember when I went to Cuba I was telling some people I met there how to make *katxupa*, and they told me, "That's our Cuban *sancocho* you're describing." So there are things that are similar. I guess I like to find the things we share, not how we're different.

I have had conversations with women in Cape Verde, and I have had the same conversations with women in other places. Our problems are universal. I've found in traveling and meeting people that it shouldn't be difficult to go from one culture to the next, that things aren't that different, and that really, we all share many things. People in Cape Verde make such a big deal about how things are so different from one island to the next, but they're really not. And if I start to think about putting down roots—staying here or going back—I've decided that it doesn't necessarily have to be in any one place, because your world is everywhere



you go; it's all the places you've been. Sometimes I think you are small when you just live in one place. You have to be big, so spread yourself, because you are connected to everybody.

I like to say that when I look at my life, it's like a circle: I was born in Fogo, then I went to San Vicente—another island—and then I went to Portugal to study. Finally, at forty-three, I came here and found my childhood friends, because they ended up here, too. And not just my childhood friends, but my whole island! Sometimes I think America is more Fogo than other parts of Cape Verde, like San Vicente or Santiago. So, coming here has been a very spiritual experience. Yes, I have lost some things, but when I stop and see what I've gained in living here, I think, no, I haven't lost anything. Of course I miss it at times—my mother is there, my sisters, too. But I know if I went back, I'd miss the things here: my students, my friends, all the new experiences. I love what I do now. My life is full. I've had wonderful experiences and met so many wonderful people involved in so many interesting projects, people who share similar views as I do. I feel like I'm lucky: this is not my country, but I'm very happy here.

I guess the only thing that's really been a challenge has been the language. I am always thinking more than I am able to express in English, and it's frustrating. So I sometimes feel, oh, I'm not going to do this because I can't express myself very well. Let's say I'm going to talk about Cape Verdean culture. I know so many things about this subject, but I'm not able to operate on the level I'd like to in English. I try not to let these thoughts take over, but sometimes it's hard. You know, when I first considered talking about the food from my country for this book, I thought, oh, Nezi, you cannot do this; you will not be able to do this. Then out comes all the pain. I think, why am I doing this? I don't know how to express myself. But my husband encourages me a lot. He says, "Do it! Just do it! Don't stop!"

So, I'm trying. And I share my experiences with my students. I tell them how I've struggled. I tell them that I am still learning English. And, you know, they feel relieved. I think if someone older, someone with more experience, tells you that they've been through the same thing that you have, it's like, wow! She's had a hard time, too! So I share my experiences with them. I think we should talk about our weaknesses; it makes us stronger.