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CELEBRITY COOK: A RUBEN BLADES SPECIAL

By MICHAEL WINERIP;

RUBEN Blades is a man of rare breadth: an internationally known salsa singer, composer and lyricist; an actor in serious and light films ("The Super," starring the Academy Award winner Joe Pesci, is due out in late summer; "Crazy From the Heart," co-starring Christine Lahti, will air on TNT in August); a celebrity with law degrees from the National University of Panama and Harvard. Add to this a bicoastal life style, and it is plain this is someone who could eat anywhere -- or anything -- he pleases. Yet Mr. Blades's dietary habits reflect a Panama childhood spent watching his grandmother at work in the kitchen.

"Because of my grandmother, I will not eat fish or chicken," he said. "My grandmother was this lovely, charming lady who would raise the chicken in the backyard and then murder it in the kitchen. . . . I'd look at her with her 12-inch knife; I'd say, 'Thank God she's on my side.' Also, you have chickens in your yard, you see what chickens eat -- it doesn't turn you on to chickens." As for fish: "Panama has two coasts; you'd think I'd love fish. But I'd see my grandmother chopping fish to pieces -- the head, the eyes, the imploring eyes . . ."

So, early on, Mr. Blades -- now 42 -- became a beef and pork man. (The lovely, charming lady did not do livestock.) For someone of such diverse interests, he admits to having a one-track stomach. "I could eat pork chops, plantains, rice and beans for the rest of my life and be happy. I probably will die young: Everything, I cook in oil." The only healthful thing Mr. Blades can say in defense of his eating habits is: Beans. "Full of protein," he pointed out.

Because he eats such a limited range of foods, Mr. Blades has become an expert on black beans. ("I've tried them in every restaurant you can imagine.") He says the best in the United States are at La Caridad in Manhattan, on Broadway at 78th Street. He discovered the restaurant in the mid-1970's when he first moved to this country, and returns for the beans whenever he's on the East Coast.

But even La Caridad's beans fall short, according to Mr. Blades. "You can't get really good black beans in the United States. There's not enough taste with black beans in restaurants." Instead, he recommends eating them at his place, recalling a time his friend

the Nobel laureate writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez came for beans and brought his son. "Gabriel likes to eat . . . good food," said Mr. Blades. "He wasn't disappointed." Possibly the great writer was just being polite? "Oh, no. He had several servings. If he hadn't liked the beans, Gabriel would have ordered out pizza."

Mr. Blades's black beans recipe consists of "stuff that comes along, bits and things your Mom tells you, bits and things your wife does, things you incorporate," he explained. Sometimes, to make them saltier, he adds bacon instead of ham. "These black beans are a combination of elements and memories of tastes," Mr. Blades said. He serves them with "a nice steak," rice and fried plantains, or as a soup. But he's even heard of people who eat them with chicken and fish.

BLADES'S BLACK BEANS

1 pound dried black beans, washed and picked over
6 cups chicken stock, approximately
4 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup minced yellow onion
1 plum tomato, chopped
1/2 cup minced green bell pepper
1/4 cup chopped cilantro
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
1 tablespoon sugar
2 teaspoons low-sodium soy sauce
1 1/2 teaspoons dried oregano
1/8 teaspoon lemon-pepper seasoning
1 clove garlic, minced
1/4 pound baked ham, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
Salt to taste
Sour cream and cilantro sprigs, for garnish.

1. Soak the beans overnight in cold water. Drain. 2. Place the beans in a large, heavy pot, cover with water and simmer for four hours, adding some stock to cover the beans as the liquid is reduced. 3. Meanwhile, heat the oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Sauté the onion until golden, then add the remaining ingredients except the ham, salt and garnishes. Simmer for three minutes, stirring. 4. Stir the ham and the contents of the skillet into the beans. Simmer, covered, for two hours, stirring and adding more stock to cover the beans as necessary. 5. Season with salt and serve with sour cream and sprigs of cilantro. Yield: Six to eight servings.

Michael Winerip is a reporter for The New York Times, currently on leave to write a book.

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