

FOREWORD

by Chef LaLa
(Laura Diaz)

Twenty years ago, the title of this book, *Diabetes? No Problema!* would have been an oxymoron. In the past, a diabetes diagnosis was often a cause for hopelessness. Thank goodness that has changed! We've come a long way in our understanding of how a variety of foods—not just sugar—are converted to glucose in the body. And now we know that exercise is critical to diabetes prevention and management. Living with diabetes today is, in fact, no problema.

However, despite what we know about the disease, how to ward it off, and how to prevent complications, the number of new cases is rising along with the death rate. Latinos are at special risk. As authors Sheri R. Colberg and Leonel Villa-Caballero point out, more than 10 percent of all Mexican Americans twenty years or older have diabetes. That's almost double the rate of non-Hispanic whites. Other Latinos have somewhat lower rates, but still higher than non-Hispanic whites.

Although I don't have diabetes myself, it's hard to shake those numbers from my head. I know how devastating it is to watch a loved one struggle to manage the illness and then suffer through the

later stages of the disease. I lost both of my grandmothers and one of my grandfathers to complications of diabetes. Seven of my father's eight brothers are currently living with diabetes. My dad has it too.

Though this book is geared toward Latinos, the advice it contains is applicable to anyone, especially those with strong cultural ties. In my work as a chef and certified nutritionist, I hear all the time from people belonging to a variety of ethnic groups that they want to eat healthier without giving up the comfort and flavor of their traditional cuisine. Latinos will say, "Well, my grandmother always made that with lard. That's how it's been done for generations." While it's true that our parents and grandparents cooked for us with the intention of giving us the best, do you think they would have used certain ingredients, like lard, if they had known the long-term consequences of doing so?

It's okay to tweak traditional recipes. It's okay to make healthier choices without sacrificing the rich culture that we hold dear. After all, we are the next generation of *abuelos* and *abuelitas*. We have the power to create new traditions from old—so we can stop being a statistic. Our *abuelos* came to this country because they wanted for us to have a better life. A better life for me, frankly, is having my dad around for a good long time. And I personally want to be around a good long time for my son and his children.

If you have diabetes or if you're reading this because you know someone who has it, what better time to build a healthier lifestyle that involves the entire *familia*? There's no need to feel guilty because you have certain dietary needs. Eating well to manage or prevent disease is not the same as going on a diet. In fact, I loathe the word "diet" because it implies deprivation. There are many foods that you can eat without sacrificing *sabor*. Just switching to different cooking methods, such as broiling, steaming, or baking, or eating less meat—which were the norm in many of our cultures before

modern-day influences were introduced—can have a tremendous impact on health. And think about the native produce of Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean that's now available on our store shelves: *maracuyá*, *tamarindo*, *jocote*. Something that comes in its own package, the way nature intended, is always an excellent choice.

You also have the opportunity to create new family traditions involving exercise, which is critical for your long-term well-being. Going for a walk after dinner is a great time to catch up on the day's events. Bicycling with your children can be fun and relaxing. If you really want to honor our heritage, put on some music and dance. There's no reason you can't exercise *con sazón*. But please, don't make the excuse that you don't have time. Because if you don't have time to take care of yourself now, then be prepared to make a lot of time for disease later. Being sick, having a heart attack, going to the hospital—all of that takes time. *Mejor prevenir que lamentar*.

Latinos especially have difficulty admitting their condition, discussing it with others, and getting help. So, if you haven't already, surround yourself with a team of medical professionals who make you feel comfortable. Then make the lifestyle changes necessary to manage your blood sugar. When you face diabetes head-on and take control of the daily decisions that affect your health, the people around you will know how to support you. The beauty of our culture is the importance we place on *familia*. We go through this together.

For those of you who are reading this book, I applaud you. Even if you don't have diabetes yourself, or even if you belong to a different ethnic group, you'll find these pages brimming with useful information. The important thing is to take hold of your condition. You need to ask yourself, Do I have diabetes or does diabetes have me? You can have diabetes and still have it all!