

# Measure with your heart: COVID and TikTok launched this Providence mother's cooking career

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The pandemic shutdown compelled Omi Hopper to head to the kitchen with her camera. If she recorded herself cooking, she just might keep her Puerto Rican cooking traditions alive, she thought.

What else was she going to do? COVID had closed down her busy makeup studio and her day job at Sephora.

With a husband and four sons, she was knee-deep in food anyway.

"All I was doing was cooking," she said good naturedly. "I started on TikTok and figured I could do one-minute videos."

What she created clearly fed the soul of others. Her videos went viral, getting 10,000 and 12,000 views.

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"Cooking Con Omi" (Cooking with Omi) has more than half a million fans on Instagram, 52,000 followers on YouTube and more than 410,000 followers on TikTok. She was featured in the national magazine Latina in December.

Being a social influencer has changed her life.

Hopper now works with sponsors, collaborates with other influencers and, most important, has become a food entrepreneur. The only makeup she applies is on herself, and it looks really nice, though what most see is her food.

Hopper recently launched her first product: Sofrito Fresquecito. Sofrito is an herb base for many dishes in Latin American cooking. She says every country has its own formula for cooking everything from rice and beans to roasts to sautéed shrimp.

**Reserving a table for Easter dinner?:** Try one of these great restaurants around RI

Hopper's sofrito includes cilantro, coriander leaf, red and green bell peppers, onion, garlic and sweet bell peppers.

It is not only sold in all Dave's Fresh Marketplace locations in Rhode Island, but also online at [saboriza.com](http://saboriza.com). This is an online marketplace for Latin foods. Her fans across the country buy it up.

She is working on two more products at Hope & Main, the culinary business incubator and kitchen that has launched many new entrepreneurs.

But not to get ahead of the story, there were other steps to get there.



One of the key ones was taking a Zoom class with Rhode Island Commerce.

"During the shutdown, in the thick of it, there was a course to see how you can reopen after COVID," she said.

She was thinking about her makeup studio.

"I was doing the videos for fun. But while in class, someone recognized me from the videos and they asked, 'Why isn't that your business?' "

Out of a fog, the light dawned.

"I took it seriously because of the numbers," Hopper said.

Her sofrito video alone attracted 1.1 million views. If she stayed the course, maybe there was a new career in food for her.

"In your own kitchen, you are the boss," she added.

Hopper applied for and got a small business adaptation grant. Then she met Lisa Raiola, president and founder at Hope & Main. She began the program to create a new food business.

Social media works as her advertising plan, even though it just started for fun and to remember her traditions.

Hopper was born and raised in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico. She came to Providence when she was 11 years old.

Keeping alive those memories from home inspired her. Her grandmother was the family matriarch and her mother had four sisters. She has fond memories of the six women.

"I'm surprised I'm not 300 pounds, because all we did was cook and eat."

But the cooking came with music, dancing and plenty of laughter. "It sounded like a party but it was just the family cooking," she added.

Still, Hopper was learning at the same time.

"I was that kid who always asked questions about what was cooking," she said. "It was only years later that she realized she could cook."

"I knew the flavors I liked and the ones that went together," she said. And of course, she was always cooking for her family.

## **When she started making videos during COVID, it took her cooking from the shadows**

Hopper learned the most important lesson of social media: she had to produce new content every day. Now she has to study algorithms to keep pace and continue to grow.

"I have to be inspired by the recipes and the cooking, and I want people to feel good when they are watching it," she said.

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Nearly all of her videos are in Spanish. That is how she learned back in Puerto Rico. When she's cooking, she's thinking in Spanish.

Though she is bilingual, Hopper said she doesn't speak in recipe style. She finds writing recipes challenging because she doesn't cook in an exacting way.

"I learned that you measure with your heart," she said.

That's all part of her charm and appeal as a home cook.

But she is transitioning to a food entrepreneur and working on two new products. One is a freeze-dried version of her sofrito that you can take out as you need it. The other is a marinade that is made from the sofrito. That adds a lot of versatility to cooking.

Her husband, Kradin Hopper, is helping her with the development of her brand. She calls him the thinker. They've been together a long time and share a lot of history. They recently bought a new home in Riverside.

Hopper believes everything they've done to this point has led to the moment she turned on her camera. She turns a young 40 this year.

"I feel like I was destined to do this," she said. "I can create memories and have a product that will eventually become a line of products."

She thinks about those four sons of hers and thinks she can create a family business that will be a legacy for them.



At her Easter table on Sunday, she will have two other families joining hers. They will do an Easter egg hunt and then eat a traditional Puerto Rican roast, Carne Mechá, stuffed with colorful peppers and onion.

She shared the recipe here. Find a video online with the story at [providencejournal.com](http://providencejournal.com).



## Recipe for Carne Mechá

3- to 5-pound beef roast chuck, round, or brisket

1 red pepper

1 green pepper

1 yellow bell pepper

2 large white onions, divided use

1 teaspoon adobo, plus more for dusting the roast

1 teaspoon sazón, plus more for dusting the roast

2 teaspoons salt

2 tablespoons vegetable oil



4 cloves minced garlic

2 tablespoons of Mi Sofrito Fresquecito, sold at Dave's

2 tablespoons tomato paste

1 to 2 cups red wine

2 cups low sodium beef broth

1 pound baby carrots cut into 2 inch chunks

2 celery stalks cut into bite-sized chunks

2-3 bay leaves

Get a large, oven safe Dutch oven pot heating over medium high heat.

Create a hole in the middle of your meat of choice. Create a well but do not cut all the way through to the opposite end of your meat.

Dice all of the peppers and one onion and season with adobo and sazón.

Stuff the vegetables inside the well of the meat. Use kabob sticks to pinch and close the hole, or a cooking twine to tie and keep the vegetables inside.

Season both sides of your roast with the salt and more adobo and sazón.

Add vegetable oil to pot and sear roast until browned, about 3 to 4 minutes each side.

Remove roast from pan and set aside briefly on a plate or cutting board.

Add garlic and “Mi Sofrito Fresquecito” to pot and sauté 60 seconds. Add tomato paste and deglaze pan with red wine and beef broth. Add the second onion, cut into 2-inch chunks, plus carrots, celery and bay leaves.

Place the roast back into the Dutch oven pot.

Place a lid on the pot and transfer it to a preheated 275-degree oven. Cook 2 hours.

Remove the bay leaves and let the roast rest. Then cut into perfect rounds. Garnish with cilantro leaf.

It pairs well with vegetable rice or mashed potatoes.

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