

The Meaning of My Lunch

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sancocho de gallina

Nilsa stared at the clock on the classroom wall, daydreaming about lunch. Her mother had given her a treat today, a thermos full of *sancocho de gallina*.

Sancocho was one of Nilsa's favorite dishes, something she usually only ate on special occasions like her birthday or when a family member came to visit from Panama. Just thinking about it made her mouth water.

The bell rang and, finally, it was time for lunch. Nilsa sat down in the school cafeteria and carefully poured some *sancocho* into a bowl. When she looked up, she saw her classmates staring.

"What *is* that? It smells really bad," said Gus, pinching his nose shut.

"It's *sancocho de gallina*," Nilsa responded. "It's kind of like chicken stew."

Codi glanced at the bowl full of chicken, yams, corn, and more, and scoffed, "That doesn't look like any stew my mom makes! It's more like a science experiment." He laughed, pointed

to his lunch, and asked, "Why don't you eat something normal, like pizza?"

"Codi's right," added Candice. "That's one weird lunch."

Nilsa looked at everyone's else's lunches: pizza, fries, meatloaf, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Suddenly she didn't feel hungry any more.

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"Mom, why did you make me bring this weird food to school? !" Nilsa blurted out when she returned home.

"What?? *Weird food?*" her mother replied, startled. "You love *sancocho*!"

"I do! But all the kids said it was weird and smelly, so different from pizza or meatloaf."

"It isn't weird, and if it smells different, so what?" responded her mom. "You know, *sancocho* is the national dish of Panama. Back home, people eat it all the time. And we all love it in this family!"

"Maybe. But everyone made fun of me," said Nilsa, still feeling upset.

"You know, *hija*, there really is no such thing as "normal" or "weird" food," Nilsa's mom said.

"What's weird to one person may be delicious to another. And sometimes people learn to love a food they find yucky at first. Even if you're not used to something, you should try it before you judge it."

"Yeah, but... the kids said really mean things," Nilsa replied, her eyes looking down at the floor.

"Maybe you can help them understand. How about if next time you bring it to school, you explain a bit. You could tell them *sancocho* tastes great, and that our family has been eating it for hundreds of years. Your great-grandmother taught your grandmother who then taught me."

Nilsa pondered this for a moment and then asked, "Can you teach me how to make it?"

"Of course! Let's make another batch tonight. You can bring it to school tomorrow."

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The next day at lunch, Nilsa pulled out her thermos. She immediately heard Codi comment to Candice, "She's eating that smelly food again!"

Ignoring them, Nilsa scooped up a big spoonful and smiled; it was delicious! She then looked over at her friends and asked, "Anybody want a taste?"

"No way!" Codi yelled.

But Candice agreed to try it, and so did Gus and Amy. One by one, each of Nilsa's peers ate a small portion. Some of them loved it, some really didn't, and others were in the middle.

Eventually, even Codi agreed to take a taste, though he made a disgusted face as he brought the spoon to his mouth. He took a tiny sip and rolled his eyes, but then he looked a little surprised. Next, he put the whole spoon in his mouth and ate the rest. "Uh... you know, this isn't too bad. It's got a nice flavor."

Nilsa chuckled. "You just weren't used to it, but you should always try food before you judge it. Next time my mom and I make *sancocho*, I'll bring an extra bowl just for you."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What meal does Nilsa bring to school for lunch?

- A. *ropa vieja*
- B. *empanadas*
- C. *sancocho de gallina*
- D. *arroz con pollo*

2. How does Nilsa feel about *sancocho de gallina* at the beginning of the story, before lunchtime?

- A. She is excited to eat it because it's one of her favorite dishes.
- B. She is nervous to eat it because she doesn't know if other people like it.
- C. She is angry that her mother didn't give her more stew because she's so hungry.
- D. She is confused because she doesn't know where to get a spoon from.

3. Nilsa's classmates are unfamiliar with *sancocho*.

What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

- A. "Codi glanced at the bowl full of chicken, yams, corn, and more, and scoffed, 'That doesn't look like any stew my mom makes! It's more like a science experiment.'"
- B. "*Sancocho* was one of Nilsa's favorite dishes, something she usually only ate on special occasions like her birthday or when a family member came to visit from Panama."
- C. "You could tell them *sancocho* tastes great, and that our family has been eating it for hundreds of years. Your great-grandmother taught your grandmother who then taught me."
- D. "Ignoring them, Nilsa scooped up a big spoonful and smiled; it was delicious! She then looked over at her friends and asked, 'Anybody want a taste?'"

4. Nilsa tells her mom that her classmates made fun of her lunch. What strategy does Nilsa's mom suggest when Nilsa says that everyone will make fun of her if she brings in *sancocho de gallina* to school again?

- A. Her mom thinks that Nilsa should ignore everyone and not talk to them anymore.
- B. Her mom thinks that Nilsa should share more about the history and importance of the dish in her family.
- C. Her mom thinks that Nilsa should transfer schools and start over with a new group of classmates.
- D. Her mom thinks that Nilsa shouldn't bring the dish to school anymore and should only bring sandwiches.

5. What is the main idea of this story?

- A. At first, Codi, Nilsa's classmate, makes fun of her lunch of *sancocho de gallina*, a traditional Panamanian dish, because he's unfamiliar with it, but later he grows to like it.
- B. Most of Nilsa's classmates bring meals like pizza and meatloaf to school because those are the foods that they eat at home, and Nilsa brings the food that she eats at home with her family.
- C. *Sancocho de gallina* is an important Panamanian dish, but it's not as well-known as *ropa vieja*, which is a shredded beef stew, or *arroz con pollo*, which is a chicken and rice dish.
- D. Nilsa brings a traditional Panamanian dish to school for lunch and is made fun of, but she eventually becomes confident in her heritage and traditions and teaches her classmates about the meal.

6. Read these sentences from the text.

"You know, *hija*, there really is no such thing as 'normal' or 'weird' food,' Nilsa's mom said. 'What's weird to one person may be delicious to another. And sometimes people learn to love a food they find yucky at first. Even if you're not used to something, you should try it before you judge it.'"

What does "judge" mean as it's used here?

- A. to celebrate someone or something
- B. to decide whether or not you like something
- C. to introduce someone to something new
- D. to smile at someone and be nice

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

Nilsa decides to bring *sancocho de gallina* to school again _____ her classmates made fun of her the first time.

- A. even though
- B. as a result
- C. however
- D. eventually

8. When Nilsa brings *sancocho* to school the second time, her classmates act like her food is gross. How does Nilsa respond to them?

9. How do Nilsa's classmates react once they eat *sancocho de gallina*?

10. What lesson does Nilsa try to help her classmates learn?
