

Abuela, Chef, Boss: Vladimir Guerrero Jr.'s Grandmother Feeds the Majors

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TORONTO — The brown sugar bubbled in the pan. The marinated goat meat sizzled when added. Spoonfuls of olives and capers were heaped into the mixture. Then Altagracia Alvino, who can make this dish with her eyes closed, froze.

“Did I put spice in here?” she whispered to herself in Spanish.

Alvino, 66, was careful to make as little noise as possible because it was 7:22 a.m., and her husband and her 20-year-old grandson, Vladimir Guerrero Jr., one of baseball’s brightest young stars, were asleep in their rooms of the family’s Toronto apartment. The familiar scent of cooking meat was unavoidable, though.

Silver hair in a net, Alvino leaned in to inspect the meat, decided it indeed lacked kick and reached for a package of crushed red pepper. She had plenty of time to perfect the feast of white rice, stewed beans and goat before Guerrero awakened at 11 a.m. and quickly departed for Rogers Centre, carrying bags of the food to share with both his Blue Jays teammates and their opponents.

Alvino may be the most popular and powerful grandmother in baseball. For about two decades, she has filled the bellies of hundreds of players, most of them Latin Americans far from home. Eating her comfort food is a tradition that has become especially popular among players from the family’s homeland, the Dominican Republic.

A few have come to call Alvino “abuela,” or Grandma, yet most have never met her. She was there forevery step in the career of her son Vladimir Guerrero Sr.,who was enshrined in the Hall of Fame last year, and now she oversees his son’s.

“I do it out of love,” Alvino said recently as she drank coffee at the dining room table while the food cooked.

Alvino learned to cook in bulk at her mother’s food stand in Don Gregorio, a small town in the baseball-loving Dominican Republic. After some financial trouble in her family, Alvino took over the stand’s cooking duties at age 10.

No country outside the United States has produced more M.L.B. players than the Dominican Republic, and few families have produced more than the Guerreros. Alvino’s four sons — Vladimir Sr., Wilton, Eleazar and Julio Cesar — all became professional baseball players,

and several of their children did, too. Vladimir Jr., a rookie, is the only grandchild in the major leagues now.

Although she ended up living with Vladimir Sr. for most of his 16-year career, she first did so with his older brother Wilton, who reached the major leagues as a Los Angeles Dodger just weeks before Vladimir Sr. joined the Montreal Expos in September 1996.

Wilton told his mother that his Dominican and Venezuelan teammates longed for home-cooked meals, so she made some for him to take to the stadium. She was relieved when Wilton was traded to the Expos in 1998, allowing her to cook for both sons. Although Wilton left Montreal in 2000, Alvino stayed with Vladimir Sr. for the rest of his career, including stops in Texas, Baltimore and Anaheim, where even the Angels' owner, Arte Moreno, partook in Alvino's feasts.

Alvino assumed she was done cooking for ballplayers in 2011, when Vladimir Sr. ended his major league career. But by 2016, Vladimir Jr., whom she helped raise, was playing professionally and Alvino was back to her routine. She lived with him at every level of the minor leagues, from spring training in Dunedin, Fla., to Class AAA Buffalo. Guerrero joked last year that she would go with him to China if he somehow ended up there.

"As long as I have strength in me, I have to give that strength to them," Alvino said of her grandchildren. "So I've dedicated myself to this."

To this day, Alvino refuses any money for her efforts, even to cover the cost of supplies. Guerrero, who asked his grandparents to live with him in Toronto, took pride in becoming part of the food-sharing tradition.

"I needed to keep doing it," he said.

Her support is not just culinary. She attends every home game and encourages him to keep an even temperament, rolling her eyes when she catches him complaining to the umpire.

"She always tells me to respect the game and to respect my teammates," Guerrero said.

That motherly nature fuels her cooking. She does all the chopping, stirring and cooking as a labor of love, even when her knees hurt. She recently joked that the players she has fed over the decades are part of her brood, along with her own 23 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

"I didn't expect her to still be cooking, but it was gratifying to see that she still does," said the Minnesota Twins slugger Nelson Cruz, 39, who first tried Alvino's cooking when he was 25 and who has followed her example, taking meals to the park for his team and the visitors.

"When we came to Toronto this year, I had her food. It's still the same good food that I ate in 2006."

On a recent morning, Alvino cooked 15 pounds of goat, two pounds of red beans and 10 pounds of rice. She speaks just enough English to order most of what she needs from the store near her grandson's apartment, which is just a few blocks from Rogers Centre. During a long homestand, the refrigerator in the kitchen and a small one in the living room, which is on loan from the Blue Jays, are stuffed.

Many have sought Alvino's recipes, including the Blue Jays' clubhouse chef, but she has no formal ones.

"The only thing I measure is the rice, so it's not undercooked," she said as she poured it, along with oil and water, into a large pan.

Her secret is the sauce (sofrito) for her beloved stewed beans. She started with a purée of cilantro, onion, garlic, celery and oregano, which she got from the Dominican Republic because, she said, it tastes better. She added tomato paste, seasoning blends, chicken stock powder and sugar, giving the beans a hint of sweetness that she believes sets them apart.

"It's amazing," Blue Jays second baseman Cavan Biggio, 24, who is from Texas, said of Alvino's cooking.

"The best," added Rafael Devers, a Dominican 22-year-old Boston Red Sox third baseman who likened Alvino's cooking to his mother's and grandmother's.

Everyone knows that Alvino is the backbone of the Guerrero family. When the Blue Jays have wanted Guerrero to lose weight — last winter he was listed at 6-foot-2, 250 pounds — they talked to her.

"The boss," said Blue Jays Manager Charlie Montoyo, who is from Puerto Rico and made sure to meet with her on a trip to the Dominican Republic after he was hired.

During spring training, Alvino said, Guerrero lost 12 pounds after she fed him mostly smoothies, multigrain toast and grilled meats, fish and vegetables.

Yet during the six-month regular season, his diet — and those of the players receiving the special meals — matters less since he burns so many calories practicing and playing.

Although players from all countries eat her food, Alvino always checks with her grandson to see how many Dominicans are on the opposing team. Last weekend, there was just one — Domingo Santana — on the visiting Seattle Mariners.

Players do not have to request a meal: Guerrero brings it to the park himself, and clubhouse assistants take it to the visitor's clubhouse.

"Sometimes I don't even try the cooking myself," Alvino said.

It can seem as if every Dominican player knows of Alvino or has a tie to her. Yankees pitcher Luis Severino, 25, said his family's cook in New York is Alvino's daughter-in-law. Before one game in Toronto this season, Alvino's delivery to the Yankees' clubhouse was devoured so quickly that Severino requested a special order through the daughter-in-law. He received it the next day.

"When we're together as a family, she's always cooking," said Ketel Marte, 25, an Arizona Diamondbacks utility player who is married to one of Alvino's granddaughters.

There is only one rule for those receiving Alvino's food at the stadium: Wash and send back the plastic container. When Severino's didn't come back after one game, Alvino sent another the next day plus a note on top: "Return the container."