

## **Keeping It Real with Alan Govenar and Kaleta Doolin at Mis Cazuelas**

It was raining cats and dogs. I was sitting with Alan Govenar in Mis Cazuelas in East Dallas. We were waiting for Kaleta Doolin, his wife. Govenar is an author, filmmaker and founding director of the upcoming Museum of Street Culture — among other things. Doolin is a brilliant artist, philanthropist and author — among other things. They are two of the busiest people I have ever met. They agreed to have lunch and chose Mis Cazuelas, one of their favorite spots in close proximity to their workspaces.

Outside, there are picnic tables in the front under a tarp. Inside, there are a few tables and stools at the bar. This is a tiny Mexican diner. There is a much larger Mis Cazuelas nearby on Main, but the couple emphatically prefers this location on Columbia. “Part of it is the aesthetic of this place,” Govenar says. “I love the idea of being in the kitchen.” They point out that one employee has been there since they first visited twenty years ago. The place was once a Dutch restaurant and there is still a windmill on the roof.

They see little change in the neighborhood over the last three decades. “It’s an intense scene,” Govenar says, of the immediate surroundings. Indeed, people have warned me about visiting the surrounding bars. On the other hand, Govenar searched those bars for talent when he was organizing massive folk festivals in the ’80s. He remembers an angry homeless man kicking the glass door at Mis Cazuelas hard enough to break it once while he was eating. But on the other hand, a friend of his on the way out of town once dropped his wallet in the parking lot after a meal. They were looking for the wallet an hour later when someone called to say it was found. It was returned with all of the contents still inside.

We are given chips and tiny cups of salsa and quickly learn that a little goes a long way because it is extremely spicy. Govenar orders two ice teas, I get water, and the drinks arrive in ancient, enormous plastic tumblers. He recommends the gorditas, and the small masa cakes are being flattened and tossed on the grill right in front of us. He also recommends the guiso de puerco, tender pork in a red chile stew of ground pepper paste.

Govenar also says the Albondigas — Mexican meatball soup — is fantastic and it is perfect for this occasion. But alas, they only serve that on Thursdays. Mis Cazuelas actually offers a Lent menu. Doolin arrives from a Zonta Club of Dallas meeting and has somehow avoided rain that seemed to be falling sideways.

We talk about the incredible 60,000-piece Texas African American Photography Archive, which Govenar and Doolin founded. Along with 40,000 other items from Govenar's company, Documentary Arts, they are sadly leaving Texas. But they are getting a nice home at the International Center of Photography in New York and Govenar curated an exhibit about rhythm and blues that was shown at the Mana Contemporary in New Jersey.

We admire the delightfully simple paintings of food on the exterior glass. Govenar created all the historical plaques hanging in Deep Ellum and he mentions another idea for a project: Putting paintings of everything that was torn down for the freeway on columns under the bridge. "If you walked under the freeway, you would feel the ghosts of Deep Ellum past," Govenar says. He sums up how he typically treats out of town guests: "Eat at Mis Cazuelas and then go under the freeway to what we believe to be the spot where Blind Lemon Jefferson stood and listen to the ghost."

Near Mis Cazuelas, Doolin served as a teacher and director for her non-profit organization, Contemporary Culture, for two decades. She developed a curriculum in English and Spanish to not only help students create art, but give them a culturally diverse art history. Mis Cazuelas reminds her of a place she used to eat at near Lovefield.

She also mentions that her father, Charles Elmer Doolin, opened the Casa de Fritos Mexican restaurant at Disneyland in California in the 1950s. From there, he setup the Tango Dairy Mart in Dallas as a prototype for a plan to open fast food restaurants that would feature Mexican food. He had the first microwave in Dallas. Doolin also mentions her father inventing the car service tray decades earlier.

The restaurant serves nopalitos (cactus), so I decided to order it stuffed into a gordita to go along with Guiso de Puerco. "Are you kidding?" Doolin asks, when I struggle to decide if I want corn or flour tortillas. Corn it is. The avocado seeds are left in the guacamole to keep them from turning brown. Doolin mentions immersing them in water to create dye for yarn she uses for her artwork.

Guiso de puerco is served with sopa de fideo, a soup with minced garlic, diced onion and broken vermicelli. It's a simple, inexpensive noodle soup with a surprising depth of flavor. The chile paste has subtly and layers. It is, by turns, rich, sweet and spicy. The nopalitos

have a taste that is difficult to describe, but comparable to green beans with a texture a little closer to aloe vera.

—JEREMY HALLOCK