



Conversation with Rodrigo Pacheco

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your background and what brought you to the work that you're doing today?

Rodrigo Pacheco: My name is Rodrigo Pacheco. I'm an Ecuadorian chef who is committed to the conservation of climate-proof gastronomy, and igniting gastronomy as a mechanism to reconnect, strengthen, restore, and protect ecosystems and cultures. My background is in Europe, where I worked in three Michelin-star restaurants for many years. A little over a decade ago, I came back to Ecuador and immediately started to work on the restoration of ecosystems through the concentrations of edible crops, perennial, and non-perennial crops.

Since then, I have been able to connect with Indigenous cultures from Ecuador and other parts of the world and create a bridge through gastronomy that connects the conservation of nature and culture, brings economic opportunities for the community, and transmits knowledge and wisdom to the future guardians of the planet. As a chef, my goal is to utilize my creativity to solve the world's problems.

Ashley Hopkinson: There are so many ways to approach restaurant work and food, and you've worked in a lot of these areas, so when you came back to Ecuador, what made you choose this approach? What was pressing on your heart that made you say: I want to go in a different direction, and do this in a sustainable way?

Rodrigo Pacheco: I was raised like this. When I was a child, I saw my grandfather planting and cultivating and living off his very compact, edible forest. I remember the smell of the plants, I remember the way he worked with the clay oven, with the embers. He also had sustainable animal systems with guinea pigs and chickens. I saw this mechanism as a way of life. My grandfather always intrigued me. I saw his hands were wise and tender, but at the same time, they worked the land, so this, of course, inspired me.

As I grew older, I started committing to this world of gastronomy as a dream for academic purposes. Then it became a profession, then it became a way of life, and then it became a purpose. It became the most important mission of my life. Yet even more important than gastronomy was the conservation of nature. Gastronomy became a motor to catalyze and be able to sustain and connect with the different stakeholders around me and create gastronomic experiences that were focused on conveying a message.

But the origin is my childhood: my mother, my grandmothers, the way that the kitchen was always the center of my house when I was a child. Now that I have two kids, the kitchen remains the most important place and moment in my life. I've always been very adventurous in the sense that I always liked the outdoors, the exploration of nature, the adventure. When you are outside, you are absorbing all this important information, you are interpreting the life cycle of plants, of the planet, of animals, of humans. I was able to define my role as a person and as a chef in this world, and that is how everything came together.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me what your approach looks like, and what makes it special? How would you describe it to someone who is not familiar with the restaurant, or with Ecuador? How do you work with the community? How do you bring the food to the table? Can you tell me a story about how it all comes together?

Rodrigo Pacheco: As a chef, I created an experience that connects people with nature and brings people to the origin. First, we do artisanal fishing on the shore, then the guests walk through a bio-diverse trail for one hour, so it's a very physical experience with a connection to nature. Then, when you arrive at the actual restaurant, you have prepared your body, your soul, and your spirit to receive and absorb the benefits of the food, of the harvest, of the foraging we have been doing, of the ethnobotany we are expressing in our work.

This is how it became popular. We have served people from all over the world, and from over a 100 countries in the world. That's how a small restaurant like Bocavaldia was able to start doing more and more, improving the quality of life of the people and of the community and integrating members of the community who didn't have any background related to hospitality or gastronomy.

My team has always been a team that I have trained from scratch, men and women from the Indigenous community who barely finished primary school. But I always believe in their talent, in their skills, and in the wisdom they carry as Indigenous people. I have always been very respectful of them in the sense of recognizing their superpowers. That's how we connected the people and the landscape and started shaping the surrounding universe in a way that made it stronger.

Being such a small restaurant, Bocavaldivia has been able to protect and articulate the protection of over 150 hectares of forest by now. Maybe it's a lot, maybe it's not a lot, but my question is: If we were able, as a small restaurant in the middle of nowhere, in a small country in South America, to articulate the protection of 150 hectares, what we can all do together then: What can gastronomy do by working together to hold itself accountable for climate change? Gastronomy is a continuation of agriculture, and agriculture is the number one cause of global warming. Part of my individual, as well as my collective sense of responsibility towards environmental transformation, is encouraging other leaders and other chefs to make bold decisions in favor of good health and a harmonious relationship with nature.

Ashley Hopkinson: You talked about integrating members of the community and ensuring that people who have Indigenous wisdom and a relationship with the land are part of the work you are doing. Why is that so important to you in terms of being able to realize your mission?

Rodrigo Pacheco: Indigenous people of the world are the guardians of over 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity. Over the centuries, they have been adaptive, they have been resilient in terms of creating agri-food systems that do not deplete nature, and they have always taught us about living in harmony with our surrounding universe. So for me, you can learn knowledge on the internet, at school, in a book, but wisdom only comes from two sources: nature and Indigenous people from all over the world.

I think we're facing a very important crisis in terms of the elderly people from the Indigenous communities not being able to pass all that information, all that knowledge, to the present and future generations because of different factors such as social media and the placement of cities and other constraints that are not in favor of this transmission of knowledge. So I have determined a mission to be able to become a bridge from the Indigenous wisdom to the people, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, recognizing them as an example of how we have to live in today's world and in the future.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is missing from the conversation in gastronomy and with our food systems? What do you wish people were talking more about in this area where you have a lot of training as well?

Rodrigo Pacheco: Not enough chefs are talking about climate change. I think chefs of the world are focusing on creating delicious and beautiful dishes, and that's okay, it's part of our job, but the question is: How many hectares are you protecting? I'm glad that you have Michelin stars, but how many hectares are you protecting, chef? How are you improving the quality of life of the people

around you, chef? Those are my questions to other chefs in the world. What is the message that you are conveying through your creativity? Where are you obtaining your products? Are you harming any ecosystems? Are you harming anybody so you can serve that product and sell it to your guests?

All those questions become a little bit uncomfortable and sometimes misinterpreted in the gastronomic world, which is always geared toward glamour, and having these beautiful, fancy products and fancy experiences in fancy places. But for me, the most fancy food is the food that is positively transforming our surrounding universe. I think society, and gastronomy in general, have a lack of sensibility about and a lack of connection to nature. I encourage chefs to talk more about this.

My mission is to open the hearts and the minds of other chefs and entrepreneurs of the hospitality business, so they can become leaders who are willing to compromise with the environmental transformation that is part of the 2030 agenda, who follow the sustainable development goals [SDGs], and who have a clear road map of the precise actions they must take.

[We need chefs who are willing to] take bold actions, break glass to align the stakeholders towards these important purposes, create a triple bottom line, and think about not only of benefiting the shareholders, but also about benefiting people, the planet, and culture. The conversation is much deeper than: What are you serving on the plate, and what fancy wine goes well in a beautiful scenario? It goes much deeper than that, and I hope I am a positive element as I try to inspire more of my colleagues toward this purpose.

Ashley Hopkinson: From your perspective, what role have partnerships played in your work over the years? Can you talk a bit about strategies that you've used to cultivate partnerships and maintain partnerships?

Rodrigo Pacheco: They've been very important. Number 17 of the SDGs essentially says to create alliances, so this is very, very important for all. Right after COVID, society understood that we have to work as a team, so COVID was a good thing to catalyze that sense of becoming allies with other people.

In terms of my specific project, after an analysis of the region, we have determined who the stakeholders are that work around the community. You might think that some of them are enemies, or some of them are not connected to you. But with a deeper vision or a higher level vision, you can establish small fibers of cooperation with all the stakeholders that are around the community, and then those thin lines may become a pipeline later on. This is how I've learned how to make partnerships with academia, with local communities, with the private sector, with international

organizations, with foundations, with local governments. Everyone must be aligned so we can solve the world's problems.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there a particular partner you've worked with that has been especially valuable to your mission and what you're doing?

Rodrigo Pacheco: I think they all play a pretty important role. For example, the private sector can direct capital and integrate these projects into their social, cultural, and environmental responsibility plans and teams. International organizations such as the Food and Agricultural Organization [FAO], where I am a Goodwill Ambassador, has also become a great platform for providing the right data for us to use in directing our decisions toward environmental transformation.

Then, of course, the local governments have to be part of it because they are policymakers. They can transform the way that we deal with different situations. You also need to be aligned with the community. You need to give them hope to make them believe that this is important for their children and important for their health. It's a very high-level vision that is required to be able to connect all these important dots.

Ashley Hopkinson: What has been a challenge with the work? Do you find challenges in helping people to appreciate native ingredients? What other challenges do you face in doing work this way?

Rodrigo Pacheco: For me, the biggest challenge has been living in one of the hotspots of biodiversity in the world, surrounded by beautiful ecosystems and extended biodiversity, yet seeing the devastation of nature in an unprecedented rhythm. That, for me has been sad and painful, but at the same time, it has pushed me to create mechanisms to restore, strengthen, and protect the culture, to embrace our ancestral wisdom, to give recognition to the Indigenous people, to plant more trees, and then to express all this information on a dish, connecting those dots so people can absorb all this information, rather than turning it into activism.

I'm not an activist. I'm more of a promoter of good health, a promoter of biodiversity. Gastronomy is such a joyful way for us all to connect. It's a positive and delicious way to learn information that society needs to hear. As chefs, we must become richer, we must become elements to transmit this important knowledge and these crucial experiences to society. This has been my role, and this is the special key I have to do what I do.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you measure the progress you're making toward your goals and your mission? You mentioned the hectares, but what else stands out in showing you that you're achieving what you set out to do and that you're making a difference?

Rodrigo Pacheco: When you are patient enough to wait for over 10 years to harvest the fruit of a perennial tree that you planted with your own hands, that is very meaningful. When you have had the experience of restoring the ecosystem around you for over 10 years, and you start seeing wildlife coming back to that place, it's something that brings a lot of spiritual health. That's been the experience for me and my team.

When you see a team that started out shy and very insecure transform into beautiful warriors for gastronomy, ambassadors of the culture, people with great confidence and a sense of environmental responsibility, it becomes a satisfaction. Then, to see my children grow up in such an environment, as the future guardians of the planet, is also really comforting. These efforts pay off in many ways.

Ashley Hopkinson: You've been in the culinary field for a long time, and now you're doing this work in Ecuador, so I'm curious: What has been a lesson or insight that you've learned along the way? Is there a teachable lesson you can share with the people who read this interview?

Rodrigo Pacheco: I think that we all have a purpose on this planet, and as long as we find it and recognize it, it will give us the most important fuel of our lives: We can wake up every day knowing that we are part of a solution, we are contributing to solve the world's problems, we are bringing people smiles, and we are helping the economic growth of our community. Those are things that many people can do.

I always invite people to support our project, but also to create their own solutions. Some of the best solutions come from civil society, and it's important to provide this support to institutions, to governments, and not just point at the bad things that we see around us. It's easy to point at others, but it's not so easy to point at ourselves, at our fridges, at our way of managing waste, at the actions we are taking as families and individuals to solve and contain climate change. That's something I invite everyone to think about, and then to take action. It's time to take action.

Ashley Hopkinson: I've been thinking a lot about wellbeing in doing this work, and a big part of it is reflecting on how the work you do is helping communities and helping the environment. Since this is the space that you're living in, I wanted to ask you: What does wellbeing mean to you as a chef, as a restaurant owner, and as a lover of nature?

Rodrigo Pacheco: For me, wellbeing is a forest. The forest is equal to wellbeing because forests are cooling down the planet, reconciling with wildlife, preserving water resources, creating opportunities for nutrition, for material, for medicines. With forests, we're creating economic opportunities, art, inspiration, shade, beauty, clean air, so what is better than that? That's quality of life for me, that's wellbeing, and that's why I think forests are our greatest friends in life.

Ashley Hopkinson: What have you found that has been valuable or helpful for you when having these conversations with peers, or others in the field who might be not as far along on the journey as you, or who are doing things in a different way? How do you approach those conversations? Is it through food?

Rodrigo Pacheco: Yes, it's through food. It is about research and development, innovation, and then getting the people around you to be surprised by something that you're doing: a new product, an insect, something that you discovered that is edible, or something from the ancient past that could be used in the contemporary world. When the tools of gastronomy help you to get a smile out of people and transmit knowledge, that's the most rewarding and most important thing that happens in this journey.

Ashley Hopkinson: This is a very food-specific question: What is your favorite thing to prepare? And then what is your favorite thing to eat? Are those the same thing?

Rodrigo Pacheco: I can answer in a very unique way because I do not have a specific answer, but rather, I say fresh is good. Preparing food is a way of utilizing biodiversity. What's my favorite food? Biodiversity, and that includes biodiversity of ecosystems, of cultures, of species, and of genetics. With all those elements, you can create limitless combinations of flavors, of ethnobotany, of colors, of nutrition, of textures, of temperature. It's a broad opportunity to discover nature.

A kitchen is a way to transform and recycle those emotions and that learning into something that other people will eat as an intimate act of putting things in the mouth. It's following the journey of nature, and it's a virtuous cycle.

Ashley Hopkinson: That means your favorite food comes directly from the farm, and involves the nature of understanding– not just the ingredient on the table, but all the emotions and the whole act of all that connection.

Rodrigo Pacheco: Exactly. Good food is a ceremony, and we learned that from ancient cultures in Ecuador. They were very, very committed to designing beautiful elements. They were the first pioneers of domesticating plant species, of creating pottery, of navigating. I feel extremely proud of our

ancestral cultures, but I also know that we have forgotten much of this. Now we think we know everything, but if we look into the past, we are going to find some amazing ways to create this beautiful ceremony around food, sharing, nutrition, and respecting nature.

Ashley Hopkinson: If you had the right support, what would you like to see grow, expand, and change in the field of gastronomy? What would you do?

Rodrigo Pacheco: I would create a certification that recognizes the environmental transformation that kitchens provide to the world. I think there's already a great recognition of Michelin stars on different lists. But for me, it's time to recognize 360 degrees of honor behavior, and to provide a 360 degrees of honor stamp, where you do things right with everything that is around you— with your provider, with your family, with food, with the product, with the land, with biodiversity, with gastronomy, with art, with the law. That is what I would like to see.

I would redirect the vision of gastronomy towards that. How many hectares are you protecting and how much of that recognition that we all want comes from that? Of course, the food has to be good, that's a reality, and hopefully, I do that too. But cooking is the easy part. What's difficult is connecting all these dots for gastronomy to become a vehicle of environmental transformation. That is not so easy to do.

Ashley Hopkinson: I'm not a chef, but I'm a good home cook. So let's say I wanted to take this kind of work to Guyana, to do something there with our native food. What advice would you give me? What would you share with me that you learned, or that you'd like me to try to incorporate?

Rodrigo Pacheco: Sometimes the most humble ingredients are the best. The more we believe in our roots and the origin of our culture, the better we're able to express that idea into a culinary creation. Those are the elements that bring the most satisfaction and recognition from whoever is eating.

This applies at home or in the restaurant. Sometimes we want to make things complicated, but to make things simple, yet outstanding, that's often the most difficult, but that's the way to go.

A good cassava transforms into a roasted cassava consomme with ancient cassava bread and the cassava leaves, which you can transform into a mortar. It's such a humble ingredient. But then at the same time, it has so much greatness, so much flavor, so many natural health benefits. I like to view food as a way of healing people and healing nature. Everyone can do that. It's about the intention you put into what you're preparing. That's the most important thing.

Even the position you take when you are cooking – leaning forward slightly and putting your heart on top of what you're doing – represents thinking about how you're going to make people happy. It's such an honorable act to cook and to prepare food for others in any context. When we recognize that, we empower each other and lose our fear. A cook with fear is not a good cook.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you want to add to the conversation and share– about Ecuador, about your work, or about your background?

Rodrigo Pacheco: I would like to add two things. One is that I'm creating this product that represents the forest biodiversity, so you can transform the world in one bite, and it's more than a gummy bear; it's a monkey gummy.

We are creating a howler monkey gummy that includes a fine aroma cacao, which is a signature from Ecuador, but also integrates the biodiversity of the forest in one bite. That is an interesting result of many years of trying to create an opportunity for biodiversity to stop monocultures.

The other thing is that we created this mechanism, this miniseries of documentaries that is called *The First Table* to pay tribute to the first nations of the world. We have already done two episodes, one in Ecuador and one in Toronto, Canada, connecting with the Indigenous people and the Indigenous wisdom of using their products, then reinterpreting that into a menu for different leaders of opinion as well as the Indigenous people. The more I connect with Indigenous people, the better able I feel to transform the world positively.

Ashley Hopkinson: I know for a lot of people, gastronomy and conservation doesn't always come together, but you've managed to meld it all together in a really great way. Thank you so much for sharing your insights and your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*