

# Albondigas with Alexis



We speak with Alexis, one of our program participants, in Denver Food Rescue's Healthy Choice Food Box Program and her experience. We look at how the social determinants of health have impacted Alexis's experience while she creates a beautiful meal to share: albondigas.

Alexis is a proud mother of three who has been a program participant from the very beginning of the Healthy Choice Food Box program. This program started in the summer of 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and many requests for Denver Food Rescue to start a delivery program. Alexis recalls the boxes showing up on the front door one day and being surprised with the contents inside. Each box contains a variety of produce provided by a partnership with East Denver Food Hub. Each box is inspired by different cultural cuisines. Alexis chose Box 1, it has fresh items like tomatoes, peppers, dried rice, onions and more that change periodically with availability and seasonality of produce. These items inspired Alexis's recipe choice, albondigas, a Mexican meatball soup, served with hearty vegetables.

Upon encountering Alexis, you are met with a proud woman, confident and comfortable with herself and her family. Her lack of intimidation has been helpful for her in trying new things like today's meal, albondigas. This is actually Alexis' first time making this soup, although she is familiar with the dish growing up: "I grew up with Hispanic [food], but I'll eat anything."

Alexis became familiar with this dish and other Latinx food growing up in and around Denver's Alameda and Federal Boulevards, which have large Hispanic populations. Alexis now lives within the Villa Park neighborhood, which is similar to the Alameda and Federal area, with about 69.5 percent of people self-

identifying as Hispanic (CO Equity Compass). Alexis noted that these neighborhoods have changed quite a bit in both good and bad ways since she grew up, and wants to make sure her children are aware of these changes. Villa Park has seen a decline in the self identified Hispanic population, [from 78 percent in 2010 to 69.5 percent in 2020](#). These cultural shifts are just one of the changes Alexis has witnessed.

The environment that Alexis raises her kids in is very different than what she was raised in. “We got to remember that when we were growing up, it’s different from them ... It’s a whole different thing raising kids nowadays, ya know,” Alexis shares with us. When she was younger she experienced a different style of parenting; her grandmother and extended family were her main caretakers, both with a different style of parenting that at times was not the most supportive to her needs. This motivated her to be different. “I’m trying to get them to be, for them to be sisters and brothers and friends, that way they can be there because that’s what I wish I had.” During our conversation, Alexis’s children were dancing and singing, patting the meatballs for the soup, helping their mom in little ways, and adding joyfulness to the scene.

Amongst these moments of joy, Alexis does her best to teach her children good values and life lessons. Her children are her pride and joy and her appreciation for these moments has come through very challenging times.

The experiences Alexis attributed to her growth and development are things many of us might not understand or would like to experience. A couple of years ago, Alexis found herself living in the streets, not exactly sure what to do, but sure of her capability to survive. During those challenging times, Alexis made tough decisions to ensure that her family was okay, “For us I mean, there was some days I would try and get [my daughter] fed, ya know, there’s times that I would feed her, and I would just go without.” She continued to hope and push through these hard times and went through the housing assistance programs to find a way out.

Her tenacity to survive and to rise above since she was a child brought her to the opportunity for housing. She explained that when her time came to apply for housing, she found herself being truthful of her experience and putting her trust in that. “I told housing the truth, ya know? I mean I was nervous but I was like imma take the shot, and they accepted me in like a month. One of the housing ladies was even shocked I got it.” Stumbling on her words, Alexis recalls how excited and happy the moment was when she received housing. She continued to let other women, who were in similar situations, know that being truthful would help them out, “Sometimes you just gotta open up to people.” It helped many of the women she met get resources and assistance.

Alexis attributes a lot of this ability to her individual strength and resilience. Navigating through the housing assistance programs can be challenging and tiresome. Although there are some services available to assist individuals experiencing homelessness, the growing need is stressing the services available. The growing prevalence of homelessness can be attributed to the high household cost-burden individuals experience in the city of Denver. 57.1 percent of those living within the Villa Park neighborhood experience a housing cost burden (CO Equity Compass), while there is an ever growing cost of living within the city of Denver. According to the [CPI-U \(Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers\) cost of living rose up 8.6 percent from May 2021 to May 2022](#). The CPI-U measures the cost of consumer purchases like energy, rent, food, and medical care which contribute to the cost of living. Income also

indicates how individuals live. The median income is 36K annually in the Villa Park neighborhood while the median income of the city of Denver is 77K (CO Equity Compass).

With this in mind the ability to get out of homelessness is quite challenging. Alexis was able to get housing with the right resources and her own resiliency. She found individuals who could help her navigate and connect with the housing system. Much of the work was still done on her own to find these resources while providing for her children. She now helps others, especially young women, and makes sure her children have the skills to do the same.

“I want them [my children] to survive out here, this world. I want them to know right from wrong. I grew up in the system . . . that’s what made me stronger because I’ve seen, I’ve lived out in these streets before, and I thank myself and I thank, ya know, that I’m still alive even though I went through all that, and I’m still surviving.” The same skills that kept her moving forward in her younger years provided her the hope that she could do it again. Alexis’s resilience and capabilities in these tough times created an environment for her to provide support and help to others.

Although the main goal of the Healthy Choice Food Program was to assist individuals facing transportation barriers, the reality of the reach of the program goes beyond the initial scope. This program has been able to provide some additional relief for individuals facing various precarious situations. Alexis explained that when she first started receiving this box, she was wowed by the effort put into this program. This food provided some additional resources and provided her the ability to make more meals with her family.

There has been an ever increasing effort and support in programs like this which has come in large part as a response to COVID-19. Alexis let us know that COVID-19 programs provided a lot of support to many families including her own, although with an unknown ending. “People that get food stamps, they’ve been giving people extra food stamps through the pandemic.” This additional food support, P-EBT, was in response to the growing need of families and children because of school closures during the pandemic. SNAP caseload increased [19 percent between February 2019 and June 2021](#). Although there has been quite a large response, COVID-19 will have unprecedented impacts on individuals with the support programs coming to an end soon. [P-EBT is set to continue for the 2022 summer](#), continuing as long as the [public health emergency exists, which is effective until July 16, 2022](#).

The Healthy Choice Food Box program, as a response to COVID-19, has been able to support 300 families from 2021–2022 with boxes of fresh produce delivered directly to their homes each month. This program's initial scope, to assist individuals with transportation barriers is still at the forefront of the program's efforts, but those involved like Alexis have many different reasons for their participation. This food has been able to provide a creative way for families to get involved in meal creation and have all members of the family help in some way. In preparing this soup, Alexis' children helped mix the ingredients for the meatballs and were dancing along with each other in the kitchen.



(Alexis's child mixing the meatballs for the soup with her hands. )

If there's anything this program has done for Alexis, it has helped her make some more memories with her children and provided another facet for her to show her love. When she is able to make a meal that her children enjoy, it provides another boost of what type of mom she wants to be. "When I cook and they eat it, and like it, I feel like a good mom." Alexis' love for her kids is not just expressed with food, but is a message acted on every day through her experiences and teaching. If there is one thing she wants her children to take away, it is that "my mom helped me with this life."

Alexis' story and experience have made her a great mother, a teacher, and a support system for her children and others. She has done a great deal to create opportunities for herself and to support others while addressing that the ability to do that has been by helping herself first. "I like to help people out or other people than myself, but I gotta fix myself and then help other people." She has done a great deal to be proud of and is in awe of her own experiences and triumph. The surprise she feels is for her own story and her ability to rise above and reach out to help out many others. With this experience she has made an impact on those she meets and especially her children. She continues to make sure every day to live fully and enjoy life because as she says, "Tomorrow's never promised."

The program has been an opportunity to continue supporting individuals and families experiencing different challenges and we acknowledge the work is not done. We thank Alexis for her time with this project and for sharing her story with us.

# Albondigas Recipe

## Ingredients:

### For the meatballs:

2 lbs ground beef  
1 cup white rice  
2 eggs  
1/4 white onion (diced)  
1/2 bunch mint or cilantro (diced)  
2 teaspoon minced garlic  
2 teaspoon garlic salt  
2 teaspoon oregano  
2 teaspoon black pepper

5 Roma tomatoes

1/4 white onion

2 garlic cloves

1 tablespoon chicken bouillon

1 cube tomato bouillon

1/2 teaspoon cumin

6 cups of water; add an additional 6 cups of water to boil

### Inside the soup:

2 mexican squash (chopped)

3 potatoes (chopped)

3 whole carrots (chopped)

Optional: 3 celery sticks (chopped)

Optional: 1/2 bunch mint or cilantro

## Instructions:

1. Prep all the ingredients by chopping the vegetables and herbs..
2. Combine the ingredients for the meatballs: ground beef, uncooked rice, 2 eggs, onion, mint (or cilantro), garlic, oregano, salt, and pepper with either hands or a spoon. Form meatballs about 2 inches in diameter (makes about 15 meatballs) and set aside.
3. Blend together tomatoes, onion, garlic, chicken bouillon, tomato bouillon, cumin, with 6 cups of water.
4. Coat a large pot with oil and heat over medium. When hot, add blended ingredients to the pot and allow to boil with an additional 6 cups of water.
5. Add salt to season broth and continue to stir.
6. When the broth comes to a boil, add meatballs and cook for an additional 15–20 minutes. After these 15–20 minutes, add additional vegetables of choice: potatoes, celery, and carrots, and cook until potatoes are soft, about another 15 minutes.
7. Soup is ready to serve.
8. Optional: After potatoes are soft, put in a mint bunch and let soup simmer on low heat for another 5 minutes and then serve.