

## BRINGING THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER THROUGH

# FOOD

VRINDA QUINTERO CREATES COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS  
AND SUPPORTS LOCAL CAUSES WITH VEGAN, VEGETARIAN  
AND GLUTEN-FREE VENEZUELAN AREPAS AND MORE

By ALISHA GREEN

After spending several years working with nonprofits in Santa Cruz, Vrinda Quintero felt disillusioned by the restrictions that often come with grant-based efforts. She wanted to find a way to do more for the community and be responsive in addressing changing needs locally.

She participated in a leadership training to find some clarity on her next steps. When she was asked to describe her dream for the community as part of the training, she immediately knew her answer: Bringing people together through food.

“The thoughtfulness of cooking and feeding and doing all these things is incredibly healing for your own body and the community,” Quintero says.

She opened Areperia 831 in 2017 as a social enterprise offering vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free dishes through catering and pop-up food events, giving her and her all-women team a way to support a wide range of community causes. Her dishes are drawn from her time growing up in Venezuela — seen in the many varieties of arepas she creates — along with her travels around the world.

She measures the success of Areperia 831 in terms of social and environmental impact, with a focus on building “agency and community through food.”

Some of her favorite moments have happened at “Share a Meal, Share a Story” gatherings, where Quintero and the Areperia 831 team made food for Downtown Streets Teams events and cleanups of the coast and waterways with local groups. Areperia 831 provided free food for participants, and every person gathered was invited to share a personal story with the group.

“All these people that don’t generally converge could converge and sit down and just eat,” Quintero says, and sharing in food and stories created new connections between people. She put the events on hold for the first two years of the pandemic, but she says she hopes to bring them back soon.

# SPREADING COMFORT IN OUR COMMUNITY

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**“THE THOUGHTFULNESS OF COOKING AND FEEDING AND DOING ALL THESE THINGS IS INCREDIBLY HEALING FOR YOUR OWN BODY AND THE COMMUNITY.”**

—Vrinda Quintero, founder of Areperia 831

Areperia 831 seems to be everywhere in the community. During just this past summer, it contributed food to events including the Juneteenth celebration, the Liberation Paddle Out, Pride Pint Nights at Greater Purpose Brewing Company, a Queer Joy Party at Agility Boulders, the Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter’s inauguration of its new wing, the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History’s birthday bash, and the FoodWhat Farm at UCSC supporting youth well-being, liberation and empowerment.

Quintero crafts custom menus for each event, focusing on dishes that tie into the history and significance of the moment. For Juneteenth, that inspired a menu packed with red rice, three bean stew with collard greens and sweet potatoes, lion's mane mushrooms with a homemade tomato barbecue sauce, and slaw.

“Food, for me, is a storytelling tool,” she says.

Since 2019, Quintero has been fostering a connection with food as a teacher, too, first at the Santa Cruz County Jail and now at a night school in Watsonville and at Sequoia High School, an alternative education school in Watsonville.

“I love teaching how to decolonize our food,” she says. To her, that includes an emphasis on knowing your roots, knowing where you stand now, and knowing what you stand for. That also means she is learning about what those answers are for her students.

At Sequoia High School, many of her students have Mexican heritage. “I’m obsessed with learning all these really traditional Mexican foods,” she says. She wants to show her students how they can connect with their heritage through food, and she reminds them, “This is your pride, your heritage, your gift; it's yours.”

In addition to teaching and running Areperia 831, Quintero serves on the board of the nonprofit Encompass Community Services and is on the Culture and Diversity Committee of the Community Health Trust of Pajaro Valley.

There are always more opportunities to give back to the community, she says. “If anything, I like to think of myself as a community organizer more than even a cook or a chef.”

For Quintero, people are the common thread through everything she does.

“I have this deep need for community,” she says. “Through all these things I do, I want to stand by people and for myself.” 🌀

*Learn more about Areperia 831 at [areperia831.com](http://areperia831.com), and find the latest information about its pop-up events on Instagram at [@areperia831](https://www.instagram.com/areperia831).*