

Favelas maid fights food waste with 'viagra'

Brazilian maid Regina Tchelly is about to take the world's biggest food fair by storm: the food waste champion will rustle up her trademark dish, risotto with watermelon rind, a natural viagra.

"I'll tell you a secret," the 31-year-old said with a mischievous grin.

"This dish is not only a great example of how to use leftovers, which would usually end up in the bin, it's also a natural viagra. Everyone says it works! Who knows what the visitors will get up to once they return home," she said.

Tchelly has travelled to Italy to speak at the Slow Food fair in Turin about how it is possible to eat well on a low budget, using waste food.

According to the Slow Food movement, which was founded in Italy in 1986 to tackle the rise of fast food, 1.3bn tons of foods are thrown away globally each year, enough to fill 8,600 cruise ships.

During the five-day fair in the north Italian city, Tchelly shares tips garnered from the cooking project she runs in the favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

"I grew up in the north-east of Brazil in a poor area, but we ate well because we made the most of what we had, putting everything from banana skins to pumpkin husks in the pot," said Tchelly, sweeping back her purple hair.

"I moved to Rio when I was twenty to work as a maid and couldn't believe the amount of food which was being wasted. I thought, if I can get people into the kitchen with me, I can show them how to eat money and save money," she said.

Tchelly tried in early 2011 to get funding through an agency, which sponsors young entrepreneurs in the favelas, but was told her project was too ambitious.

Refusing to give up, she got friends to donate what they could until they had raised €65, which she then spent on utensils, and the Favela Organica project was born, with Tchelly holding cooking classes from home.

News of the project in Morro da Babilonia spread through word-of-mouth and she soon built up a loyal group of women who would attend her class every Thursday, before Tchelly opened the three-month courses to men as well.

Favourites on the menu are banana peel brigadeiro and rice with taro stems. Babilonia, just uphill from the Copacabana District, has a better quality of life since being "cleaned up" in a programme set up by Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes to tackle gun violence. Tchelly plans to start courses in poorer favelas soon.

Favela residents pay 5 reales (\$2,40) and non-residents 10, but those who can't afford to are asked to make a small donation, or do the course for free.

This year, the local residents' association has arranged for the lessons to be held in the kitchen of a nearby school to allow more people to attend them. The programme now employs 20 people alongside the dozens of volunteers.

"It's been a great success. Next I'll do a course for children," she said.

Tchelly's employers, she says, have been fantastic, allowing her to reduce her working hours to hold more classes, and from the end of November, she will quit being a maid for good and dedicate herself full time to the programme.

A couple of days before arriving in Turin, she won a "social entrepreneur" prize in San Paolo and is thrilled that her hard work is being recognised.

"My dream, which will definitely come true if I have anything to do with it, is to get all the women in the favelas involved and set up catering for big events, so we can spread the word about making big savings and avoiding waste."

"I want to make it possible for everyone to be a Regina Tchelly," she said.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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