

EMONI'S

"When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Lemon Verbena Tembleque"

RECIPE



Serves: Your heart when you are missing someone you love.

Ingredients:

Two cans of coconut milk
Handful of white sugar
Four shakes of cornstarch
Pinch of salt
Bunch of lemon verbena leaves
Bunch of vanilla beans
Cinnamon, enough to garnish

Directions:

1. In a saucepan, heat coconut milk until it comes to a boil.
Muddle a bunch of lemon verbena leaves and vanilla

- beans and add to the heated coconut milk. Let steep.
2. After fifteen minutes, mix the infused coconut milk, salt, sugar, and cornstarch. Stir the mixture until the cornstarch is completely dissolved. Let the combined ingredients come to a boil and keep stirring until the mixture begins getting pudding thick.
 3. Pour into a big cereal bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Place in the refrigerator for five hours.
 4. After removing the mixture from the cereal bowl mold, sprinkle with cinnamon.

*Best eaten cold while daydreaming about palm trees and listening to an Héctor Lavoe classic.



Day One

Babygirl doesn't even cry when I suck my teeth and undo her braid for the fourth time. If anything, I'm the one on the verge of tears, since at this rate we're both going to be late.

"Babygirl, I'm sorry. I know it hurts. Mommy just doesn't want you looking a hot mess."

She seems unfazed by my apology, probably because thing (1) I'm not braiding tight enough to actually hurt her (which is why her hair is all loosey-lopsided!), and thing (2) Babygirl is watching *Moana*. And she loves *Moana*. So long as I let her watch *Moana* she'll let me play with her hair till kingdom come. Thank goodness Angelica lets me use her Netflix account. I lean a little closer to the edge of the sofa so I can snatch up the baby hairs at the front of her head. This is the hardest part, and I have to start the

braid tight and small to get it right.

“Emoni, vete. It’s time for you to head out. I’ll fix her hair.”

I don’t even look over at ’Buela standing by the staircase that leads to the two bedrooms upstairs. “I got it, ’Buela. I’m almost done.”

“You’re going to be late for school.”

“I know, but . . .” I trail off and it turns out I don’t have to say it, because in her way ’Buela always understands.

She walks over and picks up the comb from where I set it on the couch. “You wish you could be the one taking her.”

I nod and bite my bottom lip. I worked so hard to get Babygirl into a good daycare, and despite a long wait list I kept calling and stopping by Mamá Clara’s, the woman who runs the childcare, until she snuck us into an opening. Now that Babygirl is actually going I’m freaking out. In her entire two years on earth, Babygirl has never not been with family. I braid to the very tip of her hair. The design is simple, some straight backs with a pink hair tie at the end that matches Babygirl’s outfit: little white collared shirt and pink pullover. She looks adorable. I wasn’t able to buy her more than three new outfits for daycare, but I’m glad I splurged on this one.

I pull Babygirl’s chair around so we are face-to-face, but I catch her trying to sneak a peek at *Moana* from the corner of her eye. Even though my chest is tight, I giggle. Babygirl might still be young, but she’s also learning to be real slick.

“Babygirl, Mommy needs to go to school. You make sure you’re nice to the other kids and that you pay attention to Mamá Clara so you learn a lot, okay?” Babygirl nods as if I just gave her the most serious Jada Pinkett Smith success speech. I hug her to my stomach, making sure not to nuzzle her too tight and fuzz up the braids I spent an hour doing. With a final kiss on her forehead, I take a deep breath and grab my book bag off the sofa, making sure to wipe down the plastic cover so ’Buela doesn’t get annoyed with me.

“’Buela, don’t forget her snacks. Mamá Clara said we need to supply them every day. Oh, and her juice! You know she gets fussy.” As I walk past ’Buela, I lean in real hush-hush. “And I also packed a little bottle of water. I know she doesn’t like it as much, but I don’t want her only drinking sugary stuff, you know?”

’Buela looks like she’s trying to swallow a smile as she puts a soft hand on my back and guides me toward the front door.

“Look at you trying to give me lessons on parenting. Nena, please! Like I didn’t raise you! And your father.” ’Buela gives my back a squeeze, smooths the hair bunned up high on my head. “She’s going to be fine, Emoni. You make sure that *you* have a good first day of school. Be nice to the other kids. Learn a lot.”

I lean against her for a quick second and inhale her signature vanilla scent. “Bendición, ’Buela.”

“Que Dios te bendiga, nena.” She swats me on the booty and opens the front door. The sounds of West Allegheny Avenue rush

in to greet me: cars honking, buses screeching to a stop, rapid Spanglish yelled from the corners as people greet one another, and mothers calling out last-minute instructions to their kids from open windows. The door closes behind me and for a second my breath catches in sync with the lock. Every simple love in my life is behind this one wooden door. I press my ear against it and hear a clap of hands, then 'Buela says in a high, cheery voice, "Okay, Baby Emma! Today you're going to be a big girl!"

I pull the straps of my backpack tighter. Give myself that same pep talk as I race down the stairs: Okay, Emoni. Today? Time to be a big girl.



Emma

I wanted to give Babygirl a nice name. The kind of name that doesn't tell you too much before you meet her, the way mine does. Because nobody ever met a white girl named Emoni, and as soon as they see my name on a résumé or college application they think they know exactly what kind of girl they getting. They know way more about me than they need to know, and shit—I mean, *shoot*—information ain't free, so my daughter's name isn't going to tell anybody any information they didn't earn. That's why I fought Tyrone tooth and nail to name her Emma.

“You just want her name to have the same letters as yours.”
Tyrone is a whiner.

“No. I want her name to sound less like either of ours,” I said, and I don't remember if I kissed Babygirl's infant cheek or not.

But I know in that moment I felt this huge emotion; I wanted to do whatever I could to give my daughter the best opportunity in the world. And although our names do have similar letters, mine is full of silverware-sharp sounds: *E-Mah-Nee*. Hers is soft, rolls off the tongue like a half-dreamed murmur.

Anyhow, Tyrone was late on the day I filled out the birth certificate, so Emma it was. I know a name alone can't guarantee new opportunities, but at the very least it'll give her a chance to get in the room, to let other people realize she's someone they want to learn more about.