



DECOLONIZE YOUR DIET

by Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel

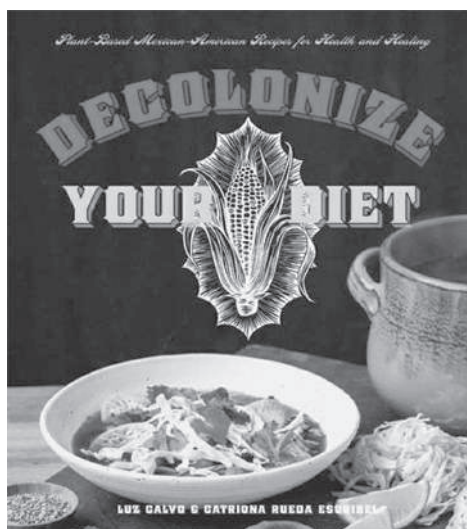
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Reclaiming Native Foods

Before contact with Europeans, native peoples in what is now Mexico, Central America, and the US Southwest ate many foods unknown to Europeans. At the time of Conquest, the lifespan of the Aztecs exceeded that of the Spaniards by ten years. The Aztecs were purported to describe the Spaniards' food as "sick people's food," contrasting it to their own cuisine, which included an array of delicious fruits, vegetables, sauces, and meats prepared with a wide variety of cooking techniques. Foods indigenous to the Americas (e.g., tomatoes, potatoes) have, in the past 500 years, changed the diet of the planet. However, Mexican and Central American cuisine also changed. The Spanish colonizers introduced white flour, cane sugar, and beef, among other products. They also introduced new methods of cooking, such as frying. After colonization, the grain base in the Americas has shifted from a reliance on corn and amaranth to predominantly wheat and rice.

There are all sorts of vegetables, and especially onions, leeks, garlic, borage, nasturtium, water-cresses, sorrel, thistles, and artichokes. There are many kinds of fruits, amongst others cherries, and prunes, like the Spanish ones. They sell bees-honey and wax, and honey made from corn stalks ... also honey of a plant called maguey ... They sell maize, both in the grain and made into bread, which is very superior in its quality to that of the other islands and mainland; pies of birds, and fish, also much fish, fresh, salted, cooked, and raw; eggs of hens, and geese, and other birds in great quantity, and cakes made of eggs.

Historical descriptions of the food markets in Tlatelolco (near modern-day Mexico City) speak to a plethora of foods and culinary techniques. In 1520, Hernán Cortés describes his first impression of the city market in a letter written to Charles V of Spain. He estimated that there were more than 60,000 people



in the daily market, twice the size of its contemporary in Salamanca, Spain. Each section of the market featured an entire street devoted to a particular kind of food. The meat vendors sold fifteen kinds of game birds, as well as rabbits and venison. The description of fruits and vegetables is also impressive:

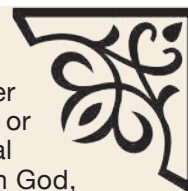
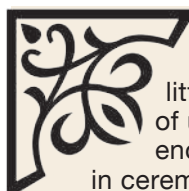
From this description, we see a glimpse of the incredible biodiversity available in pre-Conquest times. As we looked at the list of foods that Cortés encountered at the market, we were surprised to see onions, garlic, plums, and cherries listed, for those are commonly thought to have originated outside the Americas. However, research

reveals that wild onions (*Allium drummondii*), wild garlic (*Allium canadense*), plums (*Prunus americana*), and cherries (*Eugenia uniflora*) were all confirmed in the Americas before the Conquest.

The original inhabitants of the Americas cultivated and harvested a staggering variety of plant-based foods. The four food staples of ancient Mexico were corn, beans, amaranth, and chia, which provided abundant bioavailable protein. Moreover, it is important to note that extensive trade routes existed before colonization, with indigenous people from diverse cultures and locations involved in exchanges of food, seeds, and cooking utensils, not only in the Tlatelolco marketplace but throughout the hemisphere.

While there is much to learn from our abuelitas' (grandmothers') kitchens, where food was home cooked and often home grown, we want to look to even earlier generations, before white flour, sugar, and milk entered into the picture. Most people fluent in Mexican cuisine believe that a traditional red chile sauce begins with a roux made of white flour and vegetable oil or lard, but it wasn't always prepared that way. In Pre-Conquest Mexico, people used chia or pumpkin seeds or corn masa (dough) to thicken sauces. When Spanish explorers returned to Europe with corn, it was regarded only as a grain to be prepared and used like wheat, rice, or barley. Corn became a staple in Italy, where it was peasant food. When the poor Italian peasants ate it as a staple, they developed pellagra, a disease caused by lack of niacin in the diet. Native peoples, however, knew that when corn is hulled and treated with wood ash or slaked lime (a process called nixtamalization) it was more nourishing; the process unlocks the niacin, making it bio-available.

The Florentine Codex, a 2,400-page document (in twelve volumes), details many aspects of Mexica (Aztec) food, agri-



As descendants of Mexican and Central American immigrants, many of us know very little about our indigenous ancestors. Many of us don't have a single community or indigenous group to claim. Some of us participate in ceremonies that rekindle those lost connections. For example, Mexica (Aztec) dance continues to the present day, kept alive in social/spiritual groups called

calpullis, which take their name from a Nahuatl word originally meaning villages, pueblos, or barrios (neighborhoods). All over North America today, calpullis meet weekly or monthly, teaching and performing traditional dances. There is a dance to Tlaloc, the Rain God, to Tonantzin, the Earth Goddess, and to Maíz, which acts out the many steps to planting and harvesting corn.

culture, and ceremony as practiced at the time of the Conquest. The Codex was written in Nahuatl and Spanish by Mexica scribes and informants under the direction of Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590). The purpose of the Codex was to document all aspects of Mexica culture in great detail. We are especially drawn to the elaborate descriptions of the tamalli vendor in Volume Ten. The good tamalli vendor is described as selling tamales of various shapes and sizes, with a wide array of fillings: some round, some tied, some folded; some wrapped in corn husks, some in banana leaves; some with sweet, fruit-studded masa, some with savory spiced masa or tangy, fermented masa; some stuffed with turkey, beans, seeds, fish or other meats; some baked and some steamed. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of ways to make tamales. They describe sweet fillings including fruit, honey, and beeswax. The savory tamales include chile—“they burn within!”—or tomatoes, pumpkin seeds, pumpkin, or squash blossoms. Good tamales are described in enticing language: “very tasty, very well made ... savory ... of very pleasing odor ... Where [it is] tasty [it has] chile, salt, tomatoes, gourd seeds: shredded, crumbled, juiced.” The long, detailed description of the tamales in the pre-Columbian era fills us with awe and wonder, but it should be noted that the Florentine Codex also delineates the person who sells “bad” tamales: “The bad food seller is one who sells filthy tamales, discolored tamales—broken, tasteless, quite tasteless, inedible, frightening, deceiving ... [tamales].”



Florentine Codex: Tamalli vendor

Like all cooks, when we cook with each other's families, with our friends, and with cookbooks, we come across the inevitable argument about the “right” way to cook a dish, with each side arguing that theirs is the “authentic” version. These arguments might be based on regional preferences, such as how to wrap tamales: Folded or tied? Wrapped in corn husks or banana leaves? Or the argument could be about a preferred ingredient: Lard or shortening? Meat or pumpkin? By reading the codices, we've learned that indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica have always made many different kinds of tamales, and this encourages us to be creative and bold, instead of imagining that there is one “authentic”

recipe that we need to emulate. Generation after generation, our ancestors fed their families and communities by being clever, adaptable, and ingenious and by making use of different available ingredients.

Liberate the Kitchen

For many Mexican and Central American women, cooking is something they have been forced to do, part of the construction of womanhood, something to which they may submit or resist or which they may resent. Since the 1970s, for many Chicanas the image of the Mexican mother making tortillas was held in direct contrast to that of the liberated Chicana daughter who earned

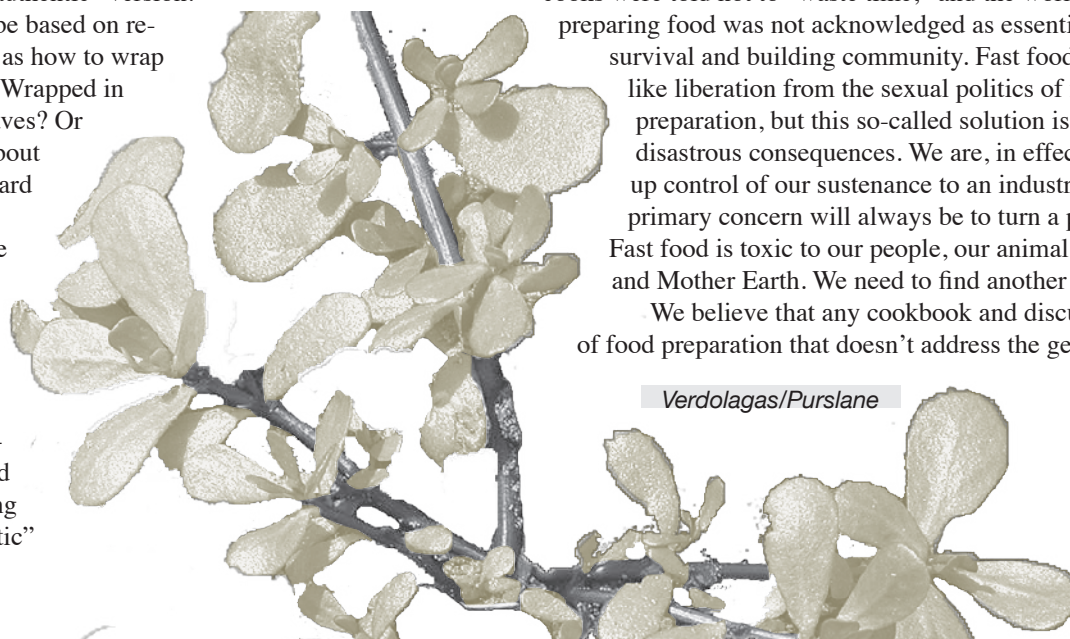
her own money and set her own terms. The problem is that sometimes, in our haste to liberate ourselves from the kitchen, we ended up devaluing the work that our mothers and grandmothers performed. Our liberation from the kitchen meant that we lost touch with how our foods formed an intrinsic part of our cultural heritage and

our health. Likewise, for every story of an angry young Chicana who resisted and resented learning to cook, there is a story of a young Chicano shamed for wanting to spend time in the kitchen, warned to walk away from women's work, and challenged about his masculinity and his sexuality.

We believe that any activity that is forced or coerced becomes oppressive. We understand that under conditions of patriarchy, food preparation often becomes an unpleasant task. In the mid-twentieth century, advertising and the food industry promised quick fixes such as frozen or processed foods or prepackaged meals that could feed everyone cheaply and quickly. Family

cooks were told not to “waste time,” and the work of preparing food was not acknowledged as essential to survival and building community. Fast food seems like liberation from the sexual politics of food preparation, but this so-called solution is having disastrous consequences. We are, in effect, giving up control of our sustenance to an industry whose primary concern will always be to turn a profit. Fast food is toxic to our people, our animal relatives, and Mother Earth. We need to find another way.

We believe that any cookbook and discussion of food preparation that doesn't address the gendered



Verdolagas/Purslane

conditions of labor may be seen to reinforce oppressive relations. We are not calling for a return of Chicanas and Central American women to the kitchen. We are calling for the liberation of

the kitchen. We understand that food is one of the pillars of our survival as a people. We need to find ways to truly value the labor that goes into all aspects of food preparation: growing, gathering, raising, distributing, and cooking food as well as the labor of keeping the kitchen clean and well-stocked.

In every household, communal living space, or calpulli, the division of labor needs to be open to discussion and negotiation. In concrete terms, this means identifying the different kinds of work essential to feeding the group—gardening, meal planning, shopping, cooking, or cleanup—and dividing these tasks in ways that are equitable. The ultimate goal should be to reconfigure the tasks themselves so that, as much as possible, the activities of procuring and preparing food can be experienced as a playful, spiritual, creative practice by everyone. In short, we want to rework the activities of the kitchen so that they become central to the revolutionary practice of love.

We welcome the fact that most people now recognize that families are configured in many ways and that families can be units of people related by blood, as well as units that come together by choice. Similarly, the labor within families can also be organized in many ways. There is no one right way to be a family, and there is no one right way to divide the tasks that go into cooking fresh, healthy meals. As queer Chicanas/os, we recognize that the kitchen has been a space to which many women have been confined, yet also one in which many (men, women, and two-spirit) have laid their own claim. Activist meetings should include feeding each other healthy foods. If one person prepares a pan of enchiladas, another a pot of beans, another a nopales salad, and another a pitcher of hibiscus tea, then the whole group is strengthened, nourished, and sustained.

Indigenous Action for Food Sovereignty

As more Chicanas/os and Central Americans come to recognize

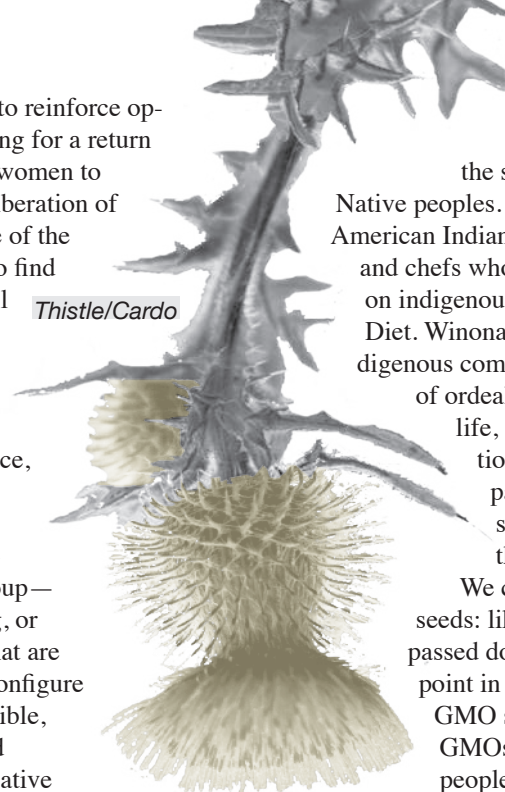
our indigenous heritages, we support and draw from the struggles of contemporary

Native peoples. Our project is influenced by American Indian and First Nation scholars, activists, and chefs who are challenging the devastation wrought on indigenous communities by the Standard American Diet. Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe) writes that, “Indigenous communities have survived an incredible set of ordeals related to food, nutrition, medicine and life, and continue to keep their cultural traditions alive. They also continue to plant seeds passed from ancestors a thousand years ago so that they can eventually pass them on to their grandchildren.”

We cannot overemphasize the importance of seeds: like recipes, they are a cultural inheritance passed down from generation to generation. At this point in history, we see an urgent need to resist GMO seeds and to support the struggle against GMOs in Mexico and Central America, where people have been organizing against GMO corn, in particular. Agribusiness focuses on monoculture, raising one crop in huge fields and applying pesticides and herbicides. In contrast, indigenous ways of cultivation use intercropping, which grows more than one crop in the same field. One well-known example of intercropping is the “Three Sisters” technique, where corn, squash, and beans are grown together. Among the many benefits of this technique is that the beans “fix” nitrogen in the soil, which helps the corn grow tall and strong without the need for chemical fertilizers.

We are indebted to Devon Abbott Mihesuah (Choctaw), who makes the argument that, “One symptom of accepting colonization is adhering to the typical American Diet, even while it is killing us.” Her words summarize our entire project: we must reject colonization because this diet is literally killing us. Mihesuah makes clear that diseases such as diabetes are the legacy of a 500-year effort to eradicate indigenous peoples. She points out the contradictions in dietary guidelines that promote dairy products despite widespread lactose intolerance among Native peoples and in spite of the fact that dietary calcium is readily available from dark leafy greens. Upon exploring how US government policies

Thistle/Cardo



COLONIZED DIET

White Supremacy and Americanization programs

disavowal, thoughtlessness

refined foods: white sugar, white flour, high fructose corn syrup

wasteful

advertising, marketing, and fads

pesticides and monoculture

GMO seeds

NAFTA, agribusiness

food for profit

assimilation



Florentine Codex: Harvesting quelites

DECOLONIZED DIET

respect for indigenous knowledge, cultural revitalization

intentions, blessings, and gratitude

whole foods: nixtamalized corn, whole grains, mesquite, local honey

resourceful

ancestral knowledge, oral tradition

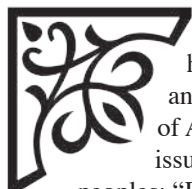
permaculture, intercropping, organically grown

heritage seeds, seed saving

small farms, local control, truly fair trade

food to sustain life

resistance, resilience



have destroyed the agriculture and radically changed the diet of American Indians, Mihesuah issues a rallying cry to Native

peoples: "Eating the foods this society presents without questioning the contents of those dishes and the damaging or healthful benefits of those foods is one of the manifestations [of colonization]. One huge step we can take to regain our culture and pride is to grow, cultivate, and prepare our own foods that our ancestors ate."

Mihesuah connects her knowledge of and research on Choctaw culture to a plan for reclaiming traditional foods and emphasizing traditional forms of physical exercise like gardening, running, stickball, and walking.

Our project has also been deeply inspired by the Tohono O'odham in Arizona, an American Indian nation whose members have been active in reclaiming native foods as a way of restoring health. The Tohono O'odham, who have one of the highest rates of diabetes in the world, worked with Native Seeds/SEARCH co-founder Gary Nabhan in a study that reconstructed a nineteenth-century O'odham diet and examined its effects on the people. After two weeks on a diet of traditional foods high in fiber and complex carbohydrates and low in fats, the participants saw significant improvement in their blood sugar levels. They then spent two weeks on a Standard American Diet based on foods available in a local convenience store. During the second two weeks, the participants showed dramatically higher blood sugar levels, "severe enough to trigger diabetes if that diet had been maintained." The activist group Tohono O'odham Community Action (TOCA) has a self-published book, *From I'toi's Garden: Tohono O'odham Food Traditions* (2010) that offers a beautiful cultural resource featuring history, traditional stories, growing, foraging, and harvesting techniques, songs, and recipes.

The authors focus on ten native foods of the Sonoran desert: squash, acorns, cholla buds, saguaro cactus, mesquite pods, prickly pear fruit, agave, wild greens, sixty-day corn, and tepary beans, plus other domesticated and wild foods. Through actively reclaiming their heritage foods, the Tohono O'odham are fighting the diseases inflicted on their people by the Standard American Diet

These examples of direct action by indigenous groups demonstrate clearly the ways in which personal food choices are also political acts. We honor our ancestors and their wisdom by learning how to cook beans, make corn tortillas from scratch, and forage for and grow wild foods like quelites. By sharing our knowledge with each other and by becoming active in our communities, we can begin to decolonize our diets.

Our Decolonial Kitchen

Our recipes feature farm fresh fruits and vegetables, dried beans, fresh herbs, spices, and whole flours made from native grains like amaranth, corn, and quinoa. To us, "farm fresh" means ingredients that come from our backyard garden, farmer's markets, or the produce section. We shop at the local Mexican market, Asian markets, health food stores, and grocery stores that sell organic produce. We occasionally buy some



Codex Mendoza: Making tortillas

specialty items online. We embrace a made-from-scratch approach to cooking, and our recipes range from very simple to more complex. The great majority of ingredients in our recipes are native to the Americas. We cook with native vegetables such as green chiles, nopales, tomatoes, squash, corn, chayotes, and green beans. Native fruits we feature include berries, currants, avocados, papayas, passion fruit, pineapples, and prickly pears. We are big fans of foraged greens, such as verdolagas,

quelites, and watercress, and we incorporate them into many of our recipes.

Most cookbooks highlight Mesoamerican food as a productive encounter between indigenous and Spanish ingredients, producing a splendid hybrid cuisine. Our recipes take another path, focusing on the indigenous history that is embedded in contemporary Mexican and Central American cuisine. We try to recreate dishes as they might have existed before the Conquest, before wheat flour, sugar, beef, dairy, or cooking oils. That said, we are not purists. Our overriding concern is to create dishes that nourish the body and the spirit. We include small amounts of cheese and a bit of oil when we feel that those ingredients help to balance or develop flavors. All of our recipes are vegetarian, with many providing vegan options. Likewise, because there was no wheat flour before colonization, most of our recipes are also gluten-free. We go back to the old ways and thicken our sauces, stews, and soups with masa harina (corn flour) or ground pumpkin seeds, instead of white flour. All of our recipes feature whole, real foods that are unrefined and unprocessed, or in the case of flours, made from whole grains.

We envision these recipes as living documents that you can change and revise to meet the needs of your friends and family. Don't be afraid to substitute based on what you have on hand or what is readily available. Our recipes sometimes call for seasonal fruits or vegetables that may not be available in all areas. We offer substitutions as a short-term solution, but we hope that by introducing you to using beautiful ingredients like local green chiles, quelites, or verdolagas, we will entice you to grow them yourselves or inquire about them at your local farmer's market. We hope more people will take up this project and share and publish recipes that recover foods from their own regions and backgrounds.

Finally, the most important ingredient for our recipes is not listed anywhere. This secret ingredient is the love that you put into preparing your food. Whether you are the cook, the gardener, or part of the clean-up crew, please know that your labor is sacred and that somewhere the ancestors are smiling to know that you are taking an active role in healing your friends and family from the ravages of the ¡Qué SAD! diet.

Leek/Puerro